

# RUSSIA'S MALICIOUS MIGRATION: PREDICTING THE USE OF INSTRUMENTALISED MIGRATION AGAINST NATO AND THE EU

By MICHAEL McMANUS



**CENTRE FOR  
RUSSIA AND  
EURASIA  
STUDIES**

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The Henry Jackson Society  
Millbank Tower  
21-24 Millbank  
London SW1P 4QP

Registered charity no. 1140489  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7340 4520

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## About the Author

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**Michael McManus** is the Director of Research at the Henry Jackson Society and oversees research at all our separate research centres. Prior to this, he worked as Director of Research at the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) in Washington D.C., where his work analysed the security and economic impacts of irregular migration, influencing legislation in the U.S. Senate and U.S. House. He also spoke as an expert witness at the Oklahoma State House. Michael has worked as an expert consultant on projects for the World Bank, European Commission, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, and other high-profile clients. For over a decade, he worked at the European Parliament in Brussels, where he worked as an expert advisor on trade, security, and international development for multiple European Parliamentary groups. Michael provided analysis, research, and expert support during trade and aid negotiations between the EU and partner countries. These included some of the EU's biggest ever trade deals including the EU-Canada, EU-Japan, and EU-South Korea Free Trade Agreements. Michael was also involved in negotiating EU macrofinancial assistance to Ukraine following the invasion of Crimea, and in negotiations to provide EU macrofinancial to post-Arab Spring states.

## Acknowledgments

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## About Us

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### About The Henry Jackson Society

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### About the Centre for Russia and Eurasia Studies

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The **Centre for Russia and Eurasia Studies** undertakes in-depth, analytically-focussed research into domestic and foreign policy issues in Russia and the other post-Soviet states. Established in 2010 as the Russia Studies Centre, the programme's geographical scope has widened since 2014, mirroring the high level of importance attached to the region.

## Executive Summary

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The Henry Jackson Society (HJS) investigated whether Russia was using instrumentalised migration as part of its war in Ukraine. To test this, data from the EU border agency FRONTEX were used to assess how many migrants were arriving, and from which countries, over the duration of the Russia-Ukraine War. We compared these time series data to events in the Ukraine war, such as periods of heavy Russian losses, impositions of sanctions, and attacks into Russia itself by Ukraine. Data from Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) for the duration of the war were used for combat events. We also used data from Ukrainian sources to calculate approximate Russian losses. We found that when Russia suffers heavy losses, suffers attacks on its homeland, or faces sanctions that are pointed at its oil industry, instrumentalised migration is more common. We additionally found that sanctions implicating Belarus also had the effect of more instrumentalised migration. Interestingly, Russia was less likely to use instrumentalised migration when it suffered territorial setbacks in Ukraine. Findings were discussed and policy recommendations made.

## Introduction

Russia's war in Ukraine has unleashed brutality that Europe has not seen for decades. In addition to conventional war, new tactics and technologies have been used, such as drones and AI-enabled misinformation campaigns. But one tactic that requires further attention is "instrumentalised migration", a new and relatively poorly understood tactic. While there is an awareness that the tactic is being used, no group has been able to predict the conditions under which hostile powers will resort to its use. This means that NATO and other actors remain vulnerable to instrumentalised migration and cannot prepare for incidents.

The HJS set out to examine whether there are conditions under which instrumentalised migration is more likely to be used. If these conditions can be identified, then it would allow NATO to better prepare for future uses of instrumentalised migration when similar conditions are present. Our hypotheses were as follows:

- 1) Russia would be more likely to use instrumentalised migration in response to being sanctioned by the EU and the US.
- 2) Russia would be more likely to use instrumentalised migration when it sustained battlefield reversals such as loss of personnel, loss of territory or attacks on Russia itself by Ukraine.

To test these hypotheses, we collected data from the European Union (EU) border agency FRONTEX, which has data on the number of migrants at Europe's borders. Next, we compiled a timeline of EU and US sanctions rounds. Furthermore, we collected estimates of Russian battlefield losses from Ukrainian sources in terms of personnel, and territorial change events and attacks on Russian territory from Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED).

## Instrumentalised Migration – History, Use and Relevance

Migration is usually viewed through the binary lens of push versus pull factors. In the former, pressures in a migrant's homeland lead them to seek to leave. In the latter, attractive features of a potential destination incentivise them to attempt to reach that country. An example of a push factor would be persecution by the state, while an example of a pull factor would be incentives to move to a new country. An example of a pull factor could be the announcement by Angela Merkel in 2015 that conditions for entry would be relaxed for asylum seekers. Increasingly, migration is being viewed not just as a phenomenon driven by economics, but as being driven by the geopolitical calculations of nation states.

Instrumentalised migration is when a state deliberately drives migration waves at an opponent's territory to place pressure upon it for political reasons.<sup>1</sup> The European Union's Schengen Borders Code provides the following definition:

Instrumentalisation of migrants is when a third country instigates irregular migratory flows into the EU by actively encouraging or facilitating the movement of people from outside the EU to the external borders. The clear intention of the third country is to destabilise the EU or one of its Member States, where the nature of such actions is liable to put at risk essential State functions, including its territorial integrity, the maintenance of law and order or the safeguard of its national security.<sup>2</sup>

This can be done either passively or actively. In passive instrumentalised migration, a state simply allows migrants crossing its territory to do so, without attempting to stop them reaching an opponent's borders. In its active form, the state directly drives these migration flows through policies and the actions of its security forces. This can be done by removing barriers, encouraging travel or even using armed force to push migrants towards a border. There is also the possibility a state may use a mixture of these methods depending on its strategic needs or capacities.

Instrumentalised migration has a long history, in that leaders throughout history have used or threatened to use migrant flows to achieve a political or strategic objective. The Hun Empire is believed to have forced Gothic migrants across the Rhine-Danube frontier into the Roman Empire.<sup>3</sup> This wave of migrants would have caused difficulty for the Roman border defenders, allowing the Huns to raid and plunder Roman towns more easily as Roman forces were spread out dealing with migrants. During the Middle Ages, the Mongol armies would drive civilian populations towards enemy territory to create chaos for defenders.

During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979–1989), Soviet forces attempted to force migrant waves across the Afghan–Pakistan border to place pressure on Pakistan.<sup>4</sup> At the time, the Soviets were struggling against US-funded *mujihadeen* rebels. The supplies for the *mujihadeen* were heavily reliant on Pakistan cooperating with the US and allowing weaponry, fighters and equipment to cross the border. By attempting to drive migrant waves into Pakistan from

<sup>1</sup> Monika Sie Dhian Ho and Myrthe Wijnkoop, "The instrumentalization of migration: A geopolitical perspective and toolbox", Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael', December 2022, [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/Report\\_The\\_instrumentalization\\_of\\_migration.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/Report_The_instrumentalization_of_migration.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Maria Margarita Mentzelopoulou, "Instrumentalisation in the field of migration and asylum", European Parliament Research Service, November 2022, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/739204/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)739204\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/739204/EPRS_BRI(2022)739204_EN.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Heather, "Goths and Huns, c. 320–425", in Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey (eds), *The Cambridge Ancient History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 487–515.

<sup>4</sup> Myron Weiner, "Security, Stability, and International Migration", *International Security* Vol. 17, No. 3 (Winter 1992-1993), p. 101.

Afghanistan, the Soviets may have been using instrumentalised migration to try and pressure Pakistan into reducing or ceasing cooperation with the US and their *mujihadeen* proxies.

One of the first recorded uses of instrumentalised migration against NATO/EU was in 2021. Following rigged elections in Belarus, and a crackdown by Belarusian security forces on protestors, the EU imposed sanctions on the country.<sup>5</sup> In retaliation, Belarus relaxed travel requirements to Belarus for 73 countries and then used official tourist agencies to bring migrants from these countries to Belarus.<sup>6</sup> The migrants were then transported to the border of Belarus and EU/NATO member states, specifically Lithuania and Poland, two countries with whom Belarus shares nearly 1,100 kilometres (684 miles) of land border. It is interesting that this was done in 2021, possibly to test NATO resolve and defences as Belarus and Russia prepared to invade Ukraine the following year.<sup>7</sup>

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EU imposed a wide range of sanctions on Russia. Russia's boast that this "special military operation" would be successfully concluded in a short period of time proved incorrect. Documents captured on the battlefield revealed that Putin estimated the war would be over in just 10 to 12 days.<sup>8</sup> As the war has dragged on, now into its third year, and Russia has failed to achieve a knockout blow, it appears to have resorted to using instrumentalised migration as a tactic to rebalance its strategic position and to retaliate against NATO and the EU for supporting Ukraine.

<sup>5</sup> "Timeline - EU sanctions against Belarus", European Council, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-belarus/timeline-eu-sanctions-against-belarus/>.

<sup>6</sup> Georg Luke, Tobias T. Molander and Peter Webinger, "Instrumentalisierung von Migration", in Christian Filzwieser and Lioba Kasper (eds), *Asyl- und Fremdenrecht*, Jahrbuch 2022, pp. 327-350.

<sup>7</sup> Pawel Styrna, "What the Biden Administration Can Learn From Our Central European NATO Allies", *ImmigrationReform.com*, 17 September 2021, <https://www.immigrationreform.com/2021/09/17/europe-lesson-migrant-crisis-immigrationreform-com/>.

<sup>8</sup> Mykhaylo Zabrodskyi, Dr Jack Watling, Oleksandr V. Danylyuk and Nick Reynolds, "Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February-July 2022", RUSI, 30 November 2022, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/preliminary-lessons-conventional-warfighting-russias-invasion-ukraine-february-july-2022>.

## Migration as a Grey Zone Tactic

Grey zone tactics refer to hostile measures that are deliberately calculated to fall just beneath the threshold of aggression that would be considered an armed attack. In previous decades, armed attacks were easy to spot and define. Treaties and defence clauses were drafted and interpreted with this conventional understanding of war in mind. In the more fluid battlefield of the 21st century, the lines are more blurred. Tactics such as disinformation campaigns, hacking, and industrial espionage are all hostile acts, but generally are not considered grounds for outright war as they typically fall outside of the traditional understanding of "armed attack".

Russia views conflict on a spectrum and sees security competition as essentially continuous rather than the Western binary view of war and peace as separate. Even the Russian language reflects this view of the world. The Russian word for security/safety is *bezopasnost* (Безопасность). The etymology of the word is revealing, as it is comprised of the words *bez* (without) and *opasnost* (danger). This shows that in Russian psychology, the default position is risk or danger, with security being noted for its lack of threat, rather than the English language concept of security as a standalone concept.

Russia has used a wide range of grey zone tactics against NATO states. This is because Russia knows that NATO states are bound by Article 5, obliging all member states to treat an armed attack on one as an attack on them all. As the text of the NATO charter reads:

The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.<sup>9</sup>

This is a trigger that Russia is anxious to avoid, given the enormous economic, demographic, technological and military advantage NATO's combined strength possesses relative to that of Russia. However, Russia is willing to provoke NATO at all levels short of triggering an armed attack. In 2007, for example, Russian hackers launched a widespread attack on Estonia's Government and media targets.<sup>10</sup> Actors linked to Russia have also been implicated in disinformation and polarisation campaigns in the West, prompting a detailed investigation by the US Department of State's Global Engagement Center.<sup>11</sup> Instrumentalised migration is another example of these "grey zone" tactics.

<sup>9</sup> "Collective defence and Article 5", NATO, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_110496.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm).

<sup>10</sup> "2007 cyber attacks on Estonia", NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, [https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/cyber\\_attacks\\_estonia.pdf](https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/cyber_attacks_estonia.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> "GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem", U.S. Department of State, August 2020, [https://2021-2025.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia's-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem\\_08-04-20.pdf](https://2021-2025.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia's-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf).

## Other Examples of Instrumentalised Migration Globally

Instrumentalised migration is a hostile act, but it exists on a spectrum of aggressiveness. Sometimes the tactic is used to pressure a concession from a country, rather than being an outright way to harm a rival. For example, in 2024, Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador asked the US for more money and foreign policy concessions in exchange for continued migration cooperation.<sup>12</sup>

One famous example of instrumentalised migration comes from Turkey. Following the 2015/16 period of large-scale migration from the Middle East into Europe, the EU began striking deals with transit countries to stem the flow. Turkey was one of the most obvious places, given that its geography acts as an obvious launchpad into Europe. For agreeing to stem migrants, Turkey was promised billions of euros. However, Turkey has used the threat of instrumentalised migration to obtain further concessions. Turkish President Recep Erdoğan stated that he was willing to turn a blind eye towards his migration cooperation deal with the EU to stop migrants reaching Europe if his additional demands for visa free travel for Turkish nationals were not met.<sup>13</sup>

Instrumentalised migration can also be used as a response to very particular disputes. For example, Australia placed diplomatic pressure on Indonesia as part of its bid to have clemency granted to two Australian citizens who had been sentenced to death for drug smuggling. Seeing this as an affront to Indonesian sovereignty, Indonesia's Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, Tedjo Edhy Purdijatno, threatened to allow mass migration towards Australia. Purdijatno remarked: "If Canberra keeps doing things that displease Indonesia, Jakarta will surely let the illegal immigrants go to Australia." He added: "There are more than 10,000 [asylum seekers] in Indonesia today. If they are let go to Australia, it will be like a human tsunami."<sup>14</sup>

The Indonesian threat used colourful language of a "tsunami", but it stemmed from a specific grievance and was not part of a broader strategy to destabilise a neighbour, much less to actively harm it. At other times, the tactic of instrumentalised migration has had a far more aggressive intent. In 2024, Hassan Nasrallah, leader of the terrorist group Hezbollah, toyed with the idea of allowing Syrian refugees in Lebanon to simply leave for Europe.<sup>15</sup> Hezbollah, a group whose military wing is designated a terror group by the EU, would have every incentive to harm Europe. Sending Syrian migrants in massive numbers into Europe was seen as a means of harming Europe.

<sup>12</sup> Michael McManus, "Migration as Leverage: What is Instrumentalized Migration?", Federation for American Immigration Reform, 25 January 2025, <https://www.fairus.org/blog/2024/01/25/migration-leverage-what-instrumentalized-migration>.

<sup>13</sup> "Erdoğan threatens to scrap EU-Turkey migrant deal", *BBC News*, 16 March 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-39294776>.

<sup>14</sup> Ben Doherty, "Indonesia 'could release human tsunami of 10,000 asylum seekers on Australia'", *The Guardian*, 10 March 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/mar/11/indonesia-could-release-human-tsunami-of-10000-asylum-seekers-on-australia>.

<sup>15</sup> Seth J. Frantzman, "Hezbollah seeks to use Syrian refugees to create crisis with Europe - analysis", *The Jerusalem Post*, 15 May 2024, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/hezbollah-seeks-to-use-syrian-refugees-to-create-crisis-with-europe-801247>.

## Why Russia Using Instrumentalised Migration is Both Important and Different

In the above examples, not all instances of instrumentalised migration were necessarily acts of outright aggression. In the cases of Mexico and Turkey, the primary motive was to obtain a financial concession from countries they otherwise have good relations with. In the case of Mexico, concessions from its most important trade partner, the US, and in the case of Turkey, from fellow NATO allies.

But in the case of Russia, we can safely assume that instrumentalised migration has a far more aggressive intent. For starters, Russia is in an outright war with Ukraine and has made bloodthirsty threats to NATO allies who came to its aid, even explicitly threatening the use of nuclear weapons.<sup>16</sup> We can safely assume, given Russia's overtly aggressive intent and rhetoric towards the West, that this is an example of the highest level of aggression at which the tactic of instrumentalised immigration can be used.

Russia is in a unique position to determine access to the European Union's Eastern Borders. Russia and its ally Belarus lie directly on these borders and therefore are in a position to directly send migrants to an EU/NATO border. Furthermore, Russia is an essentially closed society, punctuated by authoritarianism and a security-centric way that outsiders are viewed. Large numbers of foreign nationals on its territory being permitted to move towards its borders with NATO countries would be impossible in such a society were it not Russia's will for such movements to take place.

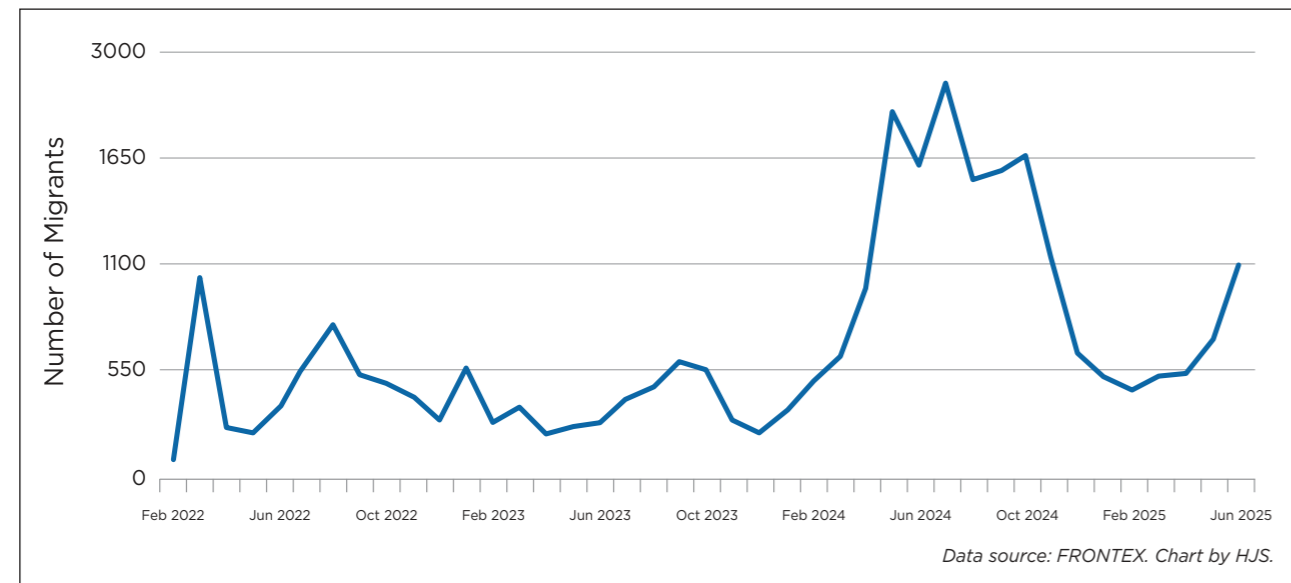
<sup>16</sup> Claire Mills, "Russia's use of nuclear threats during the Ukraine conflict", House of Commons Library, 20 December 2024, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9825/CBP-9825.pdf>.

## The Statistical Picture of Migration

### Method

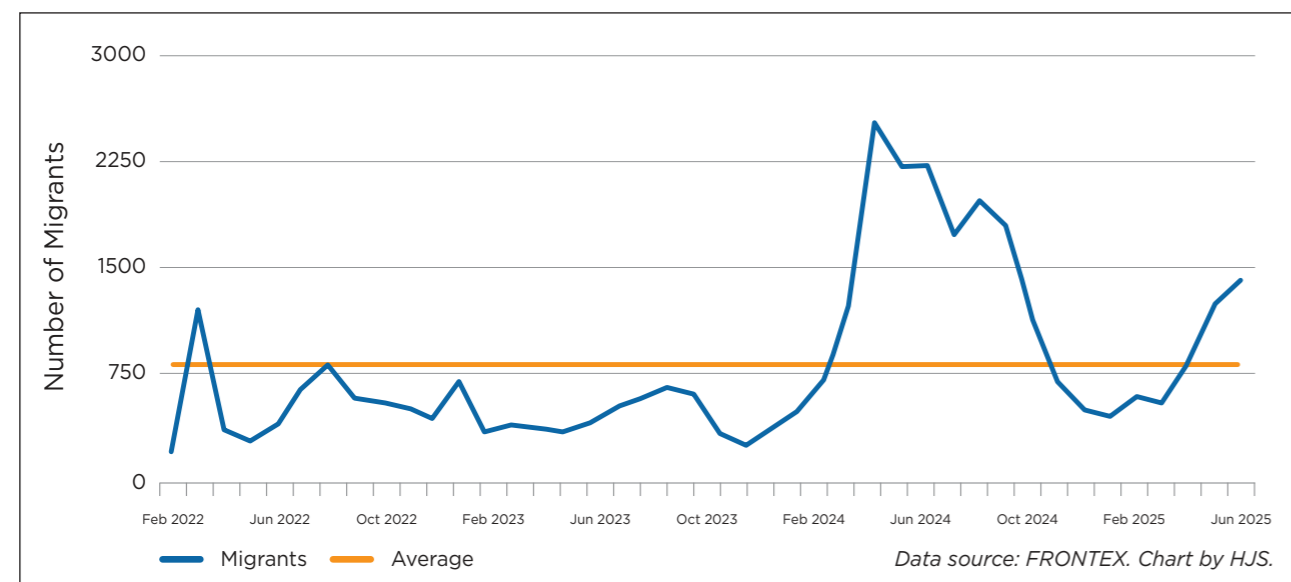
To analyse our theories, we collected data on the number of migrants of all nationalities encountered by the EU border agency FRONTEX on the Eastern Borders route. We then plotted the number of migrants over time, starting in February 2022 when the war in Ukraine began until July 2025, the most recently available data at the time the report was completed. The findings can be seen in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Number of Migrants Encountered on the EU Eastern Borders Route During the War in Ukraine (February 2022 to June 2025)



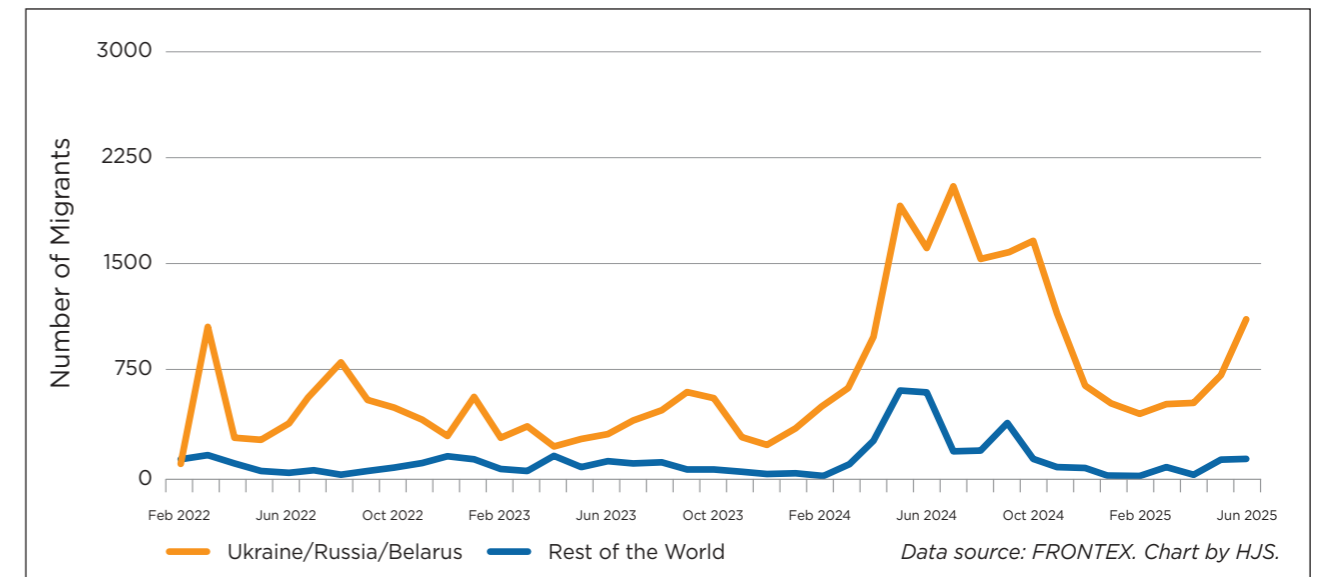
To further illustrate this, we compared the monthly numbers against the average monthly number of encounters over the course of the whole conflict (832 migrants per month) to illustrate periods of peaks and troughs.

**Figure 2:** Monthly Migrants on the EU Eastern Borders During the War in Ukraine Compared to Average (February 2022 to June 2025)



We then performed analysis on the specific nationalities of the migrants encountered. Migrants from Ukraine, Belarus and Russia were separated from migrants from the rest of the world as we felt migration from Ukraine/Belarus/Russia might be less suspicious in terms of being organic versus politically instrumentalised migration.

**Figure 3:** Migrants on EU Eastern Borders from Ukraine/Russia/Belarus vs Rest of the World (February 2022 to June 2025)



## The Concept of Passport Strength and Instrumentalised Migration

We decided to “disentangle” the nationalities of migrants to provide a deeper, more granular level of analysis. For our analysis, we divided migrants into two categories: migrants from countries which naturally border the EU’s Eastern Borders (Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, or “UkrRussBel”) and those which do not (“Others”), such as countries in Africa and the Middle East. The presence of nationals from countries neighbouring the EU’s Eastern Borders (i.e., UkrRussBel) may be less suggestive of instrumentalisation than the presence of migrants who have had to travel a greater distance.

An important consideration when assessing whether migration is organic or is being artificially instrumentalised is to examine the concept of passport “strength” for migrants. The stronger the passport, the more countries can be visited by a holder of that passport visa free. Examples of “strong” passports are Britain (186 countries) and the US (182 countries), in sharp contrast with “weak” passports like India (58 countries) and Nigeria (45 countries). Very weak passports include Iraq (30 countries) and Syria (27 countries), and the weakest passport is Afghanistan, which allows visa-free access to just 25 countries.

Nationals of countries with weak passports find it difficult to enter a country by legitimate means, i.e., by possessing a valid visa. As a result, the presence of large numbers of nationals from weak passport countries suggests large-scale irregular migration. In a society like Russia, with a strong distrust of foreigners and a strict attitude to the entry/exit of visitors, it seems unlikely that weak passport holders could be present were it not due to Russian complicity. In 2025, relatively few countries enjoyed visa-free travel to Russia.<sup>17</sup> This makes the presence of nationals without visa-free agreements in Russia more telling. The presence of large numbers of migrants from these countries, all marked by weak passports, suggests that the migrants are there with the knowledge of the Russian authorities.

**Table 1:** Top Ten Nationalities on EU Eastern Borders Since February 2022<sup>18</sup>

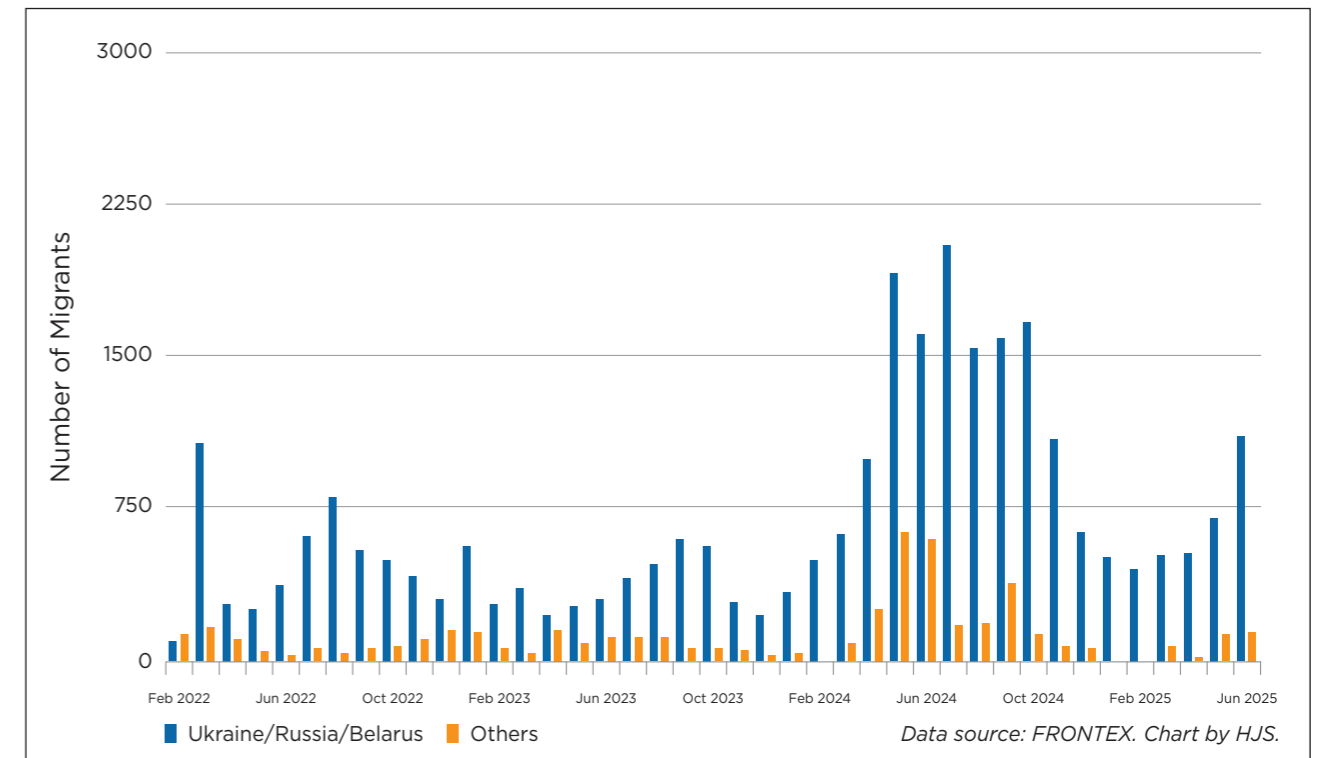
Country	Migrants
Syria	685
Somalia	579
Ethiopia	550
Eritrea	485
Afghanistan	440
Iraq	405
Iran	324
Sudan	252
Yemen	252
India	86

Data source: FRONTEX. Chart by HJS.

<sup>17</sup> “Russia visa exemption & requirements: Russian visa exempt countries”, Embassies.Net, <https://embassies.net/russia-visa-exemption>.

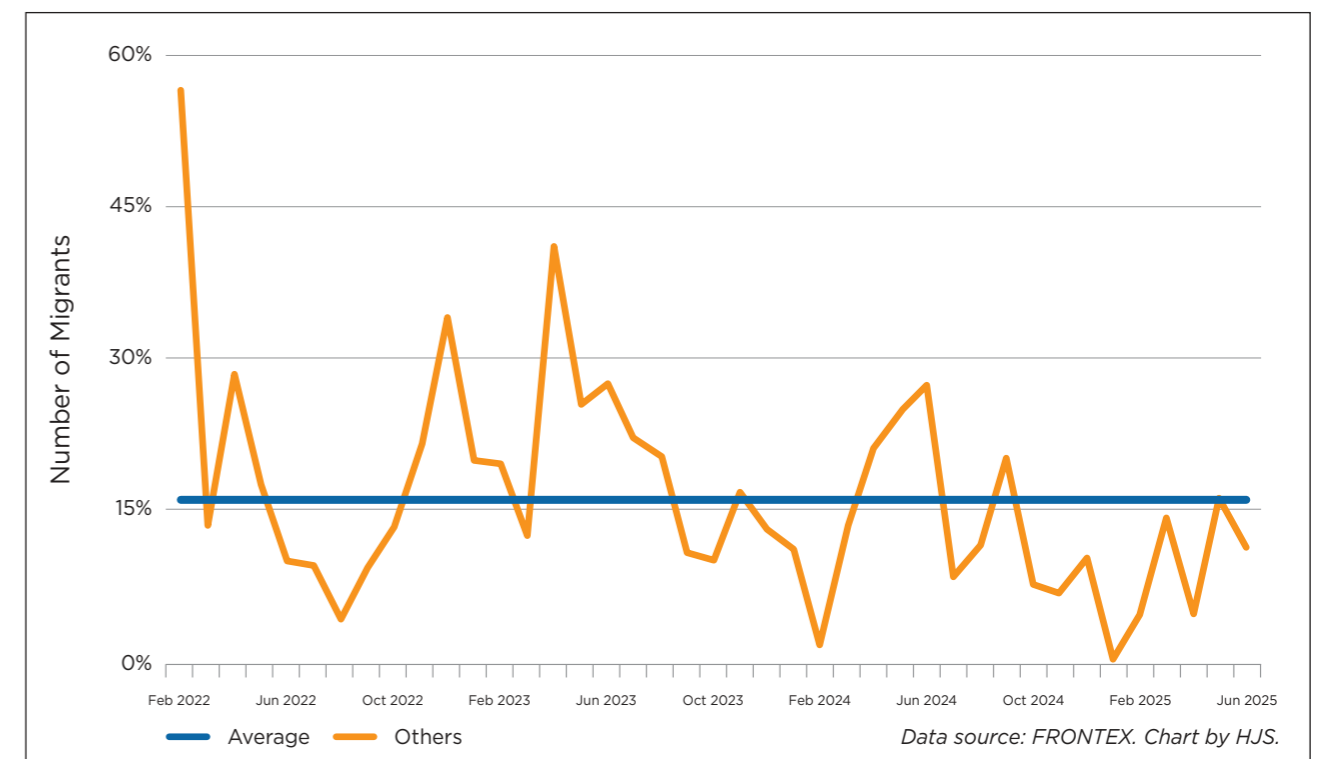
<sup>18</sup> Excluding nationals of Ukraine, Russia and Belarus.

**Figure 4:** Migrant Encounters of Ukrainians, Russians and Belarussians (UkrRussBel) Compared to All Other Nationalities on EU Eastern Borders (February 2022 to June 2025)



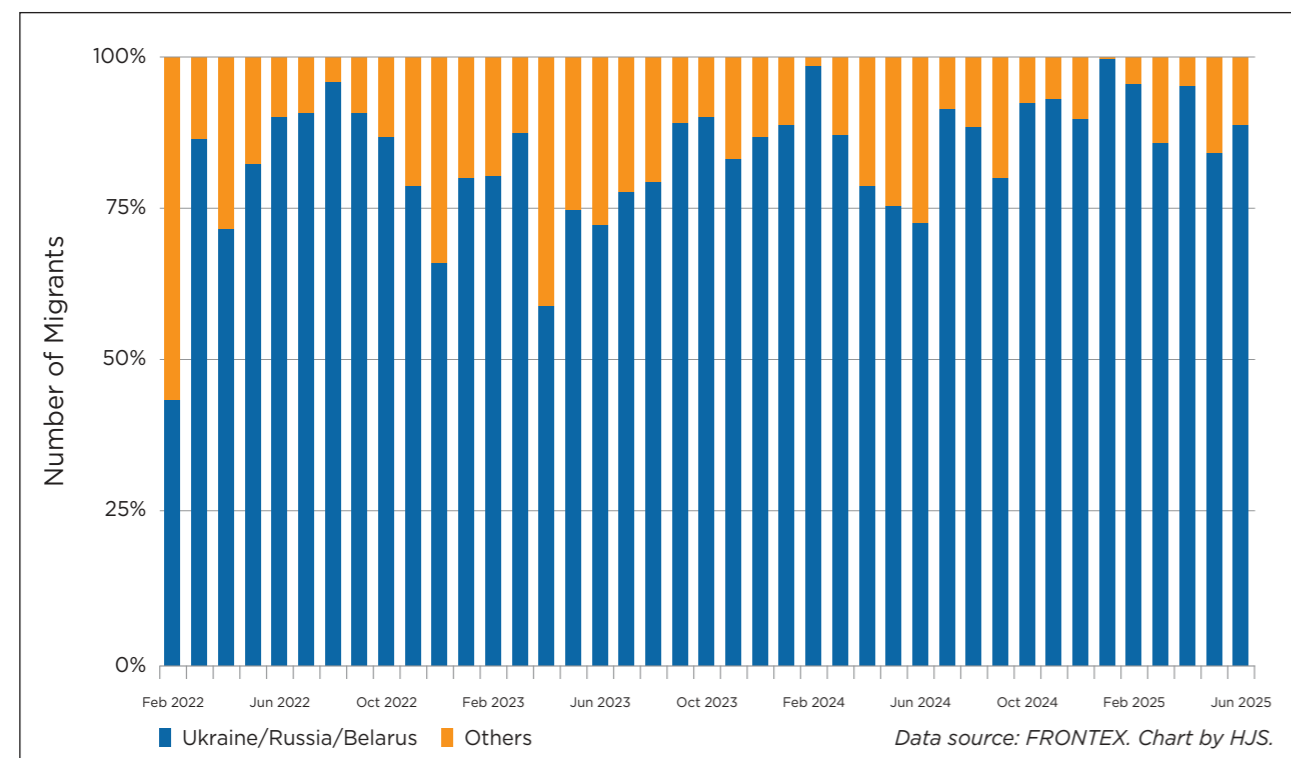
The data show that the bulk of migrants encountered at the EU’s Eastern Borders are nationals of Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. The data also show that, at first glance, the flow of nationals from both UkrRussBel and other countries are broadly comparable in terms of peak and trough periods. The average proportion of the total comprised of “Others” was 16%.

**Figure 5:** Share of Others in Total Migrant Flows on EU Eastern Borders (%)



However, we felt it would be interesting to analyse when, if ever, the Others category composed higher than usual percentages of the total flow, as this could hint at instrumentalised use. The results were as follows:

**Figure 6:** Proportion of Migrants from Russia/Belarus/Ukraine versus Other Nationalities During the War in Ukraine



The chart above shows that in some time periods, the proportion of Others was much higher. The highest month was February 2022, when 56% of migrants were Others, the only month in the entire conflict when this group constituted the majority. The range of percentages the Others have constituted has ranged from 56% to less than 1%, with an average monthly figure of 16% of the total.

Interestingly, Others jumped from 13% of the total migrants in March 2023 to 41% the next month. This could be because in March 2023, the EU imposed four rounds of sanctions on Russia and these often target the Russian oil industry. This type of targeting may well explain the unusual jump in Others migration in the month immediately after the sanctions were imposed. The reason for this increase could be that, as Russia's cash cow industry is harmed by sanctions, migrants from the Others category, many of whom are in Russia to begin with due to deliberate attempts to attract them for eventual cynical use, are instrumentalised.

Similarly, in December 2023, just 13% of the migrants were Others. December 2023 also saw a particularly pointed and hard-hitting sanctions round, with arguably the hardest hitting being the enforcement of a price cap on Russian oil. Within six months of this sanctions round (i.e., by June 2024), Others formed 27% of the total migrants.

The second half of 2024 and the first half of 2025 saw a decline in the proportion of Others. Others were 27% of the total in June 2024, but this fell to just 10% by December 2024. In the months of 2025 for which data were available, the proportion of Others never exceeded 16%. This could be because Russian battlefield losses were falling in this period and therefore the need to resort to instrumentalised migration may have been felt less keenly by Moscow.

## Hypothesis: The Role of Sanctions

Having established the general statistical picture vis-à-vis migrant encounters and nationalities on the EU Eastern Borders since the war in Ukraine began, we can now begin testing our hypotheses. The first hypothesis was that more migration would be seen in response to EU and US sanctions against Russia. This was based on the idea that Russia would be harmed by these sanctions and would use instrumentalised migration in retaliation. Russian ally Belarus did exactly this in 2021, so we know there is precedent for this type of reaction.<sup>19</sup> Given the close alliance between Russia and Belarus, and the fact that Belarus has also been targeted by sanctions in the context of the war in Ukraine, it is likely Belarus and Russia would have a shared interest in using instrumentalised migration. Belarus is in a good geographic position to do so, given its long borders with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia across which it can drive migrants.

### Role of Sanctions

Our first hypothesis would be that when sanctions were used against Russia, it would be more likely to resort to instrumentalised migration. This was based on the idea that sanctions would complicate Russia's ability to fund its society and military. This added pressure would lead it to resort to unconventional tactics in order to rebalance its position.

While a variety of countries have imposed sanctions on Russia, we focused on EU and US sanctions. As of mid-2025, there had been 18 rounds of sanctions from the EU against Russia. The exact details of the sanctions packages varied depending on the round. The details of each round are in table 2.

**Table 2:** Summary of Sanctions Packages by the European Union Against Russia<sup>20</sup>

Date	Sanction Details
1st Round (February 2022)	Targeted Russian parliamentarians and the Donbas/Donetsk puppet states
2nd Round (February 2022)	Targeted Putin's assets and the oil sector; also sanctions on technology and transport
3rd Round (February/March 2022)	Banned Russian planes from EU airspace, banned Russian banks from SWIFT payment system and banned transactions with the Central Bank of Russia
4th Round (March 2022)	Banned providing credit to Russian entities; trade restrictions on metals and luxury goods
5th Round (March 2022)	Banned Russian ships from EU ports, banned exports of fuel to Russia and banned imports from Russia of coal and solid fossil fuels
6th Round (March 2022)	Banned Russian crude oil and refined petroleum with limited exceptions
7th Round (July 2022)	Prohibited the importing of Russian gold, its most valuable non-oil export, and banned canal lock equipment to prevent circumvention of port access bans
8th Round (October 2022)	Price cap on maritime transport of Russian oil to third countries

<sup>19</sup> "EU imposes new sanctions on Belarus as migrant crisis escalates", *BBC News*, 15 November 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHXlvG7S8ml>.

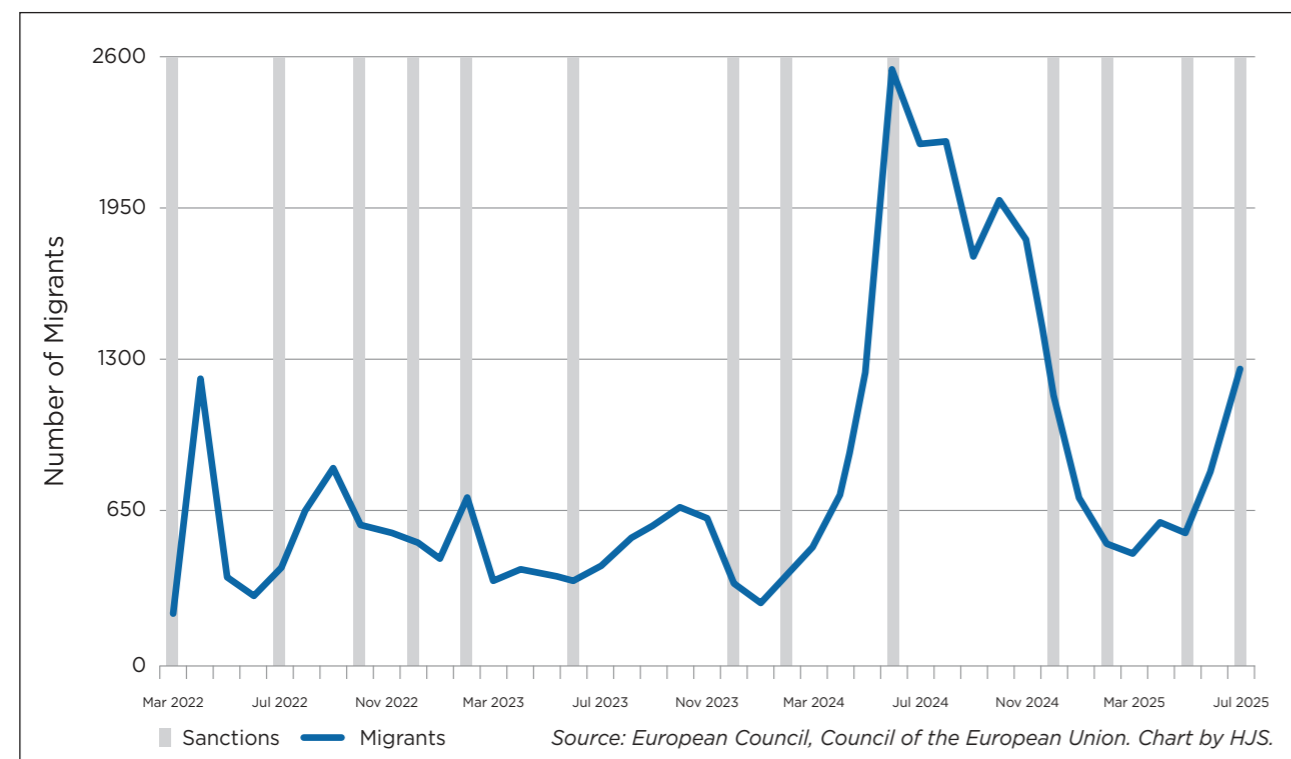
<sup>20</sup> "Timeline - EU sanctions against Russia. An overview of the sanctions adopted by the EU in response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, its human rights violations, hybrid threats, and illegal annexation of Crimea and of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions of Ukraine", European Council, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia/timeline-sanctions-against-russia/>.

Date	Sanction Details
9th Round (December 2022)	Bans on mining sector investments and on drone or dual use exports
10th Round (February 2023)	Bans on gas storage for Russia and critical technology exports
11th Round (June 2023)	Blocked vessels doing ship-to-ship transfers of cargo docking in the EU
12th Round (December 2023)	Oil price cap enforced, banned Russian diamonds, circumvention more strictly targeted
13th Round (February 2024)	Extension of diamond ban and economic sanctions
14th Round (June 2024)	Banned liquefied natural gas reloading on EU territory, ban on exports of equipment Russia could use for internal repression
15th Round (December 2024)	Port access restrictions tightened, ban on enforcing Russian court rulings
16th Round (February 2025)	Port access ban against shadow fleet access, more restrictions on goods/technologies in the industrial and energy sectors
17th Round (May 2025)	More shadow fleet vessels banned, exports for potential military use restricted further
18th Round (July 2025)	Full transaction ban on Nord Stream 1 and 2, lowering of oil price cap from \$60 to \$47.60

Source: European Council, Council of the European Union.

To test whether sanctions would be drivers of instrumentalised migration, we analysed data from FRONTEX on migrants encountered on the EU's Eastern Borders route and then plotted it alongside a timeline of EU sanctions rounds. The blue line represents changes in migrant numbers detected by FRONTEX, while the grey bars represent periods in which new sanctions rounds were imposed on Russia. The results were as follows:

**Figure 7:** Changes in Migrant Numbers in Response to EU Sanctions Rounds



It can be seen that the impact appears to vary. In some cases, the number of migrants remained broadly the same or even declined. There are also periods around sanctions rounds when encounters increased, sometimes dramatically so. The most striking rise came after the December 2023 round, and this flow of migrants (coming at a time when migrant numbers had actually been decreasing) began to increase again.

**US Sanctions**

Having looked at the EU sanctions impact, we can now look at the potential impact of US sanctions against Russia. The US operates its own sanctions regime and the timetable of these sanctions differs from that of the EU. By comparing EU and US sanctions, we could more clearly see which entity's sanctions cause Russia to react with instrumentalised migration.

To test this, we looked at a timeline of US sanctions and plotted it against the timeline of FRONTEX migrant records. This would allow us to identify any potential "triggers" of migration linked to US sanctions, the same way we analysed the EU sanctions.

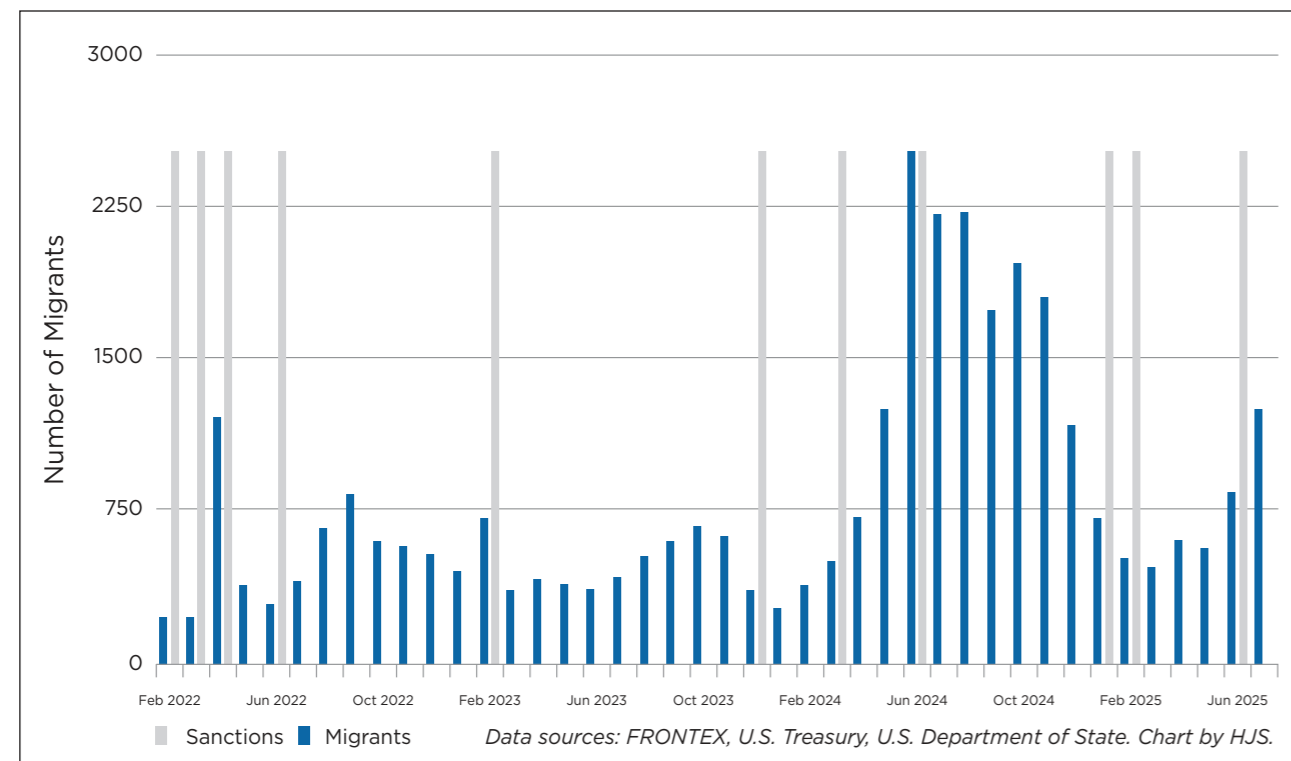
**Table 3:** US Sanctions Against Russia

Date	Sanction Details
February 2022	Export controls imposed on technical equipment, targets on Russian regime figures
March 2022	Bans on coal, oil and gas imports, asset freezes
April 2022	Russian major banks Sberbank and Alfa-Bank sanctioned, export bans to Belarus and sanctions on Belarus senior leaders
June 2022	Ban on trading in Russian securities and equities, visa bans for Russian military figures
February 2023	Sanctions on Russian oil products take effect
December 2023	Belarus key figures sanctioned, US Treasury particularly targeted wealthy figures in Belarus and industries in Belarus deemed vital to Russia's war effort
March 2024	Over 500 Russians targeted in individual sanctions
June 2024	Expanded sanctions on financial dealings with sanctioned institutions, ban on IT exports
January 2025	Sanctions on firms helping Russia to evade sanctions
February 2025	Sanctions on major Russian oil producers like Gazprom
June 2025	Sanctioning Russia Act aims to impose secondary sanctions

Source: U.S. Treasury, U.S. Department of State.

We then plotted these sanctions events against migrants encountered at the EU Eastern Borders. The results are in Figure 8, where blue is the number of migrants and grey indicates a sanctions imposition.

**Figure 8:** Changes in Migrant Numbers in Response to US Sanctions Rounds



It can be seen that for the first six rounds of US sanctions, stretching from February 2022 to December 2023, the number of migrants did not change much, moving up and down in fairly mild waves, the exception being a jump in April 2022. This began to change in early 2024 when, at a time migrant numbers had fallen for three months in a row, they began to tick up again dramatically. Specifically, sanctions in December 2023 seem to have caused more migration to occur, possibly as those sanctions targeted individuals and industries that were deemed more strategically critical than previous rounds of sanctions. This would suggest that it is not sanctions per se, rather the exact content of the sanctions that can be a driver of migration.

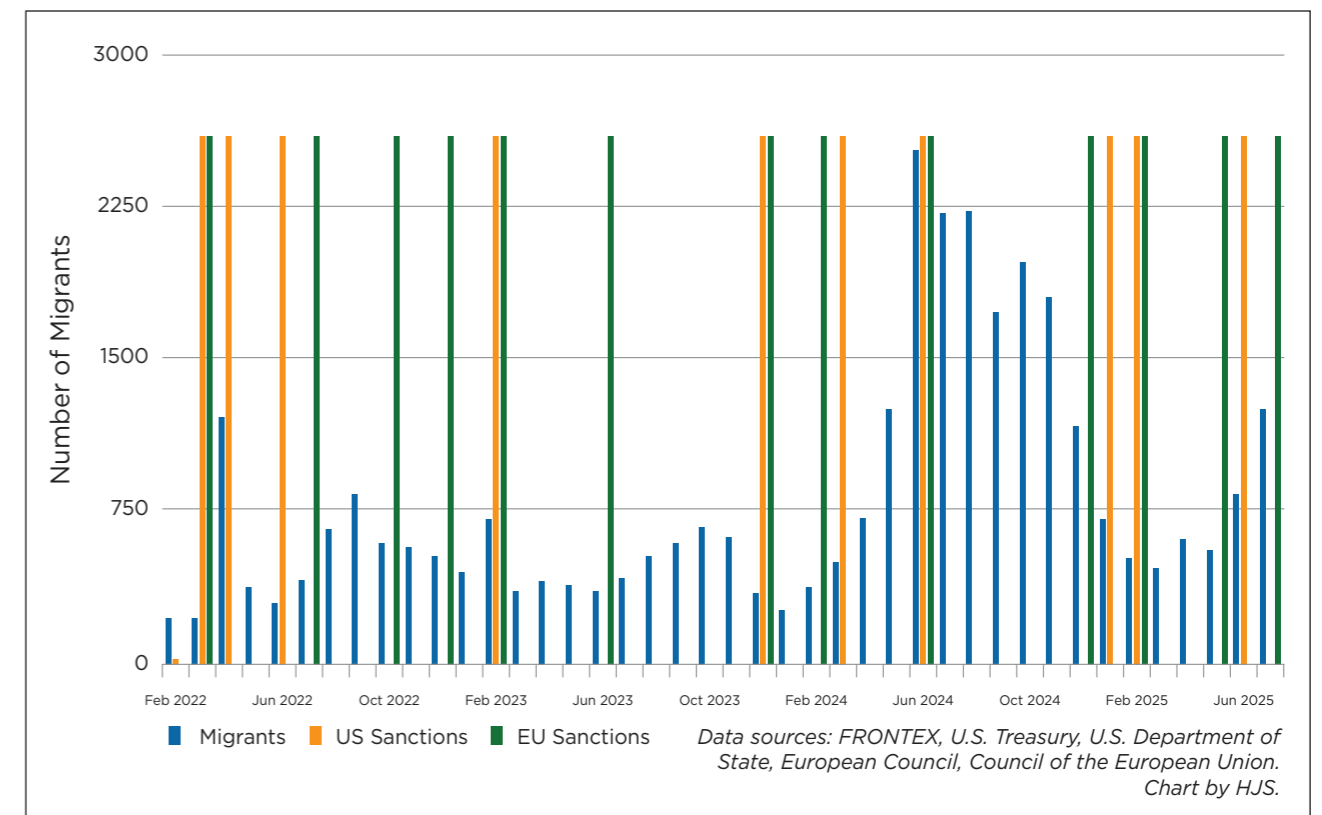
**Combined View**

Having analysed the sanctions rounds from both the US and the EU, a pattern can be detected. A very dramatic increase in migrant numbers occurs between the start of the war and May 2022. Some of this increase may be due to people fleeing the initial violence, but also this period saw the first rounds of sanctions imposed.

The most noticeable increase occurs in early 2024. There are two things worthy of note in terms of sanctions. Firstly, the EU sanctions in December 2023 targeted some of the most lucrative parts of the Russian economy. Secondly, US sanctions imposed in the same time period specifically targeted Belarus. These two rounds of sanctions may have driven much larger migrant flows for two reasons: Russia's economy had been particularly harmed by this round and Belarus, with its long borders with EU/NATO territory, had also been targeted. Because of this, Russia and Belarus would have been particularly motivated to direct instrumentalised flows of migrants at the EU/NATO.

A recent jump in migrants has been recorded in the summer of 2025. Again, looking at significant sanction event details in that time window reveals some interesting details. Firstly, EU sanctions targeted Russian "shadow fleet" ships, which had been used to help Russia avoid sanctions on selling oil by sea. By tightening this loophole, Moscow's income, which it has been sustaining

**Figure 9:** Changes in Migrant Numbers in Response to EU and US Sanctions Rounds



via these ships, would have been hit hard. Secondly, the US began to push for "secondary sanctions" to punish third parties that traded with Russia and thus were helping it to avoid the pain of sanctions. Both of these developments will have alarmed Moscow, as they would be more impactful than other rounds with more sparse or economically less critical targets.

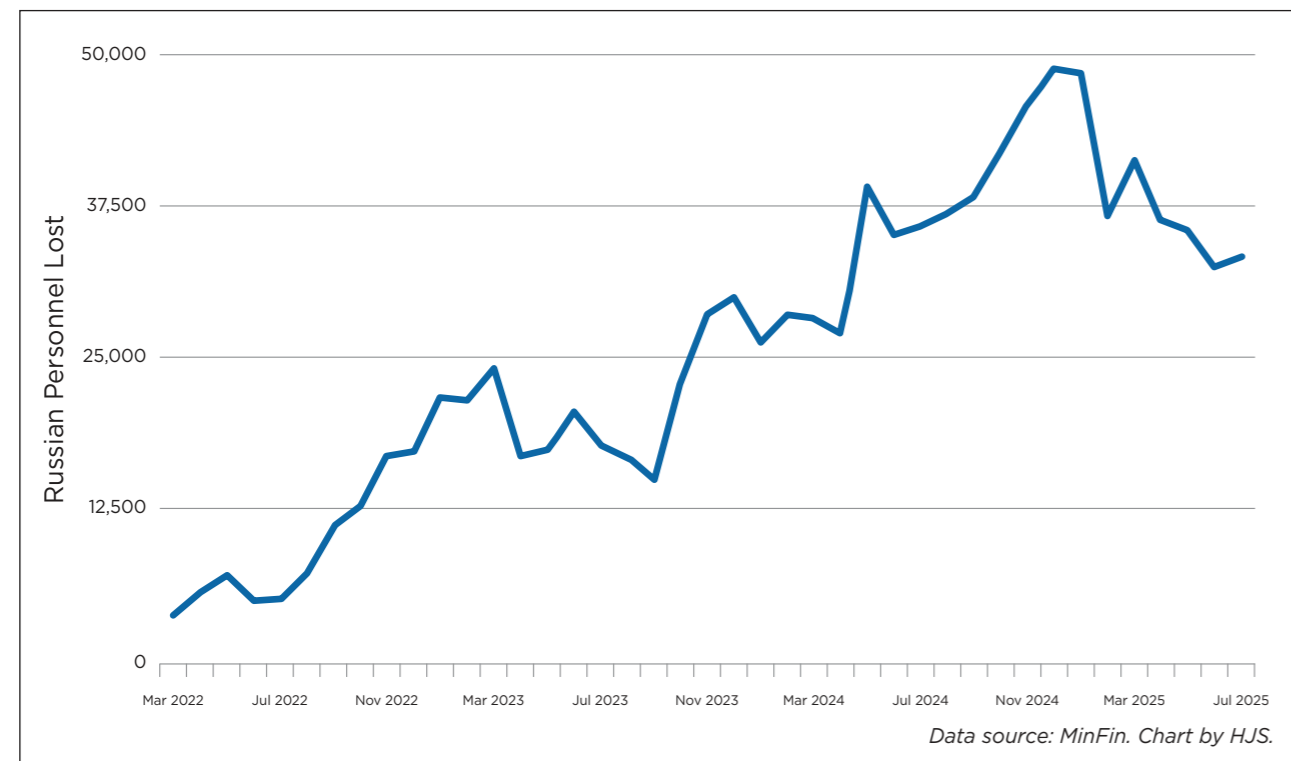
### Hypothesis: Russian Battlefield Reversals

Our next hypothesis was that during periods of battlefield reversals, Russia would be more likely to use instrumentalised migration. To define battlefield losses, we chose two measures: personnel losses and territorial losses. By choosing these two metrics, we could hopefully analyse whether Moscow was more sensitive to the loss of men or the loss of land.

Data on Russian personnel losses are not easy to obtain. Moscow treats its losses with extreme secrecy, and even if such data were publicly available, there are potential issues around verification. The Kremlin has every reason to misrepresent its strategic situation to both domestic and foreign audiences. However, Ukrainian sources estimating Russian losses do exist publicly. The shortage of sources means that this information will serve as the basis for the data analysis. The Ukrainian sources estimate Russian losses across a range of metrics including vehicles, weapon systems and personnel.<sup>21</sup>

Our focus will be on personnel losses, as human losses are more politically expensive than equipment losses – the so-called “body bag effect” that has been observed in several conflicts. This body bag effect can be caused either by “marginal casualty rates” (i.e., change in public support per additional casualty) or by “cumulative casualty rates” (i.e., when specific milestones of cumulative losses are reached).<sup>22</sup> This even applies (at least partly, based on what surveys are available) in a society like Russia.

**Figure 10:** Russian Personnel Losses per Month in Ukraine



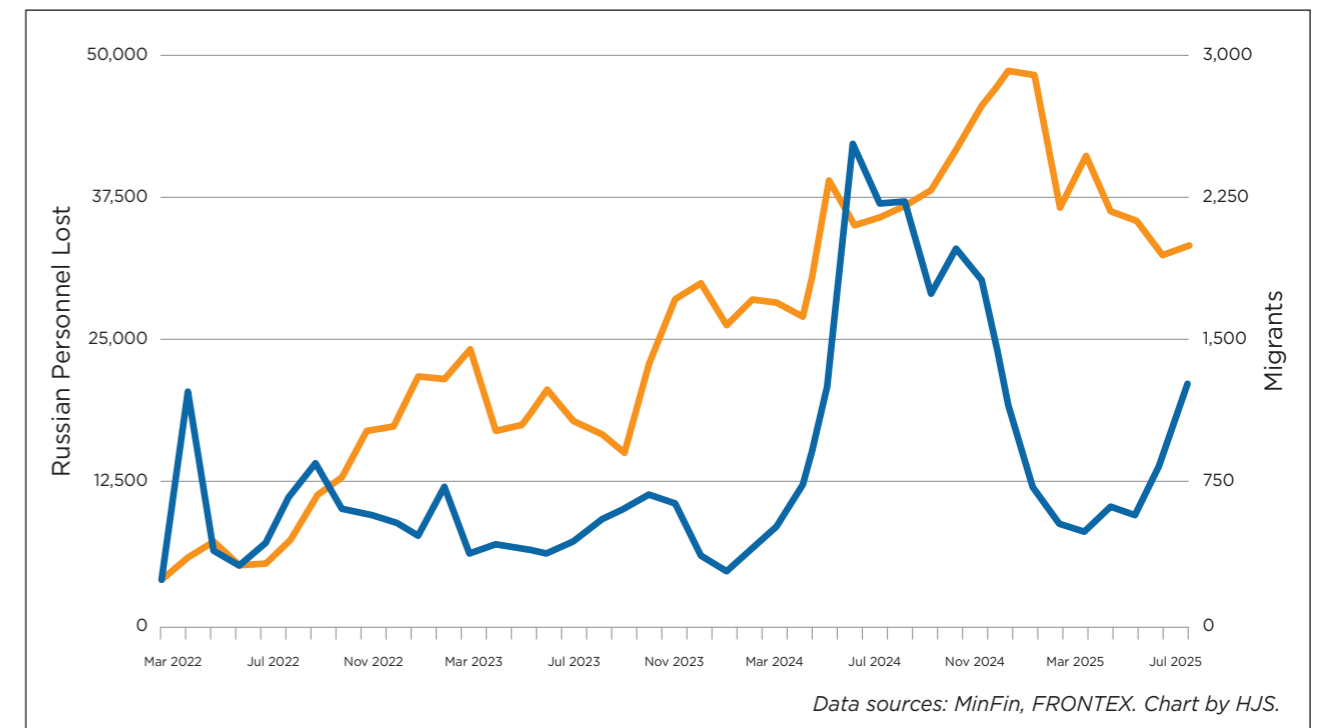
According to Ukrainian sources, in December 2023, Russia lost nearly 30,000 soldiers in a single month. This represents nearly double the monthly losses in September 2023. Late 2023 also saw combined cumulative Russian losses hit over 300,000 soldiers, a grim milestone

<sup>21</sup> “Casualties of the Russian troops in Ukraine”, minfin.com.ua, <https://index.minfin.com.ua/en/russian-invading/casualties/>.

<sup>22</sup> Babak Bahador and Scott Walker, “Did the Iraq War Have a Body Bag Effect?”, *American Review of Politics* Vol. 33, Winter (2012-2013), pp. 247-270.

for what was only supposed to be a “special military operation” that Moscow was confident would be completed in a short time period. Cumulative losses have been shown to be more politically impactful in terms of public opinion than marginal casualties.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the potential for unrest on the home front based on this, plus the need to strategically regain initiative on the war front, could have had a role in pushing Moscow to unleash waves of instrumentalised migrants. Given these losses, it is possible Russia decided to use instrumentalised migration in response to its mounting casualties and the need to try a different tactic.

**Figure 11:** Migrants and Russian Personnel Losses During the War in Ukraine



<sup>23</sup> Bahador and Walker, “Did the Iraq War Have a Body Bag Effect?”.

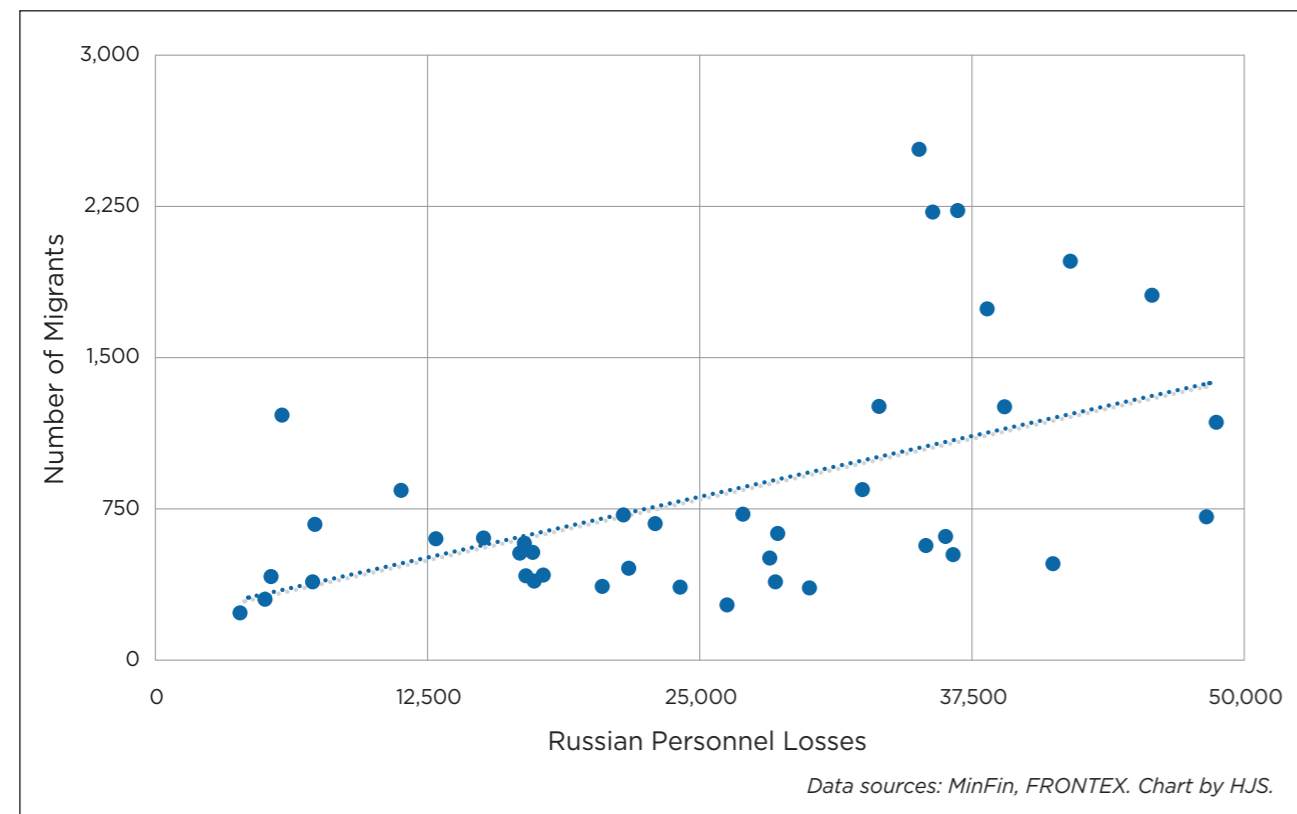
### Proving a Statistically Significant Relationship Between Russian Personnel Losses and Migration

To further test this theory, we carried out two correlation tests. The purpose of a correlation test is to establish whether two variables have a statistically significant relationship with each other. The first correlation test was to establish to what extent (if any) there was a relationship between Russian personnel losses and migrant numbers. To do this, ACLED data on Russian losses each month were correlated with FRONTEX data on migrants discovered on the Eastern Borders of the EU.

If there was a perfect linear relationship between two variables, then we would obtain a value of  $r = 1$ . After running a correlation test, we obtained a value of  $r = 0.5$ , indicating a strong positive relationship, i.e., increases in Russian losses are correlated with numbers of migrants on the EU's Eastern Borders. While correlation does not always automatically equal causation, it is nevertheless a revealing statistical finding.

Having established that there was a relationship, we then performed an  $r$  squared ( $r^2$ ) test. This does not aim to establish if a relationship exists but rather aims to establish to what extent one variable can be explained by a variant in the other. For example, if  $r^2 = 0.3$ , then this means 30% of the variance in one variable can be explained by the other variable. The results of this  $r^2$  test performed on Russian personnel losses and migrant numbers generated the following results.

**Figure 12:** Correlation Between Russian Personnel Losses and Number of Migrants Detected (February 2022 to July 2025)

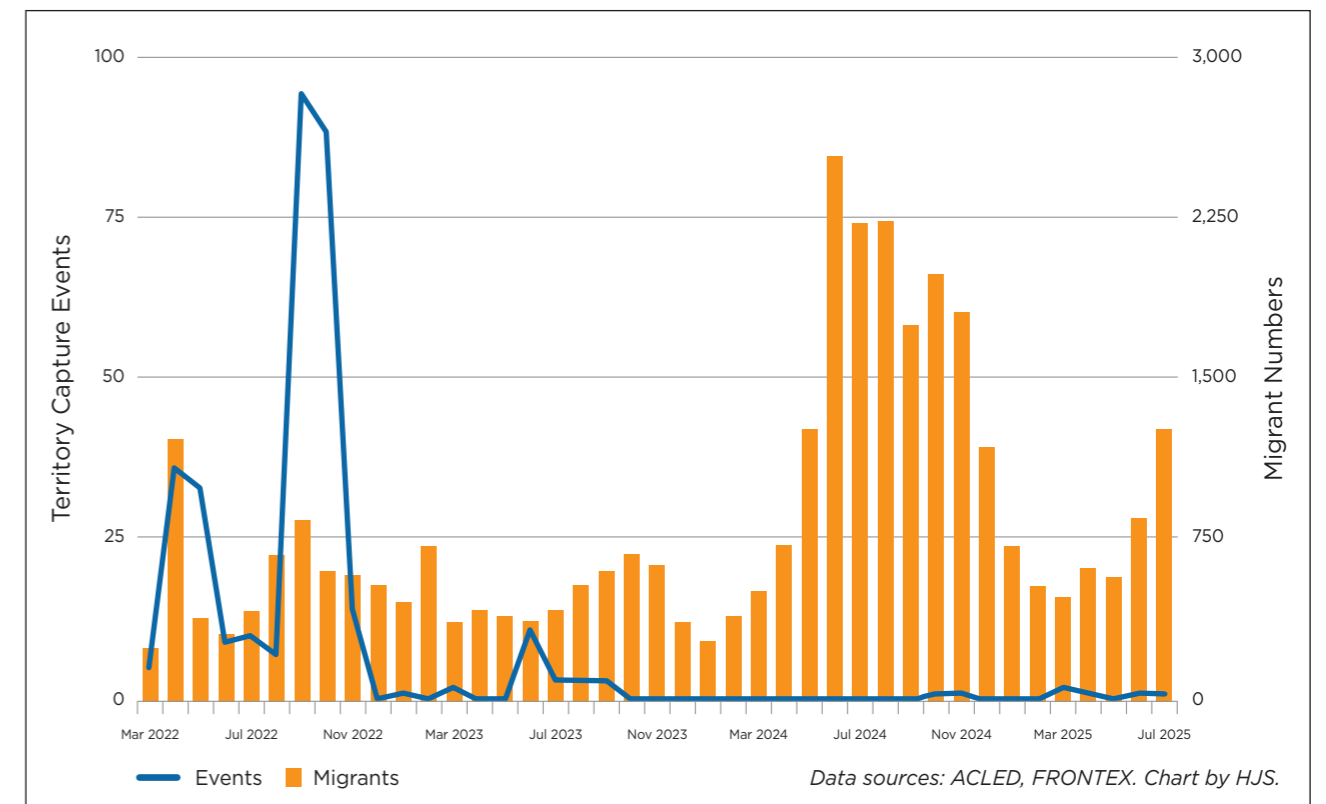


The value we obtained was  $r^2 = 0.26$ , i.e., 26% of migrant encounters can be explained by increases in Russian battlefield losses.

### Battlefield Reversals: Territory Losses

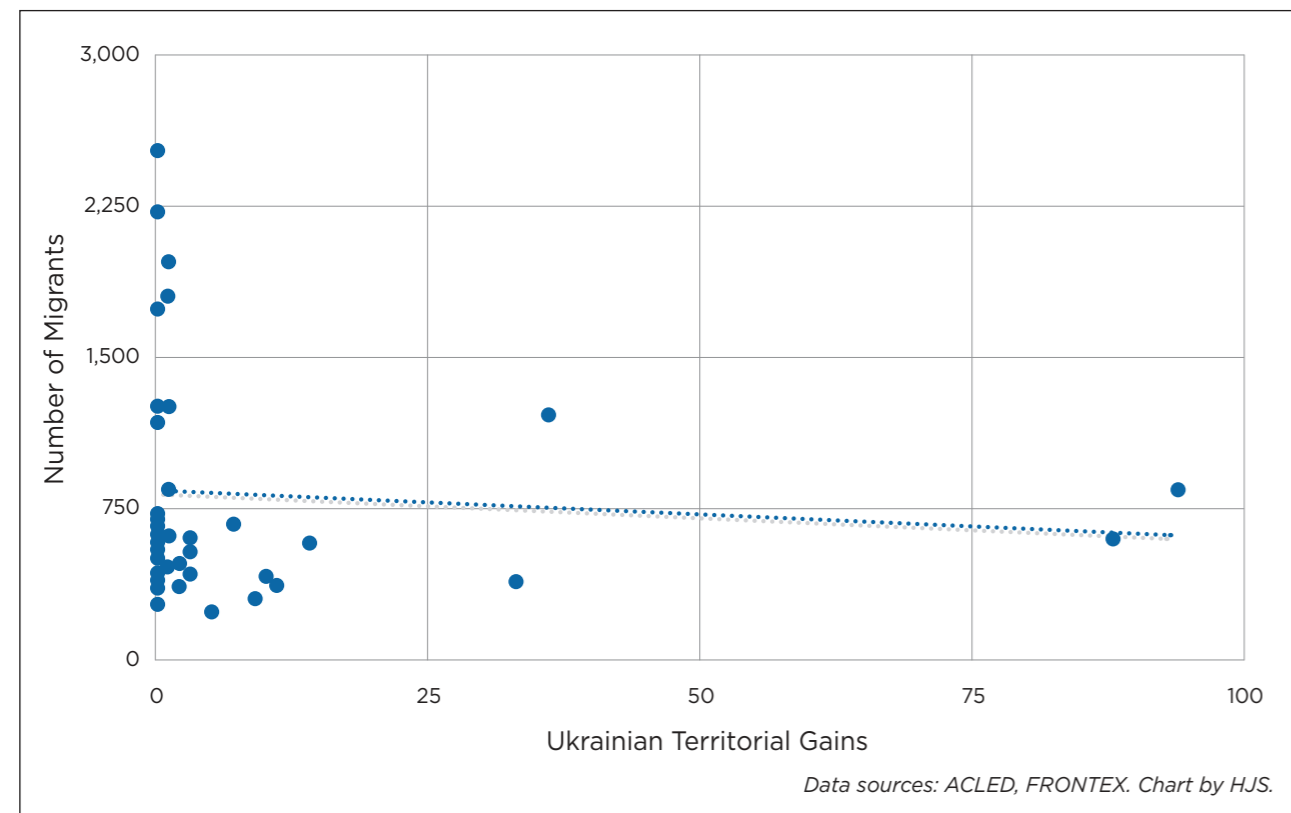
To test the theory that Russia would be more likely to use instrumentalised migration during periods of territory loss, we analysed data on Ukrainian territory gains (i.e., Russian territory losses) with migrant numbers. To do this, data from ACLED on the number of events resulting in Ukrainian territory gains were compared with data from FRONTEX on the number of migrants detected on the EU's Eastern Borders. The results are in Figure 13.

**Figure 13:** Territory Capture Events by Ukrainian Forces and Migrant Numbers



To further examine this relationship, we performed a correlation analysis on the two sets of data. The results obtained were as follows:

**Figure 14:** Correlation Between Ukrainian Territorial Gains and Number of Migrants Detected (February 2022 to July 2025)



The  $r$  value obtained was  $r = -0.8$ , a negative relationship. We then performed an  $r$  squared ( $r^2$ ) test. The results of this  $r^2$  test performed on Ukrainian territorial gains and migrant numbers was  $r^2 = 0.007$ , i.e., just 0.7% of migrant numbers can be explained by Ukrainian territorial gains. This would suggest that territorial gains by Ukraine do not appear to be a major driver of migrants. A reason for this could be that Russia was more willing to tolerate losses of territory than it was personnel losses.

## Russian Territorial Gains

### What About When Things Go Well for Russia?

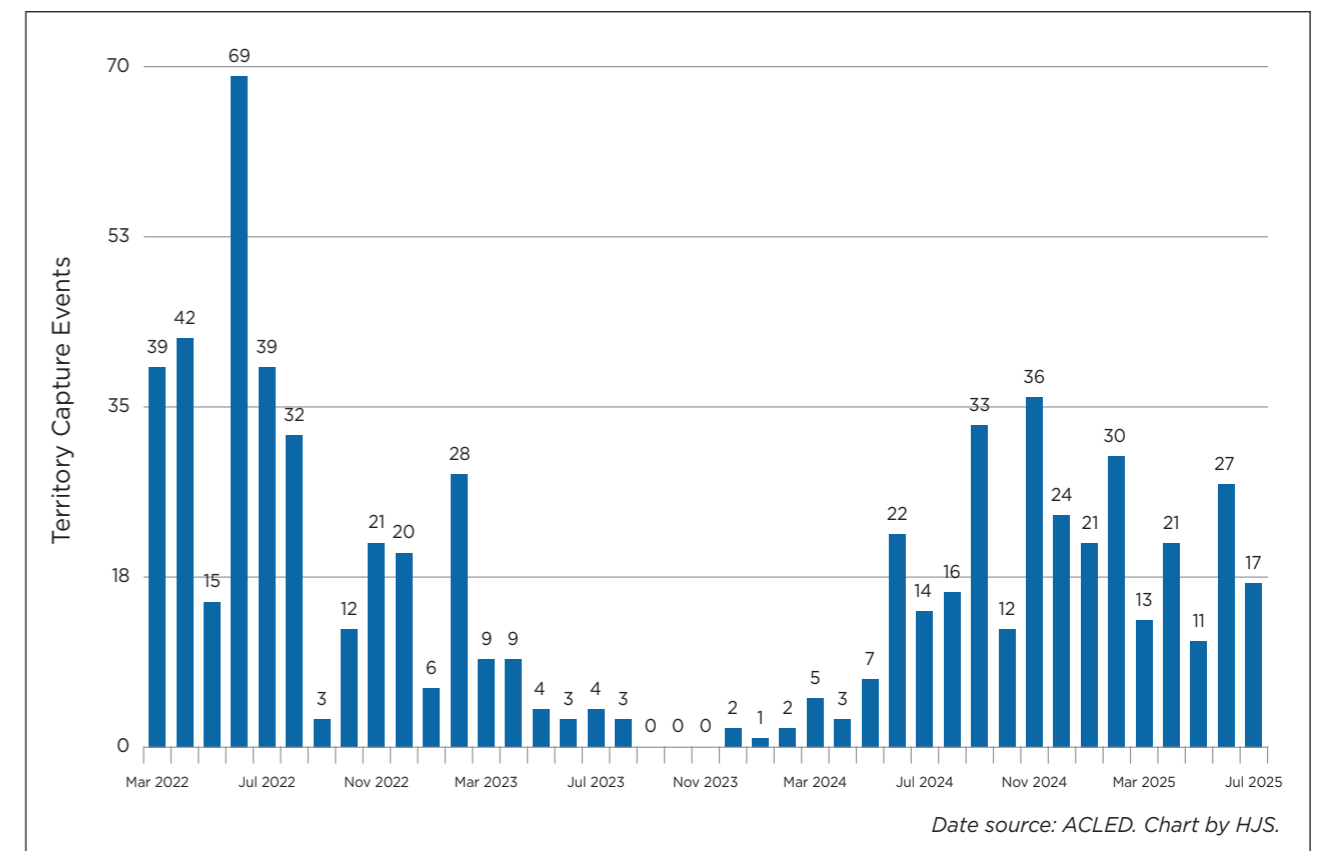
When Russian battlefield deaths mount, and when particularly acute and biting sanctions are applied, we see an increase in migrants. But a highly interesting question is: does this work in reverse? That is, when things are going well for Russia, we would predict less instrumentalised migration. The reason is that instrumentalised migration is an irregular warfare tactic that is less useful or necessary when conventional forces are enjoying success.

To test this, we examined data from ACLED and its "Ukraine Conflict Monitor" database, which contains a data-rich collection of information on multiple aspects of the war in Ukraine. Its data on Russian battlefield gains, defined as "Russian/Pro-Russian Forces Overtake Territory", was used as the metric for when Russia was experiencing success.

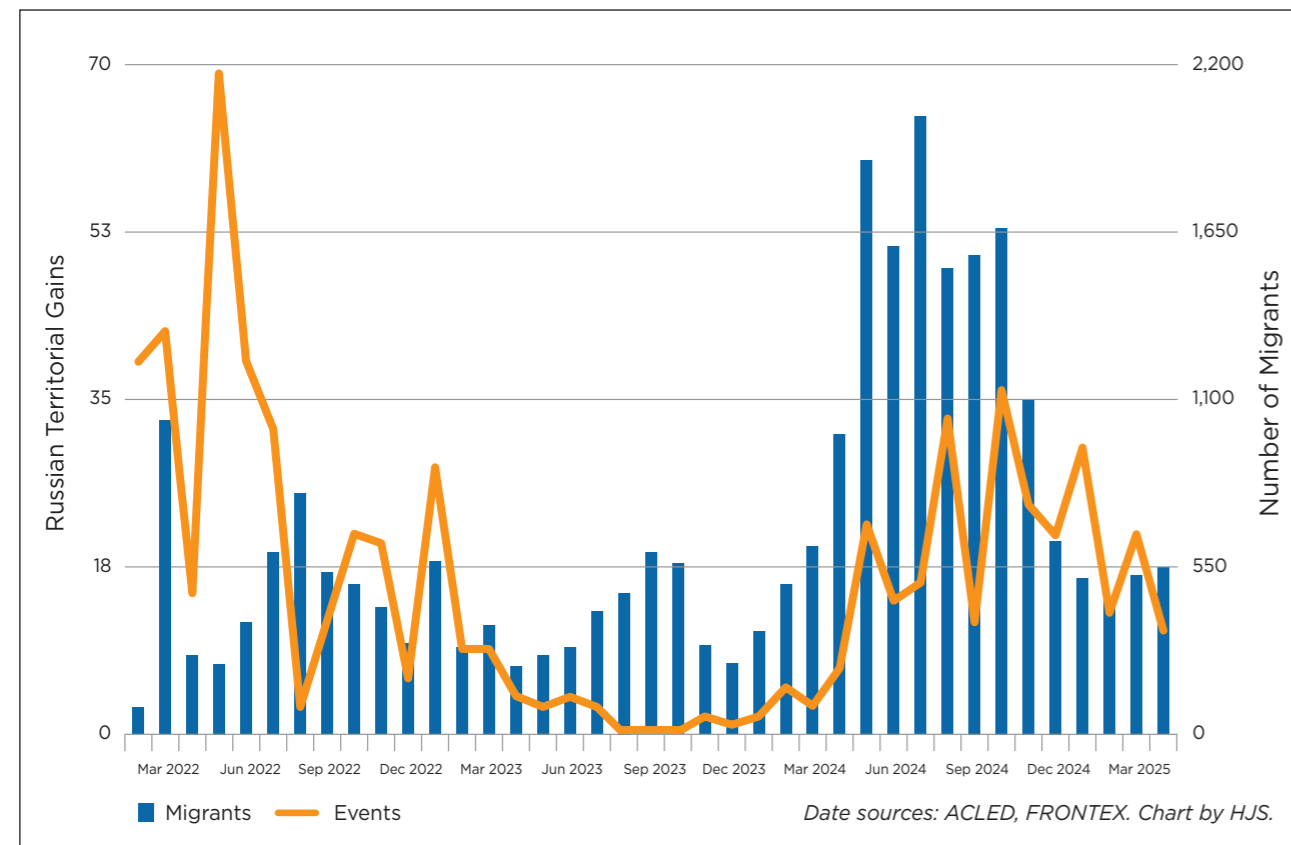
These events signify the most important measure of military success, i.e., capturing enemy territory. This is particularly true given the frustration Moscow has experienced in advancing and capturing Ukrainian territory, with a frontline that has been largely static for much of the conflict. But by 2024, this was beginning to change.

In the second half of 2024, Russia's military fortunes began to improve. According to ACLED, Russian forces began to win more territory, having spent much of 2023 on the defensive.

**Figure 15:** Events of Russian Territorial Gains in Ukraine (March 2022 to July 2025)



**Figure 16:** Comparison of Migrant Numbers with Russian Territorial Gains (February 2022 to April 2025)



The data above show a clear pattern. In early 2022, events where Russia gained territory were at their peak. These events then decline by the spring of 2023, and for much of 2023 and early 2024, Russian gains were low to zero. The events where Russia gained territory then increased from mid-2024 onwards, with some periods of decline in between mid-2024 and early 2025 (e.g., August to September 2024). If our hypothesis were to be correct, then we would expect increased instrumentalised migration in the time window when Russian territory gains had slowed or stopped.

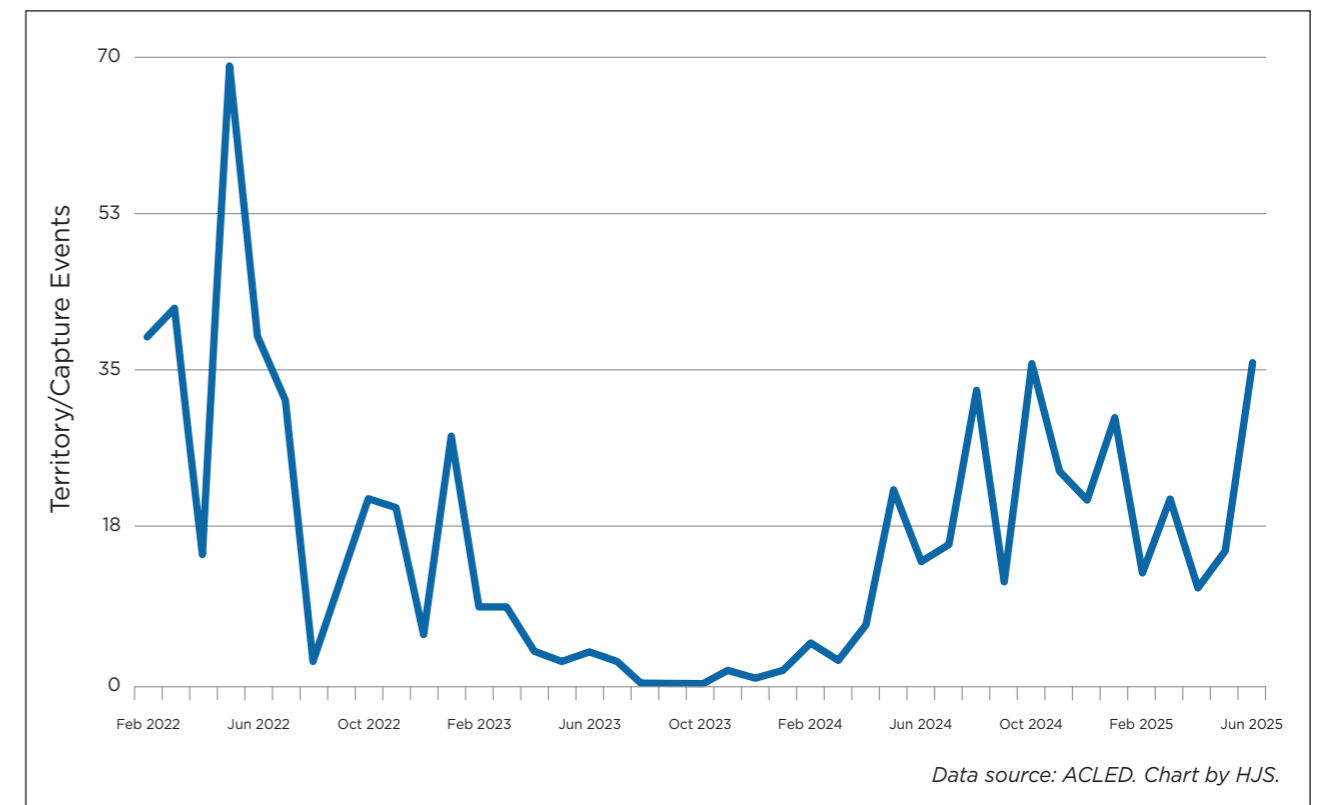
If we look at the statistics on migrants, we find that for much of 2022 and 2023, migrant statistics were relatively stable. However, between June and September 2023, migrant numbers steadily increased, before declining through late 2023. For much of early 2024, however, the numbers increased again. Interestingly, this period broadly coincides with the period that Russian territorial gain events were at zero or low single digits. It also coincides with a change of government in the vital border state of Poland, with Poland's new government (briefly) suggesting a more relaxed border security regime, which Russia may have seen as a chance to use instrumentalised migration with greater penetrative impact.<sup>24</sup>

Comparing the data on territory capture with migrant numbers, we obtain the observation that as Russia's strategic position improved in the second half of 2024 as measured by successful territorial gains, the number of migrants encountered on the EU's Eastern Borders, dropping noticeably between July and August then declining from October 2024 onwards. This would be highly suggestive of Russia "parking" instrumentalised migration during periods when

<sup>24</sup> Pawel Styrna, "Crisis on NATO's Eastern Border Shows How Anti-Western Regimes Weaponize Illegal Mass Migration", Federation for American Immigration Reform, 12 June 2024, <https://www.fairus.org/blog/2024/06/12/crisis-natos-eastern-border-shows-how-anti-western-regimes-weaponize-illegal-mass>.

its conventional tactics and forces were experiencing success and therefore did not need to resort to this tactic. This would be exactly what our model would predict.

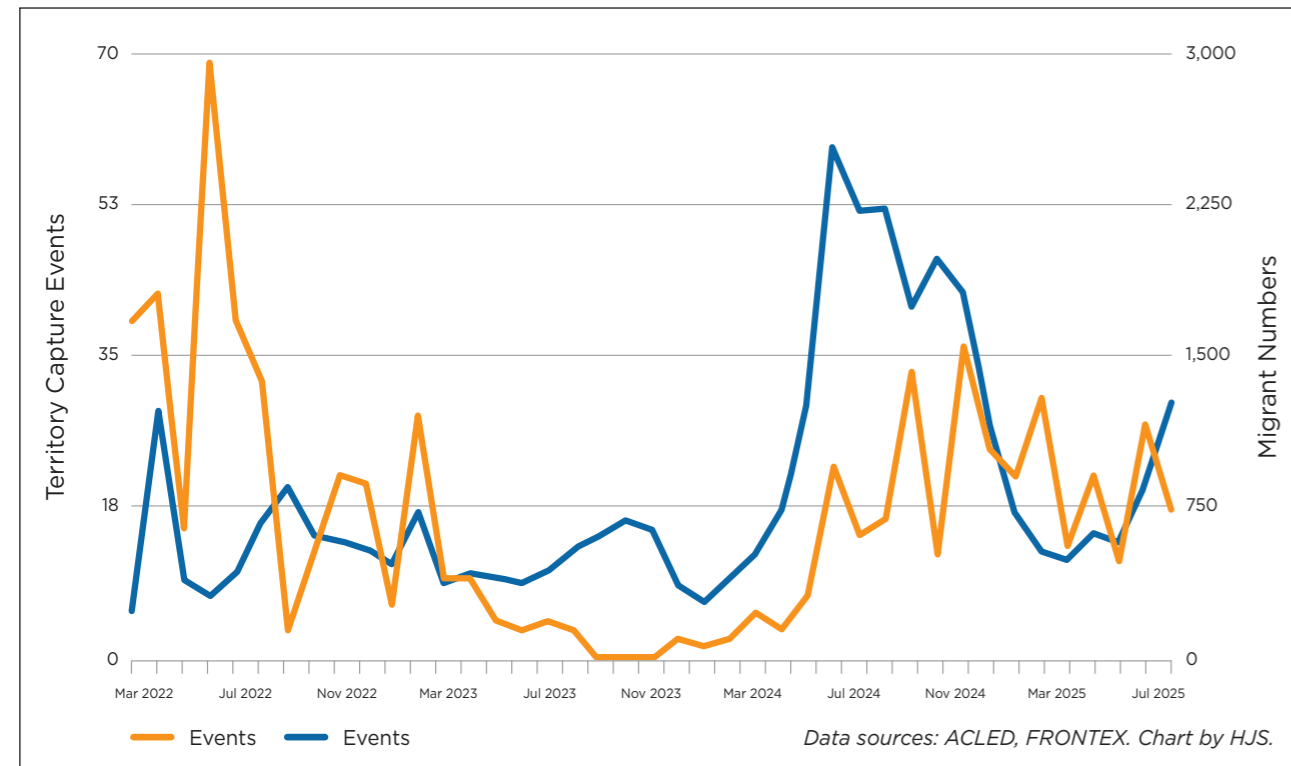
**Figure 17:** Territory/Capture Events by Russian and Pro-Russian Forces (February 2022 to June 2025)



In terms of territorial capture, it should be noted that it is possible in a fast-moving war for both combatants to be gaining territory simultaneously in different parts of the country. ACLED data show that there were occasions when both Ukraine and Russia gained territory in different parts of Ukraine at the same time, such as in the first few months of the conflict, and therefore the binary view of territorial loss may be oversimplistic. It could be that a combination of losses being offset by gains elsewhere on the front, and/or the fact that such gains and losses may potentially have been modest in terms of land area, meant that territory loss was not as big a driver of instrumentalised migration as may have been suspected.

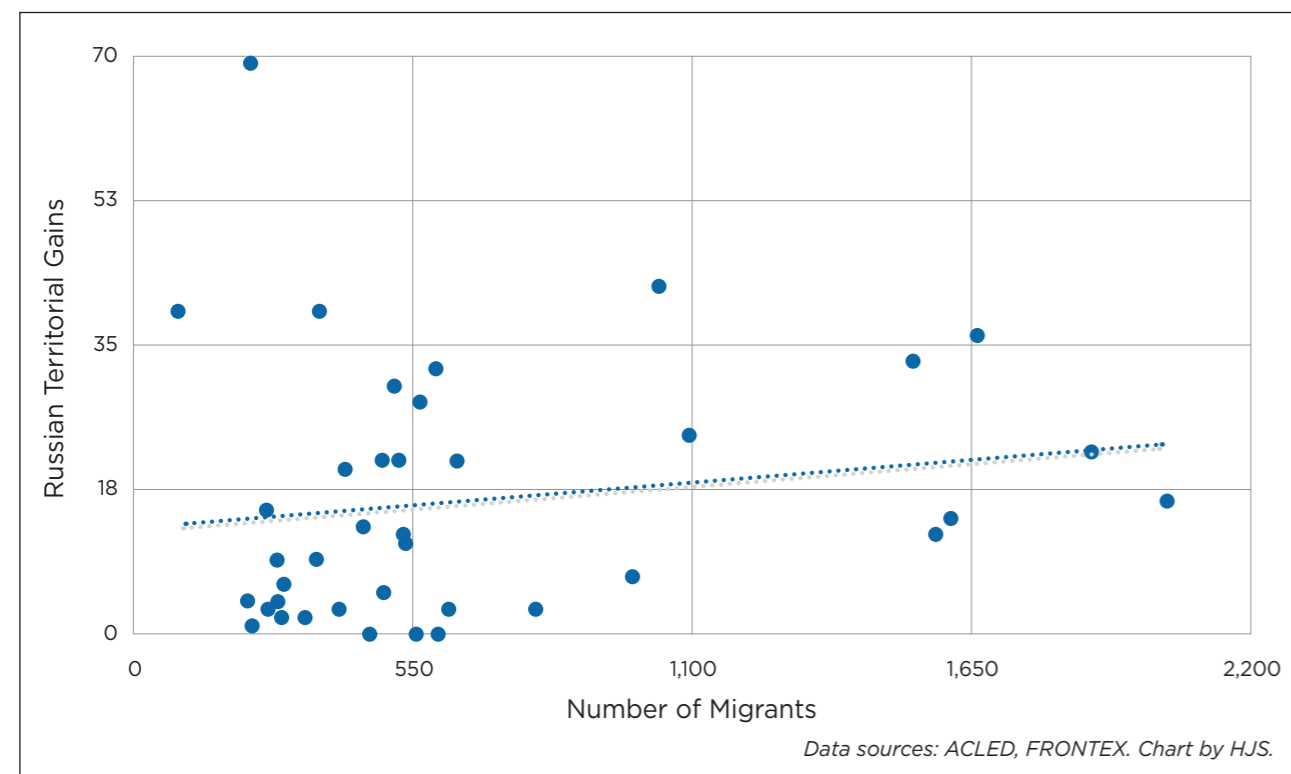
We then compared the instances of territorial gain by Russia to changes in migration numbers to see if there was a relationship between the two variables. The results were as follows.

**Figure 18:** Events of Captured Territory by Russians and Migrant Numbers (March 2022 to July 2025)



To test whether there was a statistically significant relationship between Russian territorial gains and instrumentalised migration, we performed a correlation analysis on the data obtained from ACLED and FRONTEX. The results were as follows:

**Figure 19:** Correlation Between Russian Territorial Gains and Number of Migrants Detected (February 2022 to July 2025)



The results obtained show that the  $r = 0.17$ , much lower than the value of  $r = 0.5$  obtained when we compared the relationship between personnel losses and migrant numbers. Having established that there was a relationship, albeit weaker than the relationship between personnel losses and migration, we then performed an r squared ( $r^2$ ) test to establish what percentage of migration flows could be explained by Russian territorial losses. We obtained a value of  $r^2 = 0.03$ , i.e., 3% of the change in migration could be explained by territorial losses. This compares with the  $r^2 = 0.26$  we obtained for the relationship between personnel losses and increased migration. In other words, the relationship between personnel loss and migration was 8.6 times stronger than the relationship between territory loss and migration.

## Battlefield Reversals: Ukrainian Attacks on Russia

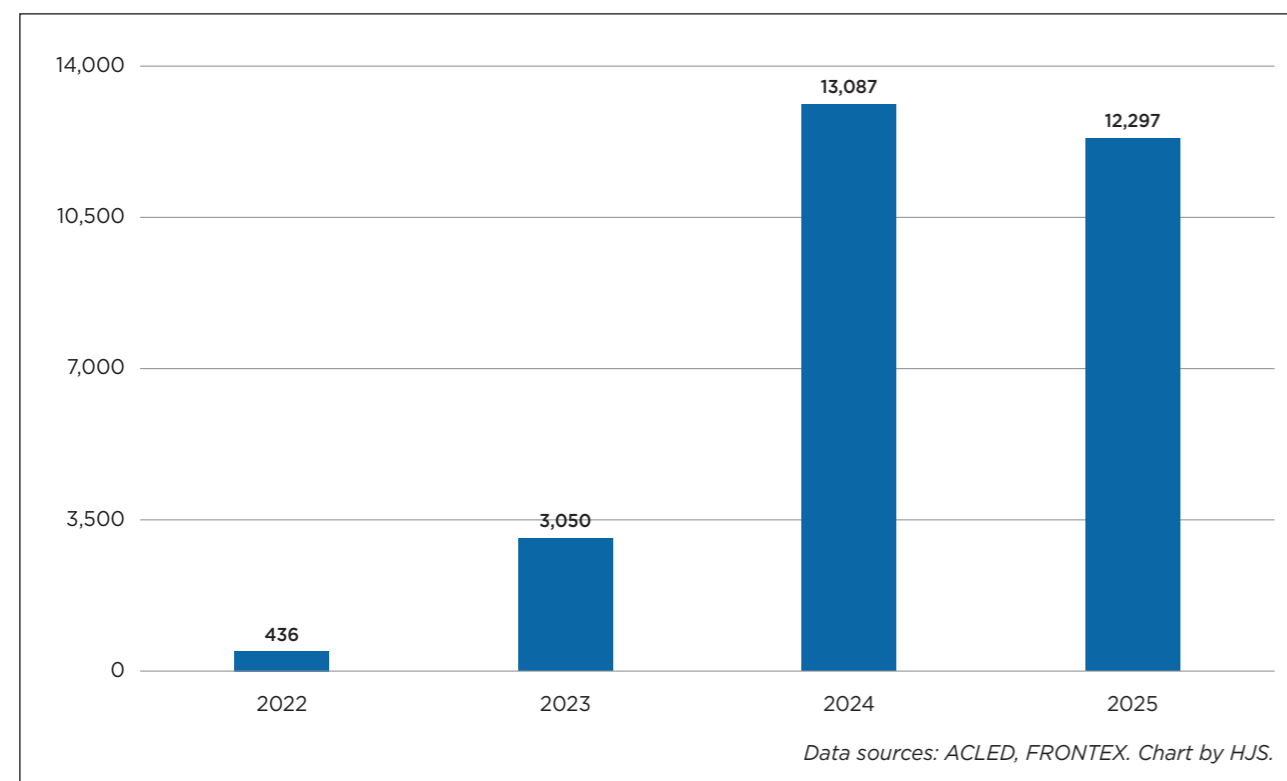
Personnel loss and territorial losses are two measures of battlefield reversal. Significant attacks by the opponent are a third, and perhaps the ultimate example would be attacks by Ukraine on the Russian homeland. We wished to explore the potential role of Ukrainian attacks on Russia as a potential driver of instrumentalised migration. Russia may be more sensitive to attacks on Russia itself than attacks on Russian forces in Ukraine.

As the war has progressed, Ukraine has been willing and able to strike not just into Russian-occupied territory in Ukraine, but into Russia itself. These attacks could have an impact on Russia's decision to launch new waves of migrants, as an attack on the Russian homeland may be seen as more politically, strategically and even psychologically serious than reversals in Ukraine.

According to ACLED, Ukraine launched just 20 attacks into Russian territory using drones in 2022, rising to 160 attacks in just the first seven months of 2023.<sup>25</sup> By August 2023, Ukrainian attacks into Russia were up 36% from the previous month,<sup>26</sup> and by January 2024, attacks into Russia had doubled and Saint Petersburg was hit for the first time.<sup>27</sup>

Analysis of ACLED data relating to battles, explosions, remote violence and violence against civilians in Russia were analysed to provide a picture of how the security of the Russian homeland has been threatened by Ukrainian action. Figure 20 shows how this has changed since the war began.

**Figure 20:** Battles, Explosions, Remote Violence and Violence Against Civilians in Russia



<sup>25</sup> "Regional Overview: Europe & Central Asia: July 2023", ACLED, 3 August 2023, <https://acleddata.com/update/regional-overview-europe-central-asia-july-2023>.

<sup>26</sup> "Regional Overview: Europe & Central Asia: August 2023", ACLED, 7 September 2023, <https://acleddata.com/update/regional-overview-europe-central-asia-august-2023>.

<sup>27</sup> "Regional Overview: Europe & Central Asia: January 2024," ACLED, 8 February 2024, <https://acleddata.com/update/regional-overview-europe-central-asia-january-2024>.

The greatest increase in these measures was between 2023 and 2024, when the number of incidents increased fourfold. Interestingly, FRONTEX data show the number of migrants increased 200% in the 2023-2024 period. It could be that as Russia itself saw increasing attacks, it resorted to instrumentalised migration to try and strategically rebalance.

It is interesting that as drone attacks on Russia escalated in number and strategic significance, there appears to have been an increase in instrumentalised migration. For example, late 2023 and 2024 saw very sharp increases in migrants, coinciding with an increase in Ukrainian attacks on the Russian homeland in terms of increased number and increased symbolic significance. While the data were sparser on this, the data that were available suggest that escalated attacks on Russian forces, especially attacks on Russia itself, seemed to drive more instrumentalised migration.

## Findings and Discussion

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This study has been the first to examine the way Russia is using instrumentalised migration in the context of the war in Ukraine. Our attempts to quantify the ways Russia has used this grey zone tactic explored possible hypotheses as to what conditions could trigger more instrumentalised migration. The results were as follows.

### **Instrumentalised Migration More Likely Following Russian Personnel Losses**

The statistics show that when Russian battlefield losses are high and/or when significant milestones are hit, there is more instrumentalised migration.

### **Sanctions Aimed at Vital Industries and Sectors Trigger Migration**

There have been multiple rounds of sanctions by both the US and the EU. But migrant numbers seem to increase most dramatically following sanctions that target vital and lucrative Russian industries.

### **“Others” Migrants Peak During Periods of Hard-Hitting Sanctions**

Migrants not from Russia, Ukraine or Belarus formed much higher proportions of the total migrant share during periods when Russia was being hit with sanctions that especially harmed its economy or industries. This is interesting as migrants from further afield are more likely to be instrumentalised than the “organic” migration of people from countries along the Eastern Borders.

### **Belarus Sanctions Trigger Migration**

Belarus is a key ally of Moscow and has been sanctioned due to its support for Russia's war effort. When Belarus is sanctioned, migration increases. Belarus has a history of doing this when sanctioned, even prior to the war in Ukraine.

### **Ukrainian Attacks on Russia Itself Impact Migration**

When Ukraine attacks targets in Russia itself, this triggers more migration. This could be because Moscow feels particularly wounded by this, and feels the urge to retaliate.

### **Territorial Losses for Russia Have Less Impact**

When Russia loses territory in Ukraine, the number of migrants does not dramatically change. This suggests Russia can tolerate territory loss more than it can tolerate personnel losses.

## Recommendations

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### **Brace FRONTEX to Prepare When Certain Sanctions Targets are Prepared**

Our study has shown that sanctions in general are a less strong predictor than the type of sanctions and what targets are subject to the sanctions. When Belarus is targeted, or when industries that are lucrative/critical to Russia's war effort are targeted, FRONTEX should prepare for instrumentalised migration.

### **Brace FRONTEX to Prepare When Russian Personnel Losses are High**

The study discovered that when Russian personnel losses are high, instrumentalised migration is more likely. For this reason, border guards on the Eastern Borders of the EU should expect more migration during periods of high personnel loss.

### **Increase Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) Methods for Measuring Russian Losses**

Russian losses are difficult to precisely quantify, despite the best efforts of multiple agencies. Given that we have found Russian losses a predictor variable for instrumentalised migration, it is vital that these losses be more accurately tracked and reported.



Title: "RUSSIA'S MALICIOUS MIGRATION:  
PREDICTING THE USE OF INSTRUMENTALISED  
MIGRATION AGAINST NATO AND THE EU"  
By Michael McManus

The Henry Jackson Society  
Millbank Tower, 21-24 Millbank  
London SW1P 4QP, UK

[www.henryjacksonsociety.org](http://www.henryjacksonsociety.org)

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