



## ETHNOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

### Europe in the Woods

#### Reflections on the Situation at the Polish-Belarusian Border

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For a few months in the summer and autumn of 2021, the eastern EU border became the focus of international media attention due to the political events accompanying the presence of refugees from the Middle East and Northern Africa. This *ethnographic snapshot* shows the idiosyncrasy of this migration route and reflects on the situation where people tried to help the refugees, despite the criminalisation of help by the Polish state. The reaction of the European Union (or rather a lack thereof) is also thematised. It is too early to expect thorough analyses of these processes, but it is important to document them. What is happening, although ephemeral and changing, is of crucial significance for our understanding of the everyday workings of EU bordering regimes.

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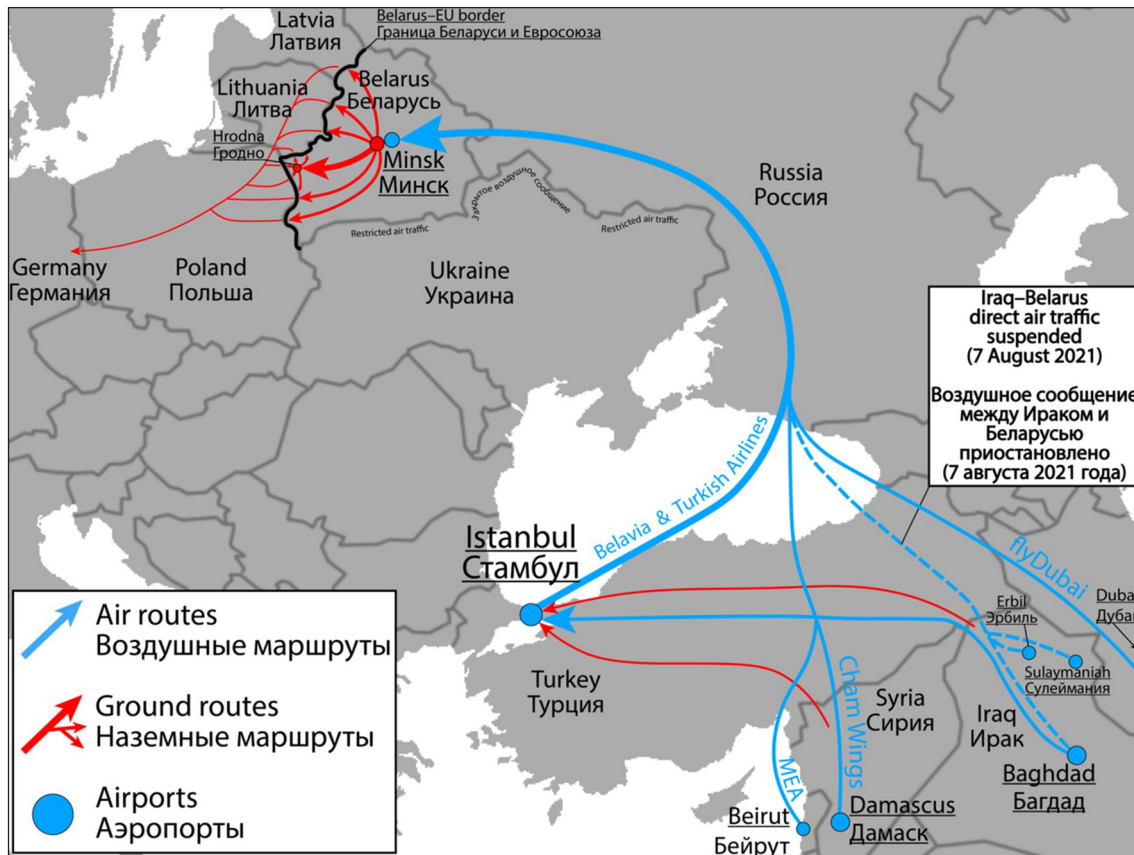
## Migration Routes to the European Union

Until 2021, most analysts recognised four to five routes of illegalised migration into the European Union (Idemudia & Boehnke 2020; *Statista* December 7, 2021). All of them involved crossing the Mediterranean – a perilous body of water, a trip many migrants viewed as “rites of passage, in which persons symbolically die and are reborn” (Grotti & Brightman 2021: 3). Researchers are interested in Mediterranean routes both for studying structural factors of EU migration, border protection and securitisation policies, as well as themes such as the dangers of travelling in overcrowded and unfit vessels on the open sea, the role of smugglers, and the deaths and the bodies of migrants drowning during the crossings.

Even for people living in coastal settlements, it is difficult to directly observe migrants’ journeys and their deaths on the open sea. One needs equipment and organisation to go to the sea and meet the migrants in the most perilous moments of their journey. Researchers therefore have tended to focus on governmental and non-governmental organisations that aim at saving refugees’ lives (Schmidt 2021). Once the migrants arrive, they land on the open shore, yet mechanisms of containment, separation and bureaucracy are set in motion, taking them away from the local communities.

The Eastern European migration route is different from the Mediterranean ones in this respect. Local inhabitants do not need special equipment to meet the refugees during the most physically dangerous part of their journey. Technically speaking, one needs only a pair of good boots to go to the woods and swamps of the Polish-Belarusian borderland. At the same time, this route is used in political arguments between neighbouring states. As a result, the objectification of the refugees is quite visible. In the narratives presented in the state media of Poland, Belarus, Russia and the Baltic states, these refugees are portrayed as tools, and their suffering and emotions directly exploited in the exchanges of mutual accusations between the neighbouring states.

Although this Eastern European route appeared on the radar of migration researchers especially in 2021 (*InfoMigrants* November 11, 2021) it cannot be called a new one, because it was used for years by refugees from Russia (mostly Chechnya) and countries in Central Asia, by citizens of Belarus as well as migrants from East Asia. Still, until the summer of 2021, it was travelled mostly by refugees and migrants moving within the former socialist countries, and they have been the focus of international research agendas to a lesser extent than those travelling within the context of the Western European colonial past and post-colonial present.



**Figure 1:** Map of the Eastern European migration routes. This map flattens a long and relatively unnoticed history of this route, which would need a separate full-length article to do it justice. (Source: Wikipedia. Map By Homoatrox – Own work, CC0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=111537928>).

### Eastern European Migration Routes and State Regimes

In spring 2021, the Eastern European land migration route began to catch the attention of international observers. In late spring 2021, the president of Belarus, Aleksander Lukashenko, confirmed that he would not hinder migrants who wanted to access the EU through Belarus (*The Independent* June 23, 2021). Shortly afterwards it became clear that he meant much more than that. Many sources confirm that the crossing of the eastern EU border was facilitated by the Belarusian state forces, as they organised planes for refugees from the Middle East and Northern Africa, starting from Baghdad, Istanbul, Dubai, and Damascus. They lured people with promises of a relatively smooth transfer into the European Union, and in return received considerable economic profit from charging refugees thousands of euros for their “services” (Rosenberg 2021; *BBC News* November 26, 2021; *Polskie Radio24* August 25, 2021). The Belarusian state acted

as a smuggler in this case. The first countries affected were Lithuania and Latvia. In Poland, the first migrants were stopped by Polish border guards in the summer of 2021.

The direct involvement of competing state regimes is crucial for understanding the workings of this migration route and its distinctiveness in comparison to the Mediterranean ones. The narrative in the government-controlled Polish official media presented refugees who were trapped on the border as tools of war, almost as hand grenades that the enemy was trying to throw across the border (Pruszkiewicz 2021). Here migrants were equated with weapons explicitly made by the enemy to destroy. Importantly, the refugees were not officially seen as enemies and therefore could not be potential partners in negotiations. In the narrative of the Polish state (*Serwis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej* August 23, 2021; *wPolityce* November 21, 2021), the “defence of the borders” was not directed against the refugees; the enemy was much bigger and more powerful, namely the lurking shadow of imperial and communist Russia for which Belarus served as a proxy and the refugees as a weapon.

For the Belarusian state, the situation at its borders with the EU was a political tool devised to divert international attention from repression of internal democratic opposition (Ackermann 2021). Commentators pointed out that the refugees were tools to put pressure on the EU to loosen sanctions against Belarus and Russia, or, even more importantly, to demonstrate that the whole discourse on human rights and “European values” was not worth the paper it was written on (Kotkamp 2021; Roth, Andrew 2021). In the Russian state television interview aired on November 12, 2021, Vladimir Putin expressed: “when on the border between Belarus and Poland now Polish border guards and representatives of military units beat up potential migrants, shoot above their heads or switch on sirens and light during the nights where the people are located, including children and pregnant women, this is somehow not compatible with ideals of humanism, on which apparently all politics of our western neighbours is built”<sup>1</sup> (*Главные новости 1*. [Main news channel 1] November 13, 2021). Subsequent aggression by Russia against Ukraine suggests that the situation with the refugees on the Polish-Belarusian border was indeed a way for Russia to test and destabilise European solidarity. Because EU nations could not work together to solve the refugee border crisis, Putin may have been reassured that aggression against Ukraine would not provoke an adequate or unified European response.

In November 2021, the Polish public media began to propagate the slogan *Murem Za Polskim Mundurem* (“as a wall behind the Polish uniform”), putting the task of using uniformed units to keep refugees physically away from the Polish territory on a par

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<sup>1</sup> All translations in this text were made by the author.

with defence of Polish independence. The news on refugees trying to cross the border were reported in the same breath as the news on Russia's and Belarus's armies training manoeuvres in the border region. There were many activities propagated under this slogan, from television concerts to children drawing pictures to be sent to Polish soldiers and border guards. The polarisation of Polish society became visible: while many stood "behind the Polish uniform", others tried to reach the migrants and give them aid before they fell ill, were pushed back to Belarus, or died.

On October 14, 2021, the Polish parliament accepted an amendment to the act that grants protection to foreigners in Poland (Law 2021/1918 2021). According to this amendment, the Head of the Border Police may leave an application for granting international protection unprocessed if it is submitted by a foreigner apprehended immediately after illegally crossing the external border of the EU. In practice, this means that illegal pushbacks practised on many EU borders were now legalised in Poland, while being a refugee became even more criminalised. The refugees' illegality created a bizarre and at the same time tragic situation, for example when a group of 32 refugees from Afghanistan was trapped on a narrow strip of land between the Polish and Belarusian border with no access to accommodation or medical help for almost 2,5 months. In this situation, the refugees were illegalised and immobilised; practically they were not allowed to do anything, which clearly shows the absurdity of what Andersson calls "illegality industry" (2014).

### Responses to Illegalisation

This illegality has produced new modes of surveillance (Follis 2012: 92), in this case a ban introduced by the Polish government on the presence of the media and humanitarian organisations in the area immediately adjacent to the border, which in a changed form has been prolonged until June 2022 (Sobczak 2022; *Serwis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej* September 3, 2021). Not only have the refugees been pushed back into Belarus, but also the media could not report first-hand on how exactly this has been done. Humanitarian organisations have also not been able to operate freely. Therefore, much of what has happened in the border zone directed towards helping people trapped in the forest has depended on the commitment, civil courage, and creativity of both the inhabitants of the border zone and those who, while living far away, try to help in other ways. It is worth mentioning, for example, the initiative to cook meals for refugees,<sup>2</sup> various collections of goods and money,<sup>3</sup> the organisation of transport or diverse

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<sup>2</sup> Example: <https://zupanagranice.pl/>.

<sup>3</sup> Examples: <https://ocalenie.org.pl/aktualnosci/zbiorka-na-dzialania-na-granicy>; <https://opowiecie.info/dobro-ponad-granicami-trwa-zbiorka-dla-uchodzcow-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej/>.

demonstrations and information actions.<sup>4</sup> In social networks, people discussed how to talk with acquaintances, friends, family, and neighbours seeing the refugees as a threat or arguing that helping them is equal to supporting Lukashenko's or Putin's regimes. Most importantly, there were people, both locals and volunteers from other parts of Poland, who searched for refugees stuck in the woods and supplied food, sleeping bags, dry clothes, as well as legal advice and medical help.

## PEOPLE ARE DYING

### on the border between Poland and Belarus



Drawing by J. Tarkowska based on a photo by M. Kiełbowski / Testigo Documentary

**Support „Grupa Granica”:**  
<https://zrzutka.pl/kk4yh2>

**[www.rodzinybezgranic.pl](http://www.rodzinybezgranic.pl)**  
**[www.hf.org.pl](http://www.hf.org.pl)**  
**[www.obywatele.news/uchodzczy/](http://www.obywatele.news/uchodzczy/)**



**Figure 2:** Leaflet distributed by volunteers linked to *Grupa Granica*. (Drawing by J. Tarkowska based on a photo by M. Kiełbowski/Testigo Documentary).

<sup>4</sup> Examples: <https://rudaslaska.com.pl/i,demonstracja-przed-placowka-strazy-granicznej-w-rudzie-slaskiej,200274,1475218.html>; <https://rodzinybezgranic.pl/>.

“This action has taught me an incredible amount of humility, not entering into discussion, giving help, not judging political events, and [undertaking] pure medical action.”<sup>5</sup> These words were uttered by a nurse who took part in an effort called Medical Workers at the Border.<sup>6</sup> In October and November 2021, over 40 doctors, paramedics, and nurses helped people stuck in the forest on the Polish side of the border. They not only looked for people in the woods and helped them, but also organised medical courses for local inhabitants. The intention of this statement was obviously to reflect on the morally loaded judgements that the helpers faced in Poland both in the pro-government media, and sometimes from their neighbours. “Useful idiots” was one of the lightest terms used. After all, as the official argument went, helping the refugees meant helping Lukashenko’s and Putin’s causes. The above quoted nurse from Medical Workers at the Border encouraged his listeners to take a position of compassion and humanity, which was initially at the core of European asylum legal regulations, but which gradually was replaced by a discourse of potential dangers brought by refugees, as well as their criminalisation (Fassin 2011).

During an online roundtable titled *Migration, Securitization and Civic Engagement at the Polish-Belarusian Border* that I co-organised at the beginning of December 2021,<sup>7</sup> one of the voices in the discussion expressed the (im)possibility of doing ethnographic research in this region. This is not only because of the restrictions mentioned above, but, as Katarzyna Follis noted during the roundtable, there has been a feeling among researchers that it is important to help but it is ethically dubious to conduct interviews, thereby taking up the time of local inhabitants and volunteers who enter the woods and search for people in need. So how is research on this border zone to be done, based on only fragmentary information?

### Research as Documentation

The first observations on the ground were published by sociologists Sylwia Urbańska and Przemysław Sadura in *Krytyka Polityczna*, a critical left-wing liberal journal. They have conducted on-site research since September 2021 (Sadura & Urbańska 2021a, 2021b), and their work could probably be called in-depth journalism. The main goal of practically all research initiatives since then has been documentation. In late November 2021, at the initiative of the Institute for Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, a network of researchers who conducted or wanted to conduct research in or

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<sup>5</sup> [https://fb.watch/dt\\_icegMCU/](https://fb.watch/dt_icegMCU/).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/medycynagranicy/>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.aau.at/blog/online-roundtable-migration-securitization-and-civic-engagement-at-the-polish-belarusian-border/>.

about the borderland was established. The aim of the network is “to collect data related to the humanitarian crisis on the north-eastern border of the European Union and to carry out civic education activities”.<sup>8</sup> The first seminar took place at the beginning of December 2021, the second at the end of January 2022. The presentations, questions, and discussions during the two-day seminar in January revealed not only the urgency of conducting research on this migration route but also the potential for developing areas of study that have received relatively little attention in refugee studies so far.

The situation at the Polish-Belarusian border has provided an opportunity to study the relationality of help on various levels. There is no data on how many people are involved in helping networks in Poland and beyond, but they may be more numerous than the refugees. Because the state refused to help the refugees, focusing instead on control, containment, and securitisation, and because the woods are a relatively accessible terrain, researchers can study, for instance, chains of civic help. People go to the woods to help despite controls and harassment on the part of the guards. Research can help answer many questions: What factors facilitate/restrain participation in help-related activities? What is the nature of the collaboration between formal NGOs and informal networks of help? How do helpers deal with bodily engagement and emotions? What is the role of technologies in help and communication? How does self-reflection influence the language and metaphors used, as well as feelings of responsibility for public discourse (e.g. how should I talk about this experience so I can make a change? Can I, as a helper, talk about my strained or difficult relations with refugees?). And finally: how does participation in such support networks change people’s self-perception as members of various political bodies such as the nation-state or the EU? All of these are questions that ethnologists and, more broadly, social scientists, have the ability to answer.

The crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border pertains directly to broader political, social and ethical issues in the European Union. Although Putin’s words quoted above were clearly populist propaganda, that does not mean that they should be ignored. The crisis in which refugees die at the Polish-Belarusian border has not received adequate attention from the foreign media and the way in which it has been reported does not correspond to the complexity and depth of the situation. It could be said that the very term “refugee crisis” is misleading. At issue have been thousands, not hundreds of thousands, of migrants. These people can certainly be helped. Yet they are still dying in European forests despite the efforts of many European citizens. While the Polish government was criticised at the time by many Western politicians because of its stance

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/BadaczeiBadaczkiNaGraniczy/>.



on abortion policy, LGTB rights or unconstitutional changes to the judicial system, it received little critique for its handling of the situation at the border. Instead, there was a considerable support and thanks expressed by European leaders, praising the actions of the Polish state at the Polish–Belarusian border in defence of the external EU border (Roth, Johanna 2021; *Zeit Online* December 1, 2021; European Commission November 23, 2021).

Migrants are dying at many European borders. One could say Europe has become used to this. After the picture of a 3-year-old Syrian boy's dead body on the Turkish shore went viral and generated outrage, organisations helping refugees received donations, but in the long run nothing changed. Europeans cannot say that they do not know about refugee deaths. At the Polish–Belarusian border, refugees die not far from local people's houses and those who want to help them are not only prevented from doing so, but are categorised as national traitors or useful idiots. The situation at the Polish–Belarusian border can be seen not as an exception but rather as a nonsensical case of changing attitudes towards refugees in Europe: from compassion to criminalisation.

I was a naïve European Union enthusiast for many years. Poland's accession to the EU made my life possible and relatively easy. I work in Poland, live in Germany and almost everything goes smoothly – from health insurance to Covid vaccinations. I could ignore where the border was. I remember the time before Poland's admission to the EU and the obligatory visits to the “Aliens' Registration Office” in England and *Ausländerbehörde* in Germany. I experienced borders before and after 1990. Still, the Polish–Belarusian crisis made me realise that I am living in a gated community that not only tries to ignore the world outside, but also effectively kills the people who try to enter.

The situation on the Polish–Belarusian border is part of a complex chain of events, much broader in time and space than what we can see in the woods along the border region. The roots of the present situation can be traced not only to conflicts and poverty in the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia, but also to the political situation in Eastern and Central Europe, as well as in the EU and the world in general. It is perhaps difficult to think about this humanitarian crisis now in terms of theory-building and meta-analysis, but it is certainly the time when *documentation* is needed. This is something that ethnographers can do, but do not pursue often enough, being forced by the demands of the liberal academia to propose quick applicable solutions or to produce hermetic and bloated theoretical analyses for high-profile journals. What is needed instead are descriptions, multivocal, sensitive to detail, aware of the positionality of the ethnographer, but directed towards the observed world. Documentation of the work of everyone involved, in whatever role they may find themselves, is important:

refugees, border guards, residents afraid of strangers, members of paramilitary groups, volunteers from other parts of Poland, or locals who light a green light on their porch as a sign of welcome. The forest itself is an important participant in this entire process, on the one hand allowing the refugees to hide and the volunteers to reach the refugees despite the existing prohibitions, and on the other hand, a frightening place where swamps and thickets can be a dangerous trap for refugees.

### **Post-scriptum**

On the European level, after Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022, Poland went from being seen as a basically anti-refugee country to being praised for the help it provided to Ukrainian refugees. The ethics of asylum in liberal democracy and attitudes towards refugees can be seen as a test for nation-states and other state-like regimes in relation to human rights (Fassin 2011). The situation on the Polish borders shows that there is no linear change from protection to imprisonment – while some refugees are illegalised and the help that is given to them is criminalised, others are given much attention and protection, and people helping them are praised.

Being a volunteer interpreter for Ukrainian refugees in the German town where I live, I listened to an official at the migration office trying to explain to the interpreters the status of the Ukrainian refugees: “I understand that not everything works, and that people would like the authorities to work faster and more efficiently. But it is still amazing and fantastic that the refugees are not locked up in detention centres, that they can start the asylum procedure living wherever they wish, and the state is trying to help but at the same time gives them maximum independence and self-determination. Until recently, this would have been unthinkable.” In Poland, the difference in how various groups of refugees are treated is still glaring.

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