

(Non)responsibility for Refugees – Communicating about the Belarusian-Polish Border (2021–2023)¹

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Abstract

Given that two dramatically different refugee regimens have developed along Poland's eastern border, this essay explores the social conditions and discourses that facilitate such a radically different treatment of people. The Polish state's violation of human rights on the Belarusian section of the border and the celebration of these rights on its Ukrainian section have become part of media spectacles. This text analyses both the technical and content-related issues of communication about migrants and refugees from the Global South. It includes typologies of attributional biases in the media towards people on the move, discusses their functions and the ways towards a normalisation of violence. The final section historicises the current negative responses to refugees and sets them in the wider context of the uneasy obligations imposed on the "West" by its professed values. In doing so, this essay touches upon questions not only of a sense of social responsibility, but also of actual responsibility for the people who have died in Polish forests and rivers.

Keywords: Poland, refugees, Polish-Belarusian border, media

What are Poles' attitudes towards refugees? The period of 2021 and 2022 witnessed the emergence of two strikingly different border regimens along the eastern border

¹ This text was created with funding from the ERC consolidator project, *Unlikely Refuge? Refugees and Citizens in East-Central Europe in the 20th Century*, as part of the EU's Horizon 2020 programme (grant agreement No. 819461). It is a significant extension of my earlier paper on refugees on the Belarusian-Polish border, which was published in April 2023 on the website of the New School of Social Research in New York (Democracy Seminar) under the title: "Held Hostage to One's Values. On responsibility for refugees at the Belarusian-Polish border."

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of Poland. The people crossing the Polish-Ukrainian border were offered fast border checks and supportive infrastructure, as well as a warm welcome, encouraged by the rhetoric of dignity and proximity. Those attempting to cross the border from Belarus into Poland saw brutal blockades, the racialisation of non-European refugees and rapid border militarisation.

As a result of these actions, the Polish-Belarusian borderland has, since mid-2021, become one of the world's many border zones where people fall sick and die under the watchful eye of the state. In such borderlands, vulnerability and deaths have been normalised – they have come to be seen as a regular and acceptable outcome of the migration policy (Squire 2020: 43). The turning back of refugees on the Belarusian section of the border, especially Chechens, has been going on for many years, but previous efforts were aimed at making this practice invisible (Szczepanik 2018). Since 2021, in turn, refugees and the borderlands have become heavily politicised to repeatedly activate the spectacle of crisis. Like in other places, the most important tool, as well as the most important consequence of this worldwide practice of “border spectacle” – as Nicolas De Genova put it – is the creation of a scene of exclusion and illegality for migrants (De Genova 2013). But the most important objective of sensationalising intensified border protection mechanisms is to create the impression of effective internal control and efficiency of the national government.

Like the “border spectacle”, conflicting needs and dead ends of migration and asylum policies are far from being only a Polish problem. As for Poland, migrants – whether fleeing war or seeking to improve their low standard of living – treat it predominantly as a transit country and opt to cross illegally in order to avoid starting asylum procedures in Poland (many want to reunite with their relatives in other EU countries). In view of the fact that, once caught, migrants usually ask for asylum in Poland, forcing them back into a life-threatening environment is against the principles of both the Constitution of Poland and the Geneva Conventions. The principle of non-refoulement, which underpins the refugee legal regime to which Poland has adhered, prohibits the forced return of asylum seekers to a place of danger without examining their case (Rodenhäuser 2018).

In practical terms, we are dealing with what are known as pushbacks – the Polish state authorities built an ineffective border fence that is supposed to prevent refugees from illegally entering Polish territory. If refugees get past the fence and are spotted by the guards, they are violently turned back, whether or not they ask for asylum. Therefore, pushbacks are an illegal response to an act of illegal border crossing. However, there is no symmetry between the two in terms of their unlawfulness. The state authorities are deliberately and systematically placing people's lives at risk (by sending them – regardless of their health and weather conditions – back into the hands of violent Belarusian guards), whereas refugees feel they have no alternative but to violate the border integrity. At the time of writing, the checkpoints on the Polish-Belarusian border are hardly open, so this regular way for migrants to cross the border is practically blocked.

Those coming to Europe have fled wars in Syria and Yemen, long-time misery in Jordan's refugee camps with cramped container homes, persecution in Afghanistan or hunger in Sudan and Ethiopia. Faced with a choice between the European land and sea borders, they opted for a seemingly safer crossing through the forest. Initially, they could count on "support" from the Belarusian authorities during the crossing. Later on, this "facilitation" of migratory movement subsided. In each case, winter conditions exercise biophysical violence on refugees at the border. At that time of the year, the local geography, including the landscape and weather, takes its toll on migrants. Hypothermic, often injured after having climbed over the border fence, the refugees end up hopelessly trapped in the midst of the Białowieża primeval forest, where the ground goes from water-logged to frozen.

Given that a completely different refugee regimen is applied to the Polish-Ukrainian border, it is impossible to escape the recurring questions about the social preconditions for treating the suffering and death of refugees in the border zone as a regular and acceptable consequence of the migration policy. In this essay, I will discuss mechanisms leading to indifference or hostility towards refugees on the Belarusian-Polish border. These are by no means the only reactions that have emerged in Poland. Nevertheless, they are gaining ground to the extent that more humanitarian communication is considered a potentially dangerous line of argumentation in the face of the political electoral cycle.

Due to the limited contact Poles actually have with migrants from the Global South, it is the media that plays a big role in shaping social norms towards minorities (Bissell, Parrott 2013; Bulska, Winiewski 2023). At this constructivist level, the objectives of media makers, their structural constraints related to media environments and the discourses they operate with, lend themselves to typologisation in a fairly orderly way (such an analysis is also provided in this text). A more complicated question is why the public is so susceptible to arguments that desensitise them to violence against refugees and even justify suffering and death at the Polish border. The following essay also addresses this difficult question. It aims to bring together in one place the core aspects of communication on the Belarusian-Polish border to facilitate and ideally stimulate discussion on the refugee question, for example in an academic classroom.

The structural side of communication: what does not come across and why

Communication fatigue

Although violence towards refugees on the Belarusian-Polish border has been ongoing since the summer of 2021, the level of public awareness of the issue remains a riddle. There are several reasons for this. The first could be called communication

fatigue: it is hard for the media to keep providing meaningful news updates if the crisis persists for so long. How to find new ways of talking about the protracted crisis? This challenge is faced by people trying to communicate any protracted situation to the public; like the one at the border, the one about the continuing war in Ukraine, and many others. The problem of “moral attentiveness” – how to effectively engage audiences with issues of moral importance and sustain a focus that competes with the distractions of everyday life – is not new to scholarly reflection (Reynolds 2008). This issue extends to people’s attitudes toward information in general. Not all people are similarly “epistemophilic” and necessarily want to be constantly kept informed (Horolets et al. 2019).

Polarisation and echo chambers

Secondly, pushbacks at the Polish border provide a perfect example of the echo chamber effect. Pushbacks have been regularly criticised in the media followed only by this part of Polish society which accepts this type of knowledge. In a highly polarised public sphere, such as the one in Poland, humanitarian coverage competes with the right-wing discourse justifying such violence. On top of that, up to 2024, public media channels of communication were in the hands of the conservative government who attempted to monopolise the information setting. It used broadcasting to calm moral anxiety through distraction and engaging popular presenters to foster fear of refugees (e.g. the documentary “On the Border” [Na granicy] by Marcin Tulicki). These practices notwithstanding, media pluralism was preserved in Poland during the period in question, so there is no doubt that a sizeable proportion of the public chose to remain “unaware” of the nature of border violence. Another portion showed little concern upon accidentally finding out that “something is still going on at the border.”

Still, it is one thing to accept the right-wing government’s interpretation of the situation at the border – painting refugees as an aggressive and dangerous threat, rather than people who need help. It is quite another thing to narrow one’s own cognitive horizon and, by choice, ignore reports of violence against refugees. Precisely because the public sphere is highly polarised, each side is at least aware of the other side’s presence. Organisations and individuals reporting on the refugee situation (Janina Ochojska, the Ombudsman’s Office, Grupa Granica, Researchers on the Border Group (BBnG), as well as publicists and artists, including Agnieszka Holland’s film “The Green Border”, Kasia Smutniak’s “Mur”, Tusia Dabrowska’s “Zones of Exclusion”, Michał Zadara’s theatre play “Responsibility”, Joanna Rajkowska’s installation “Sorry”, books by Mikołaj Grynberg “Jesus Died in Poland” and Andrzej Muszyński “Koncertina”) make every effort to reach a wide audience. Therefore, the conventional argument “we didn’t know”, “the authorities kept us in the dark”, and the situation was taking place “out of our sight”, cannot be considered a circumstance that mitigates social indifference.

Given the involvement of public figures, intellectuals and experts, the gap between the humanitarian message of most of the Polish intellectual and artistic establishment and the indifferent or sceptical reactions of large portions of their audiences in Poland provokes important questions. Where in the communication process does the moral and universal value-based message get distorted or interrupted? The moment of interruption has to be constantly re-examined as there are always new grounds on which the ontological primacy of the individual life is abandoned in favour of various exclusivist beliefs (Tsoneva, Stoyanova, 2023). This interruption may be ideological, but also non-political, with intuitive and mundane grounds that the humanitarian narrative has failed to convincingly address so far, such as economic fears.

A final aspect of media polarisation, perhaps a key one, is the total lack of trust in the “other side”. The rapid spread (and awareness) of disinformation – that is the intentional use of fake news – provides an additional alibi to abandon any attempt to listen to the other side on an issue. The topic of this essay is mainly anti-refugee communication, discussed below. However, the journalist Małgorzata Tomczak (2023) in her polemical text about the border argued that the problem might be affecting both parties communicating about refugees. This includes – in her eyes – humanitarians who sometimes resort to emotional communication to evoke empathy and who might not have time to fact-check all the details. Rather than disinformation, the latter would fall into the category of misinformation, i.e. an unintentional distortion of the facts. In any case, the point is that in the public sphere, completely devoid of trust in the other party’s communication, even if it presents some relevant information, it is implicitly ignored and dismissed with the preconceived belief that it comes as part of a false agenda. In a scholarly typology of ignorance – choosing not to inform or conceal information, here about the violence on the border, and choosing not to know about it – are both strategic ploys, a deliberately constructed ignorance (Proctor 2008; Horolets et al. 2019).

Global versus local

The third problem of communication is connected to the exclusive nature of national public spheres in Europe (and beyond, of course). Despite some attempts, it has not been possible to create a supranational European information grid as a viable alternative to national points of view. Many excessive asymmetries of knowledge and attention persist, like in the case between Eastern and Western Europe. In the Polish case, this means, for instance, much less interest in current affairs in the decolonised part of the globe, while a much greater focus on the domestic scene (than in Western European media). In these circumstances, it was all the easier for the conservative media in Poland to build its arguments of “historical innocence” and “moral purity” upon the fact that Poland is a country without a classic colonial past, and

by extension, a classic post-colonial burden. Following these lines, the refugees from the Global South were presented as not “Poland’s responsibility”.

Having said that, in the West European public sphere, the belief that reporting on the humanitarian crisis (which began in 2015) in war-torn Yemen will bring about any sort of change for the local population is also diminishing. Likewise, South Sudan, affected by extreme weather conditions, is too far away for news from that country to capture proper European attention. The millions of refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, along with the hundreds of thousands of Rohingya made destitute in South Asia, have barely attracted any coverage. Against this backdrop, the situation of the Palestinians in Israel is an exception, because of its wider political implications. These range from anti-Zionism to a sincere preoccupation with the wrongdoings of a country considered to represent Western morality.

Overabundance of crises

Fourthly, solidarity has its limits amid an overabundance of crises in the media. As much as one tries to wave away the word “crisis” and as much as a crisis is a subjective feeling, everyone has recently been confronted with a growing number of serious challenges, both locally (in Poland: breaches of the rule of law) and globally, including migration, climate change, inflation, the Covid-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine and Gaza. Water pours in from all sides; short-handed and slow off the mark, people have been struggling to plug the holes.

In uncertain times, gravitating towards the groups to which one feels the greatest loyalty, based, for example, on a shared religion or ethnicity, geographical proximity or common history (all the identity issues bringing Poles closer to Ukrainian refugees than Syrians for example) may be seen as a reflex. On the one hand, it is an instinctive reflex – a defence mechanism against the overabundance of crises. Ivan Krastev pointed out that the increased selectivity of our response to the issue of migration and the shrinking of space for solidarity are both by-products of the pandemic (Krastev 2020). During the pandemic, we were literally advised to lock down and isolate. The pandemic prompted the need to redefine the concept of “home”: where and what it is, who belongs to it and under what (security) conditions. This selective approach has been actively encouraged by political fearmongers and their warnings against strangers. At the same time, the sense of helplessness in the face of global challenges brought out the limits of universalism. Concerns about situations getting out of our control (Citton 2016), and the desire to retain control in some areas, all lead to a further narrowing of the horizon of solidarity.

On the other hand, this is an acquired reflex via socialisation. This refers to an upbringing within a national framework that necessarily restricts universalism (Assmann 2020). It also refers to inherited persistent patterns of xenophobic narratives. In the Polish case, they date their origin back to a period when Polish society was

multi-ethnic (Gross 2015), but were consolidated in a mono-ethnic socialist period. Social psychology and sociology are both trying to establish the role that external pressure plays in falling into such collective reflexes, compared to the role of individual conscious choice that leads there. This will be developed later.

Interpretative side of communication: what does come across

The events in the Polish borderlands, i.e. in Białowieża, Narewka and Siemianówka, have unfolded just over 200 kilometres away from Warsaw. Relegated to the sidelines on a daily basis, distant conflicts, and the consequences of climate change and hunger are getting closer to the heartlands of Europe. They have taken the form of refugees on the doorstep of European homes. What happens to these people once they have made it to the “safe” side (after years of turbulent history, Poland has been consigned to the category of safe rather than refugee-producing countries³)?

Some of the refugees were buried in the Muslim cemetery for Polish Tatars in the border village of Bohoniki. Among above 50 fatalities (and dozens of missing persons) resulting from pushbacks are also Christian refugees. Some of the migrants had been kept for months in detention centres for foreigners that are not very different from prisons. Although dozens of people have died at the border as a result of the blockade, thousands have managed to cross and reach Western Europe. The permeability of the anti-refugee barrage is so high that Germany has reintroduced regular checks at the border with Poland. The refugees are left with terrible memories of an extreme experience in Poland, the time spent hiding in the forest from aggressive guards from both sides of the border, violence and multiple attempts to climb the fence or cross the river. Poles are left with what remained of the refugee makeshift camps, soaked jackets and empty bottles; in short, traces of a criminalised human presence.

The financial and environmental costs of constructing and maintaining a fence that is more than 180 kilometres long and more than five metres high are a lengthy topic. This essay focuses on human costs. Physical barriers have been erected in Greece, Austria, Hungary, Lithuania and the USA, among others, not to mention the separation walls built in Israel and Pakistan as a (failing) security precaution. There are now close to 80 walls and fences around the world that are designed to keep migrants out, with more being erected all the time. Migration researchers have been doubting the effectiveness of a fence as a barrier to migration. While it may reduce the flow of migrants, walls do not stop it (Saddiki 2017). Increasingly, their emphasis is on the theatrical and affective functions of the barrier towering over its physical

³ Since the symbolic caesura of Sweden’s turning back of the ship with African refugees to Poland in 1990, on the grounds that Poland was no longer a dangerous country.

ones. The walls are meant to offer a sense of protection from those who are “coming to take or plunder what is rightfully the nation’s own – its safety, its First World privilege” (Brown 2010: 121). This does not change the fact that fences also have serious physical consequences. They contribute to more injuries among refugees, they encourage abuse from smugglers and they lead to the humiliation of other human beings. Case in point: a refugee ended up hanging upside down on the border fence, his foot hooked on the razor wire. Instead of helping him, the Polish border guards, later followed by the rightist media outlets, made fun of the man, dubbing him “the bat from Podlasie.”⁴

Meanwhile, the fence is just one of many elements of the “architecture of repulsion”. David Fitzgerald uses this term in his work on methods of “remote control” or dealing with migration by keeping people out of spaces where they might ask for shelter. The creation of such sites of exception as the borderland, in which the state abdicates its responsibility for human beings and their right to life (Agamben 2005), reminds Fitzgerald (2018: 9) of the medieval barbican, located outside the main walls as an external defence for the castle proper.

Anyone who managed to cross the fence and got closer to “the castle” was forced to hide in the Białowieża Forest’s wetlands, as if they were wild game. As I found out personally during my field research, everyone was illegal in the forest’s “no visitors allowed” area. Outside that zone, only those with a darker complexion or suspicious facial hair are hunted down like animals. The darker complexion of refugees poses a problem for Poles even far from the eastern border. This proved true when non-white refugees began arriving in Poland from Ukraine in 2022, becoming a hot potato for Polish municipalities (Zessin-Jurek 2022). They were sent in buses to the German border in the hope that they would be able to cross it (Słubice, Kostrzyn, Gubin) because they were not white (Ukrainian) women with children – the ideal type of refugees to be taken care of in Poland. The literature analysing the discourse of deservingness, “social construction of refugees” and constructed rationalization of the assistance is growing at a rapid pace (Paytner 2022; Zogata-Kusz et al. 2023). Based on popular discourses, there are real refugees and there are fake ones, and not everyone deserves to be rescued. As for migrants on the Belarusian border, discourses of “merit” often boil down to skin colour, that is a biopolitical concern (Cambell 2011).

Refugee death as a side effect

The only way in which the Polish right-wingers linked refugees from the Global south to the war was by seeing them as “weapons” against Poland used in a hybrid war waged by Belarus and Russia. The sacrifice of refugees’ lives was declared acceptable

⁴ Beata Czuma-Hyk, <https://wiadomosci.radiozet.pl/polska/Szokujacy-film-z-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej.-Smiechy-wyzwiska-i-podlaski-nietoperz>, accessed 18.01.2024.

because the Polish side was fighting a defensive – and thus a “more just”, even if hybrid – war. In this vision, the lives of dozens of refugees turned into human shields was a price to pay for thwarting the “attack” plans of a Belarusian dictator. But even in a situation of a just war (if we stick with this problematic terminology), the sacrifice of innocent victims is required only if there is no other way to counter the threat, military conflict theorists say (Walzer 1978). While not an end in itself, their deaths and suffering were presented as side effects of the proclaimed safeguarding of a country’s territorial sovereignty, in the way the governing party understood it. Such consequences, albeit unintended, could be easily predicted. Anyone who does not intend to cause the death of others but accepts, if not contributes to, conditions conducive to it and does not try to prevent it – is still morally guilty. Damage turns into harm whenever an accident or mistake could have been prevented, but no deliberate attempt to do so has been made.

Refugees have been long used in the international political field to embarrass, destabilise or otherwise weaken the antagonist party (Lippert 1999). Kelly Greenhill (2010) has written explicitly about the potential of mass displacement as a tool in foreign policy; this is the case of Alexander Lukashenko’s border practice. However, this border conflict between two states or blocs (by extension: the EU and Russia) is not the only context in which the Polish state’s response is shaped. Equally important, if not more important, is the internal Polish context, which is also the argument throughout this essay. The party that ruled in Poland until the end of 2023 – Law and Justice – used the presence of refugees at the border to perpetuate a preconceived threat posed by “illegal immigrants” and “Islamists”. The repertoire of this party, aiming to stoke fear and then present itself as a guarantor of safety, included arguments ranging from health risks (Jarosław Kaczyński’s infamous insinuations about bacteria carried by migrants) to all types of imaginary behaviour attributed to refugees. In their discourse of securitisation, the right-wing have gone as far as to accuse the refugees on the Belarusian border of zoophilia during an officially broadcasted state conference.

Masculinised security threat

One of the most often raised points is the issue of a gendered security threat. Many ask, with alarm, “Why are migrants from Syria and Yemen predominantly young males?” To find out, we only need to listen to refugees and explore their literature. In her autobiography “The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria,” Syrian journalist Samar Yazbek recalls the reaction of older women to the evacuation: “The elderly grandmother was angry and hadn’t wanted to leave her home. [Ayouché] told me that she hadn’t wanted to leave her home either, to become a refugee. She would have preferred to die with dignity. Displacement stripped us of dignity. Better to die in our homes” (Yazbek 2016).

As a historian specialised in the wartime refugedom of Polish Jews, I can confirm that such a pattern – one among many – of predominantly male refugee migration is neither new nor unique. In certain types of conflict or poverty situations, young men are more likely to leave their homes (Zessin-Jurek, Friedla forthcoming). They are the first ones to be considered a potential threat by the enemy (see: Srebrenica Massacre 1995), but they also flee in a bid to avoid a fratricidal war or, being physically the fittest in the family, to test the water and pave the way for their relatives. Today, if these men arrive at the border unshaven and dirty, they are perceived as a future burden. If they happen to have fancy smartphones and nice jackets, they are not thought of as people in need. One cannot but quote Robert K. Merton, the author of a classical sociological formula: *damned-if-you-do* and *damned-if-you-don't* (Merton 1948, see also: Jaworsky et al. 2022). Moreover, what is highlighted here is the intersectionality of migrants' disadvantage, who are perceived as a problem based on whatever is at hand: their skin colour, religion, gender and status alike.

Permanent terrorist threat

As historian Dirk Moses argues, invoking the argument of a potential threat and “military necessity” in pursuing “permanent security” is a proven strategy for legitimising selective violence. It then “[...] can be excused as legitimately political – that is motivated by security concerns – rather than illegitimately ethnic in motivation” (Moses 2021: 9). Officially, people are subjected to violence not because they are not liked, but because they are presented as being a potential future threat. An analogy can be drawn between the Jews in the Third Reich or the kulaks (wealthy peasants) in the Soviet Union, both perceived as a “permanent threat” in their respective countries, as well as Muslims today, so often equated with potential terrorists. It is their alleged unusual propensity for violence rather than geopolitics, that is believed to be the source of the conflicts that they flee from (Jas-Koziarkiewicz 2023). While the young people coming to Europe are not responsible for wars and hunger in their native lands, they stand no chance against local dictators and global powers involved in chaos. These powers bear the bulk of responsibility for the suffering and deaths of the victims of such conflicts, including refugees. Still, does it absolve “the West” (one of the global powers after all) of passively condoning deaths at the border of its countries?

Economic threat

In one likely scenario, we should assume the following: had it not been for the border wall and the determination of Polish border guards, the President of Belarus would most likely have intensified the migration traffic in the corridor cutting through the Białowieża forest. What we are dealing with is an instrumental use of refugees in order to destabilise the political situation in the European Union by playing on economic

fears: who is going to pay for all of this. The concerns in question were also being played out by – note the paradox – the government of one of the countries that had received the highest number of (labour) migrants in Europe over the last decade. The vast majority of Ukrainians who found jobs in Poland before the 24th of February 2022 were not classified as war refugees (nor opted for this path to legalise their stay), despite the fact that they did flee from a war-torn country. Still, Poland opened its doors to them. Before the Covid-19 pandemic pushed the country into crisis, the Polish government had not only allowed labour migrants from culturally and geographically close Ukraine, but also from faraway Asian countries. In 2023, the government was investigated in connection with the “cash for visa” scandal, a large-scale practice orchestrated by Polish consular services in some African countries. Outside politics, it is also the case that those who keep on bringing up the argument about economic migrants could hardly cast the first stone, as in their families too are people who left their homeland to seek a better life abroad.

Finally, even in the case of refugees from Ukraine, the issue of social benefit equalisation provokes increasing resistance. Related to the issue of merit, there is a growing tendency to narrow down the willingness to also share benefits with the “truer war refugees”, which Linda Cook calls “welfare nationalism” (Cook, forthcoming). She discusses several criteria for deservingness or inclusion into “the legitimate community of welfare receivers,” among them identity (cultural closeness), need, contribution and reciprocity. Due to Ukraine’s neighbouring location to Poland, the regional geopolitical threat from Russia and the possibility for Ukrainian refugees to work, there are – nevertheless – more factors on the side of Ukrainians in favour of including them in this welfare nationalism, compared to refugees from more distant conflicts coming via the Belarusian border.

Cultural and ethnic threat

The fears that are spread whenever a migrant is a non-white refugee are played out based on uncertainty as to whether the newcomers are willing to adapt to the local work culture, laws and customs in European countries. Nothing is easier than to use these misgivings and unknowns, in combination with racist conspiracy theories (such as The Great Replacement), as ideological fuel to sway elections. Not only are jobs at stake (which are long being filled by labour migration) or the working culture, but much more: the loss of Poland’s ethnic, cultural and religious homogeneity, into which the country was transformed after the Second World War. Another paradox is worth noting here – Poland relishing a mono-ethnic present and the same vision of the future has proceeded hand in hand with a celebration of the country’s multicultural past.

It is easier to look back to a multi-ethnic Polish past than forward to a multi-ethnic future. A particular case in point is the extended commemoration of the Polish Jewish minority, which was long diagnosed as a philosemitic turn (Zubrzycki 2022). Research

into the commemorative uses of the figure of the “absent Polish Jew” suggests that Jews may be especially convenient “Others” for Poles, precisely because they will not return or – unlike the figure of the “migrant” – will not want to live in Poland. Historical studies of ethnic relations and antisemitism offer many relevant points of reference for today’s reactions to refugees. Contemporary studies increasingly treat the historical development of European antisemitism as interconnected with other racist phenomena (Zimmerer 2004; Kühne 2013). Although Eastern Europeans were not state represented in overseas colonised regions, they developed and exercised narratives of exclusion against their numerous internal minorities (for Poland: mostly Jews). However, through cultural diffusion from the West, they also succumbed to patterns of colonial prejudice against non-whites (Macmaster 2017; Balogun 2024). It has long been known that the significant presence of a particular minority: non-white in Poland or Jewish in pre-war Germany (not even one per cent), was not necessary in order to build strong prejudices. The same is true today. Finally, the subaltern role of Eastern European societies on the continent, together with their experience of unprocessed racialisation from their Western neighbours, also plays a role (Lewicki 2023), adding to the complexity of these ongoing processes of hierarchisation and their compensatory features. At the same time, echoes of the past, in which Poles colonised Ukrainians, are reverberating in the caring response of Poles to Ukrainian refugees. The past, which not only unites but also strongly antagonises Poles and Ukrainians, has been (temporarily?) overcome in the face of the greater antagonism the two countries share towards Russia (Zessin-Jurek 2023).

Current responses and attributions to refugees echo various civilisational hierarchies. This also includes past patterns of refugee policies. Particularly after the Second World War, the belief was perpetuated that, because people were fleeing certain places (such as communist Eastern Europe or North Vietnam), this meant that these places were under-civilised and problematic, and therefore stood lower in the hierarchy. The sense of superiority that grows out of such beliefs is collectively transferred to the refugees from these places, at the same time as their individual stories are diluted. Today, the countries of the Global South are perceived in a similar way. People who leave them are seen through the prism of the “unmanageable” places from which they arrive, rather than through the prism of their resolute attempts to change their lot.

The attitude towards Ukrainian refugees is completely different. In 2022, after having been shelved for two decades, the European Temporary Protection Directive was implemented for the first time in the EU’s history. The rights contained therein include permission to stay and change country of residence, access to the labour market and housing, medical assistance and access to education for children. The European directive – while extremely important and needed – strongly accentuated the contrast between the treatment of white and non-white refugees. The bifurcated Polish border regime reproduces these two categories of people: by stripping racist practices towards migrants from the Global South of their former political correctness, as well as by

the progressive “whitening” of Ukrainians through the political and social spectacle of welcoming them (Adam, Hess 2023). Added to this is the current general lack of a coherent concept on the part of EU decision-makers regarding the humanitarian response to the situation at all of Europe’s borders. It also explains the EU’s reluctance to explicitly condemn the measures adopted by Poland at the Polish-Belarusian border and a failure to propose convincing alternatives to pushbacks (Bodnar, Grzelak 2023).

What lurks round the u-bend? Historical conclusion to the essay

Europe will not be able to accept all the migrants who want to reach it on the same terms as it accepted the Ukrainians. The current practice of “remote control”, by pushing them back at the borders which contributes to many deaths in seas, rivers and forests, cannot be the solution. Each victim adds arguments to the constantly repeated accusation against Europe that it talks the talk, but does not walk the walk on issues of Human Rights migration, in addition to that of security and climate. The expectation, that Europe will abide by its own humanitarian and universal values is so strong, precisely because most of the EU countries have put these values first (Goldberg 2002). Those parts of the world that do not do so automatically remove themselves from the bench.

It may seem that a humanitarian approach has become a soft spot in Western morality. The West is not the only region in the world whose economy allows for providing support to refugees. The same can be said about many Arab countries, yet they are not morally blackmailed over refugees. Then there is the charge that it was Europe that exported its domination and “civilisational values” for centuries, so now it has the chance to prove their viability (Gezer 2022). Commitment to humanitarian values makes Western countries vulnerable today. In such circumstances, the systemic rejection of moral principles – alongside Donald Trump’s campaigning line – can be a tempting strategy to try to keep the situation under control. Moreover, the humanitarian response to migrant situations at the borders is also currently facing critical reflection as deeply rooted in the context of Western privilege and reinforcing a paternalistic approach to the suffering of non-whites (Pallister-Wilkins 2023). In this vision, a humanitarian response in the form of “good deeds” is not a political response and therefore structures violence rather than offering meaningful solutions.

Back in the day, there were times when the Western world defended itself hard against refugee intake and failed to ensure humanitarian yet political international solutions. In the late 1930s, people fleeing the Nazis were denied entry and turned away. Then, as now, the Western countries used an economic and security threat as an excuse (Wyman 1968; Kraut et al. 1984; Gross 2015; Fitzgerald 2018). The Polish borderlands have seen similar developments in the past too, if of a different

nature. In the autumn and winter of 1939, Polish refugees were trapped along the German-Soviet demarcation line. The remains of those who drowned or froze to death were scattered across the nearby woodland and fields. They mostly belonged to Polish Jews who became stuck in the border zone due to the blockades on both sides and multiple pushbacks, usually involving the crossing of the Bug River. Polish-Jewish refugees from Nazism were first pushed in there by the German authorities (as they are today by the Belarusian authorities) and later they fled into the strip on their own. The Soviets were not thrilled to let them in. Tens of thousands of refugees experienced the physiological violence of abandonment and blockade for weeks, living in autumn and winter on a bare strip of land (along the 500-kilometre border). It is striking that today, as before, the same woodland and the same rivers of eastern Poland are again witnessing human suffering caused by fellow humans who decide about the privilege of mobility (Zessin-Jurek 2021). It was not a Polish regime then, but was applied on what is now Polish territory and against Polish citizens.

“We were just following orders,” wrote Polish columnist Witold Bereś in his lengthy and poignant essay entitled “The Ship of Fools: Poor Poles Look at Usnarz”, published still in 2021. This is what he expected the border guards, now involved in the pushbacks, to say in the future in their defence. Historical analogies are obvious in a country so strongly scarred by the Second World War. And indeed, since the beginning of the blockade at the Polish-Belarusian border, they have been repeatedly cited, especially by authors familiar with the history of the genocide committed against the Jews.

There are as many similarities as differences between the current developments and what happened during the Second World War. The natural impulse towards analogy must take place within the framework of historical accuracy, not least because the Shoah, according to my historical convictions, remains a crime with distinctive features of importance. And yet, the Polish discourse on refugees on the border has been filled with figures such as the contemporary Righteous Among the Nations, Hilberg’s triad of perpetrator-victim-bystander, or the studies of the forest refugee hideouts being compared to those in which ghetto escapees hid in the past. This instinctive reaching to the memory of the Holocaust proves that in Poland, which is often reproached for not having worked through the past, the tragedy of Jews does have very powerful mobilisation potential. It also offers a universal language and codes that are cosmopolitan – as Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider (2006) have written – and that are almost automatic in a society whose grandparents saw the Holocaust with their own eyes. Even if they did not care enough to talk about it to the next generation, the Holocaust is – in line with the ongoing “spectral turn” – a ghostware presence manifesting itself in situations such as the suffering of refugees on the border.

When thinking of the intensely commemorated and mourned fates of the Jewish minority, it seemed that the European societies had left the u-bend of indifference behind them. So as not to lose vigilance and the sense of responsibility for the present

in an overly ritualised commemoration of the past, Michael Rothberg offered a new perspective on the familiar categories of victim, bystander and perpetrator (Rothberg 2020). According to his proposal, indifferent observers were and are implicated subjects, being participants or beneficiaries of a social formation encouraging violence. Systemic responsibility – in the past just as today – remains the sum of individual responsibilities.

Reconsidering this theme historically, we can recognise earlier mechanisms behind the progressive erosion of individual civic responsibility and agency. The responsibility for the human fate (of refugees) is on the side of the state as a hierarchical institution, which has the effect of weakening individual moral intuition. As Zygmunt Bauman pointed out in his reflection on social behaviour towards wartime state violence in the period just before, during and after the Second World War (“instrumental rationality”), the state organises actions according to an assumed “rationale” and with the technical means needed to achieve its goals (now a wall with razor-wire atop it). Delegating the performance of these activities to functionaries ostensibly does not impose any judgment or moral sentiment on them, as these actions receive the state sanction of objective necessity. They are presented as necessary to maintain order and keep undesirable elements out of the social space (Bauman 1989: 18). The state, either explains violence or is dismissive of it (hides it in plain sight), as Johan Galtung described long ago in his theory of structural violence (Galtung 1969). All the remaining citizens have to do is recognise their interest in this state’s rationality and not oppose it.

Historical contexts help understand the mechanisms of manipulation with human conscience. They also help explain the collective nature of the present reactions. At the same time, the tendency to collectively justify or excuse social behaviour with the argument that society is being formatted in a certain way has to be approached with caution. Among such historiographical proposals seeking explanations for the collective contribution to, the acceptance of or indifference to violence, one posits that such behaviours are activated by the actual or perceived intensity of the “crisis” or other moments of “moral collapse” such as in the early postwar time (Lowe 2013; Zaremba 2022). Before assuming that people’s views and reactions lie so deeply in the hands of politics or external circumstances, let us still entertain the possibility that, at the end of the decision-making process – especially in democratic societies such as today’s – there nevertheless remains the individual with their inner conscience.

Both on an individual and state level, compassion is a more arduous road and it makes us more vulnerable. Compared to such global players as Russia and China, or the countries in the Persian Gulf region, Western countries and societies have become hostages to their own values. That said, what alternative is there to this entrapment (in decency)? What awaits around another u-bend? Much depends on the path taken. One is the path of further implication in the death of refugees on Polish land and European seas. The other is the path of a concerted sincere effort to work out the principles of a new solidarity based on long-codified human rights. It does not

have to follow the utopian vision of a “global citizen”, or, to quote Iris Marion Young (1989), a “universal citizenship”; rather pragmatic discussions about a necessary, yet humanitarian border regime. After all, borders are also there to protect against the right-wing populist surge. The opening of Germany’s borders to refugees in 2015 has contributed to the consolidation of radically xenophobic parties in many Western European countries. It is impossible to ignore the fact that the fear of poorly protected borders and migration strengthens the right-wing fringes of the political spectrum and is an important catalyst for the popularity of authoritarian tendencies. In the long term, this situation could threaten European cohesion and social peace. The (still) ruling politicians on the other side of the parliamentary spectrum in many European countries are increasingly calling for a new, more realistic and systematic approach to migration policy. They are also considering ways to strengthen media literacy among audiences of the currently dominant social media channels so that the prospective host societies are more resilient to manipulated anti-refugee content and other disinformation (Eckman 2019). A significant and collective intellectual effort is needed to ensure that borders cease to be a weak point in Western morality. They must also cease to be a tool of moral blackmail and an instrument of violence against people seeking a chance for a normal life.

We need to further the discussion on the extent of refugee admissions and their integration; to implement these processes respectfully so that they generate fewer inequalities and less resentment. We must not forget the privileges rooted in the colonial past of the Western world to which Poland now also belongs, nor should we ignore the present sources of global problems, which spring from our (and many others’) pursuit of modernity and the Western lifestyle. This will be a hard path to take, the current Western morality of human rights does not guarantee happiness. However, Europe and the United States of America have renounced it in the past and are right to feel ashamed to this day. They have also repeatedly promised they would never do it again.

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