

# Families on the Border and “Families Without Borders”: Discourses on “Families” in the Context of the Crisis on the Polish-Belarusian Border

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## Abstract

Families, including those with children, constitute a significant group of people crossing the Polish-Belarusian border. The aim of this article is to analyse the discourse on the Polish-Belarusian border in the context of the place that the category of “family” finds in it, and what role and responsibility is assigned to children and parents. The theoretical framework for these reflections is primarily critical childhood studies. For this purpose, the author analyzed Polish-language online statements about the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border published between mid-August 2021 and the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2023. The research included statements by institutional actors (e.g. Border Guard), media publications as well as public comments by social media users (Twitter). In the case of the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, the term “family” is used in a variety of ways – from building a sense of symbolic solidarity (the “Families Without Borders” group), through referring this term to the presence of particularly vulnerable people among migrants, to attributing responsibility for the risks regarding the situation of children at the border to either parents or state institutions, depending on the discourse. Reflections on the Polish-Belarusian border seem to be part of the tensions related to the concepts of “family”, “parenthood” and “children”.

**Keywords:** Polish-Belarusian border, discourse analysis, family, critical childhood studies

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## I. Introduction

A significant number of people crossing the Polish-Belarusian border during the humanitarian crisis undertake this journey with their family members – including children. In the absence of official data, giving even an approximate number of them proves to be a very difficult task. However, based on media and NGOs reports (e.g. Czarnota, Górczyńska 2022; Human Rights Watch 2021; 2022), and on information about the number of children detained in 2021 and 2022 in Guarded Centers for Foreigners<sup>2</sup>, one can speak of hundreds, if not thousands, of people crossing the border in this way. Family relationships however, include not only the archetypal mother, father and their offspring, but also siblings, grandparents, grandchildren, uncles, aunts – in all sorts of configurations – traveling together. This is also because in a situation of migration, family relationships prove to be a vital resource for more vulnerable migrants.

This real presence is reflected in the public discourse by the interest in the topic of “families” on the Polish-Belarusian border. The intentions behind the use of the word “family” and the associations it evokes can each time turn out to be very diverse. We find, for example: opinions proclaiming that crossing the border by people on the move is a threat to the “wives and daughters” of Poles; statements encouraging aid and admission to Poland primarily for “families with children”; or calls for solidarity between “families” on both sides of the border. And these are just a few examples that contribute to this very ambiguous map of uses and meanings of the word “family” in statements co-creating a discursive response to the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border.

## II. The aim and theoretical framework

The aim of the proposed article is to analyze the role of the category of “family” in public discourses on the Polish-Belarusian border. Although references to it in the Polish public discourse in general may at first be associated with the narratives of right-wing movements and the topos of “protecting the (Polish) family”, the situation is much more complex. My research hypothesis is that discursive uses of the category “family” in discussions on the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border participate in the broader tensions related to the contemporary social life of concept such as “family”, “parenthood” and “children” in Poland (see: point III). The semantic content attributed to the concept of “family” turns out to be very diverse – as it is used to make very different political demands. The variety of meanings and political entanglements brings to mind the theoretical concept of the “floating signifier”

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<sup>2</sup> 567 in 2021 and 582 in 2022 – data acquired from the Border Guard Commander in Chief through a request for access to public information.

described by Ernesto Laclau (2002; 2004; cf. Żółkowska 2013). It shows signifiers that do not have an unambiguous referent, and in political discourse are used to formulate a great variety of demands. Moreover, they can be used by different actors to formulate postulates that contradict others linked by other actors to the same floating signifier. Although it is difficult to maintain the thesis that “family” is a floating signifier in the sense of Ernesto Laclau, because of its strong roots in social life and ideology, in Polish political discourse it seems to be performing a similar function. My hypothesis is that the different discourses are mostly united by a positive valuation of “family” with simultaneous differences related to the specific values, ethnic connotations attributed to it, or the distribution of responsibility for members.

A theoretical framework for analysing the different ways in which the category of ‘family’ and its associated connotations have been critical childhood studies (e.g. Nadesan 2010; Alderson 2015; Szymborska 2016; Spyrou 2018). The reflexive approach to the changing, ambiguous role of the child in the family it imposes, suggests an openness to a diversity of definitions of family roles or to trajectories of responsibility other than the traditional “parent responsible for the child” dynamic. In particular, Spyros Spyrou (2018; 2021) highlights how the “responsibility” of the child as a vulnerable subject is used by various social actors (from parents to institutions) to formulate political demands “on behalf of children”. Therefore, an important part of the analysis will be how the responsibility of the state and individuals (family members and, above all, parents) is assigned in the various discourses.

When researching public discourse on the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, securitisation on the one hand, and solidarity and humanitarian concern on the other, are relevant. I explain and introduce these concepts in section V.

This article is based on a qualitative analysis of the public statements of various actors – from politicians and government representatives, to journalists and public commentators on social media (see: point V). The discourses described in point VI will have the character of ideal types, and elements of not only a single one of them, but also several of them at once, can be distinguished in individual statements and comments.

### **III. Description of the data gathered and the methodology**

I analyzed statements that co-create the discourse – or rather, discourses – regarding the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. The earliest ones date back to mid-August 2021 and concern the events of Usnarz Górny, which in the media discourse became its symbolic beginning. I have adopted January the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023 as the end date of the data collection – but this does not mean that the humanitarian crisis is over. The discursive samples I collected came from various social actors, which include:

- public figures, who, following T. A. van Dijk (1993a), can be described as discursive elites – primarily, journalists, politicians and public experts;
- collective actors:
  - state actors (e.g. Border Guard, Ministries);
  - non-state actors (national NGOs, grassroots movements);
 In the case of collective actors, the production of discourse is accompanied by the action of either reproducing the crisis (implementing pushback policies) or providing support for those crossing the border – in various forms;
- individuals commenting on open social media forums (for this group, statements were anonymized).

Following Czyżewski (2010), I adopt a broad definition of public discourse, encompassing communications available to the public – including, social media redefining today’s existing divisions. I focus on the two most popular social media for political discussions – Facebook and Twitter. The use of such a broad definition of public discourse allows – at least for the purposes of this article – to treat the statements of very different actors equally. Of course, I am aware that there are hierarchies among them, resulting primarily from the position of various social actors – including the power they wield.

The social media data collected is part of a larger corpus of statements gathered as part of the Counter-hate project, in which the author of this article participated as a researcher. A social media content search tool<sup>3</sup> – based on machine learning – developed as part of the same project was used to create a corpus of statements relating to different minorities, not only migrants. On the one hand, the system’s basic search of publicly available social media content was based on the researcher’s predefined keyword hashtags and preselected sub-pages. In this way, approximately 2 million social media posts were included in the corpus. Based on the narrowing of the search queries, it was possible to estimate that around 30,000 of the collected contributions were related to the Polish-Belarusian border crisis. Presenting exact figures is not possible in this case, as I am operating on approximations – the research was also a test of the tool, which was being improved at the same time. Then, using a manual search, I extracted statements touching on families (children, parents, kinship, etc.). Their number turned out to be relatively low and oscillated around ~500 statements (512 included in the research).

As far as the statements of collective state actors are concerned, I mainly used official websites and official social media pages. In this sense, the number of such statements (~20) partly coincides with the statements on social media. In the case of statements by collective non-state actors, I used analogous sources – although in

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed technical description of the system, see the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights report *Przyjdą i zabiorą* (Korpala, Sęk, Tyminska 2022) available: <https://hfhr.pl/upload/2023/04/przyjda-i-zabiora-raport-o-antyukrainskiej-mowie-nienawisci.pdf> (accessed: 7 Jan 2024).

this case it should be noted that this group uses its social media channels much more intensively than its websites. Some of these actors do not even have a permanently operational website (e.g. Grupa Granica). As for media actors, I relied exclusively on content available online – primarily on national media or their local branches. On this basis, I isolated ~40 articles relating to “families” on the Polish-Belarusian border.

My data is linguistic in nature; I only make ancillary use of visual discourse. The analysed statements were published in Polish – for the purposes of the article, I translated the cited examples into English myself.

As my starting point is critical theories, I use the methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis in the qualitative analysis of the data (my most important sources being: van Dijk 1993a; 1993b; Czyżewski 2010; Jabłońska 2012). This is a way of studying discourses in which questions of the multidimensional relationship of language to mechanisms of power and control, and in many cases even systemic violence, remain in the foreground. It is a “suspicious” and ideologically non-neutral method, based on the assumption that the analytical exposure of the above-mentioned phenomena, which are considered serious social problems, can contribute to their reduction. The theories and theses on political discourse and the politicisation of public discourse formulated by Chantal Mouffe (2008) and Ernesto Laclau (2002; 2004) were also important to me in the process of data interpretation.

#### **IV. “Family” in the contemporary political discourse in Poland**

To say that the concept of “family” (often appearing in the phrase “protection of the family”, “protection of family values”) is at the center of contemporary political and, more generally, public discourse in Poland is to say too little. The normalisation and increase in the number of divorces, the proliferation of single parenthood and various models of alternative forms of family life (e.g. patchwork families), the legalisation of same-sex marriages in many countries and the discussion of introducing such legislation in Poland, labor migration (Slany, Ślusarczyk, Krzyżowski 2014; Slany, Ślusarczyk, Pustułka 2017; Urbańska 2015) – these are just some of the phenomena affecting the overall change in social norms related to family life (cf. Slany 2013; Guja 2016). These profound transformations are accompanied by a seemingly paradoxical turn towards a very traditional perception of family roles, especially in the space of conservative discourse (cf. Urbańska 2010).

The reasons for this paradox vary. Sometimes it is related to media and politically induced moral panics, as was the case with the “Euro-orphanhood” caused by female labor migration described by Urbańska (2010; 2015), or the discussion around Article 18 of the Polish Constitution regarding the possibility of legalising same-sex marriages or civil unions (Jawor, Zańko 2015; Zomerski 2017). On the other hand, the reason may also be the scarcity of a non-stigmatizing vocabulary for alternative

forms of family life and the close relationship of the existing one to traditional family life. Dictionary and survey studies from a dozen years ago indicate that the concept of “family” and the accompanying stereotype of the nuclear “full family” or “family with children” are firmly established in the social consciousness and linguistic image of the world created by users of the Polish language (Bielińska-Gardziel 2009).

However, over the past decade or so, there have been some changes in the space of public discourse. For a while at the dawn of the 21st century, progressive discourses, including feminist discourses, brought the oppressiveness of the category of “family” to the fore (Bielińska-Gardziel 2009: 132–134; cf. Środa 2009), especially in its patriarchal-conservative guise; in recent years there has been an increasing embrace of this category and a discursive decontextualisation of it from the conservative status quo. Corpus studies of media discourses indicate an increase in positive representations of alternative forms of family life. While in the first years of the 21st century negative connotations prevailed, and in the case of texts on non-heteronormative families, even homophobic, recent years have brought a change, especially in media declaring liberal values (Mizielińska, Stasińska 2013; Iwańska-Siwiek 2021). Sometimes, a profound change is discernible even within the space of a single medium, as was the case with the research on the corpus of “Gazeta Wyborcza” texts (Nowak 2014). An example of this embracement can be seen in the discursive spread of the term “rainbow families” (meaning non-heteronormative families, most often including children), connoted more positively (Dawidziak-Kładoczna 2018: 24–25).

These acquisitions and the progressive normalisation of alternative forms of family life, however, must not distract from the fact that in conservative discourse the concept of “family” is still linked to traditional values and the stereotypical image of the nuclear family. What’s more, further moral panics are being generated around “family” and its “protection”, related, for example, to resentment of LGBTQ+ people and the granting of rights to them, or of reproductive rights and access to legal abortion. So, the paradox described above still exists, and there is tension between conservative, liberal, or left-socialist discourses as to basic concepts such as “family ties”, “parents”, and “parenthood” and their meanings. They also concern who, within these discourses, bears the responsibility for the “family”, particularly the “children” – parents and family members or rather the state and its institutions.

## **V. “Families” in the Polish public discourse concerning the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border**

Previous publications on public discourses around the Polish-Belarusian border have been heavily focused on tracking general regularities – including the search for analogies and continuities with anti-refugee discourses, whose presence has intensified in Poland after 2015 (Jakubowski 2018; Cywiński, Katner, Ziółkowski 2019; Dębska

2019). Among other things, much attention is paid to the way people crossing the border (people on the move) are defined (Pietrusińska 2022; Wagner 2022), each time entangled in ambiguous and stigmatizing contexts. Attention is drawn to the use of securitisation (“border protection”) discourses characteristic of the discourse of institutions of power (primarily the Border Guard), and the tendency to use technocratic or militaristic narratives that mostly dehumanise migrants (Mościcki 2021; Fiałkowska 2022). It is also part of the securitisation trends covering the borders of the Global North countries, which imply growing control over both borders and the phenomenon of migration, which is perceived within this discourse as negative or even threatening (e.g. Gerard, Pickering 2013; Prokcola 2020; Perkowski, Stierl, Burridge 2023; Straczuk 2023). It is contrasted with the discourse of humanitarian care – this one is represented mainly by the actors that provide aid to people crossing the border, collective as well as individual.

As I maintained in my previous text – both discourses similarly address the position of the child as a subject to be protected (Tymińska 2022). The same is true for the category of “family”, which is considered a value in each of the discourses I have identified – although when we look at the various cases in more detail, we see that the specific values assigned can vary. Significantly, in all of the cases the term “family” most often appears in reference to groups traveling with children. If the situation of a particular group of border crossers is described, statements – especially in the media representing pro-refugee positions – elaborate on the number of children [e.g. “two Kurdish families with seven children” (Klimowicz 5.04.2022), “two families with young children. The first from Egypt with children aged 6 and 8 and a father with cardiac problems” (Bielska 23.11.2022)]. Emphasizing the presence of “children in the family”/“families with children” associates the presence of children with the greater vulnerability of the group – and, therefore, mobilizes for further-reaching solidarity.

Below I describe the four most characteristic types of narratives about “family” in the context of the Polish-Belarusian border. They have the character of ideal types, so more than one of them may appear in individual statements (especially in longer texts). In particular, I will focus on the tension between the field of “solidarity” and “securitisation”, corresponding to previous research on public discourse on the Polish-Belarusian border, but also on how responsibility for members of such a “family” is distributed in individual discourses.

### **a. People on the move as a “threat to the Polish family” – the “protection of Polish families” narrative**

The first of the identified narratives, which can be described as “migrants/refugees are a threat to the Polish family”, aligns very much with the securitisation discourse described above. According to it, migration is not only a threat to state integrity and security – as the general securitisation discourse maintains – but to the daily lives of

individual citizens and their families. The threats in question can be multiple in nature – they can include: the loss of peace of daily life in general ["As Poland, we have no obligation to feel sorry for every stupid clown, let them live there in Iraq or Syria or make a revolution. Here is Poland and the safety of Polish children is the most important thing" (Twit\_prot\_4)], lack of access to resources ["Many Polish families don't have such an apartment and you want to give to these *ciapaci*!" (Twit\_prot\_2)], an increase in crime ["Well, yes, when Negro kills someone in Western Europe, the victim's family is happy... over. I in Poland do not run with a knife after Negroes in Africa, ok?" (Twit\_prot\_1)]. Especially represented in the statements were alleged threats of a sexual nature, referring primarily to female family members, wives, daughters and sisters [e.g., "It would be better for the left to cry now, than for the mothers, because a *ciapaty* raped their daughter" (Twit\_prot\_3); "If a *ciapaty* fucks your mother or daughter, I wonder how you'll sing" (Twit\_prot\_5)].

Significantly, such narratives hardly appear in official statements. As I mentioned, technocracy and professionalisation dominate the official anti-refugee discourse, emitted primarily by institutions and government officials. If fear is aroused, it is done indirectly, by referring to war and threats to state sovereignty. Indirectly, a reference to the fact that those crossing the Polish-Belarusian border could be a threat to ordinary Poles and their families appeared in a speech by Poland's Prime Minister on August the 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021 ["For us, security is a priority. Security on the borders, as here, and security on the streets, all so that Poles can live, work and educate themselves peacefully" (cit. in: *bs, mag, zmj* 24.08.2021)], or during a joint conference of the Minister of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Defense and the Border Guard on September the 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021 (FA, MNIE 27.09.2021). Directly, the narrative tends to appear in the statements of individual commenting social media users – including in the form of "urban legends" about the alleged situation in Western European countries where migrants from non-European countries make up a larger percentage of the population. In the research conducted by Staniszewski's team (2022), as many as 37% of the respondents from the nationwide sample declared that they perceive persons crossing the Polish-Belarusian border as a threat to their own family. Among the alleged threats were theft, robbery, household assault, terrorism, breaking the law and attack on faith.

As is clear to see, this is a narrative strongly rooted in anti-refugee, primarily islamophobic, stereotypes, the presence of which intensified in Polish public discourse after the 2015 European humanitarian crisis on southern migrant routes. Theses regarding the alleged sexual violence, the increase in crime, or the taking of resources from native citizens coincide with those proclaimed at the time to cause moral panic – by populist ultra-conservative politicians, the media, and commentators (Jakubowski 2018; Cywiński, Katner, Ziółkowski 2019; Dębska 2019). As they have since become

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<sup>4</sup> A Polish derogatory term denoting a person of a different skin color, in the opinion of the speaker presumably from the Middle East or North Africa.



established among the anti-immigrant part of public opinion, they can appear spontaneously, with little participation of discursive elites. The vitality of the narrative of “protecting the Polish family”, maintained in recent years by politicians from conservative parties, is also not without significance.

**“Family” in this narrative.** Within this narrative, the “family” is presented as the object of the highest concern – or even defense, sometimes understood very literally. It is presented as an environment of reproduction of the (conservative) system of values and ethnic homogeneity of the state. It is presented as an environment of reproduction of the (conservative) system of values and ethnic homogeneity of the state.

**Securitisation – solidarity.** This is a narrative that belongs to the more general securitisation discourse – important as it takes it to a more individual level. The threat associated with the migration of ethnically different people is to concern the closest family members, which additionally evokes strong emotions. The subject of securitisation-understood protection is, therefore, the very basic security of one’s own and of one’s loved ones ethnic homogeneity which also brings this narrative closer to nationalist positions. The protection of Polish families becomes a value that invalidates any possible solidarity.

**Responsibility distribution.** Responsibility for family members, including children, is primarily attributed to the state and its institutions, whose role is to “not let” people cross the border – to return them to Belarus and their country of origin. It is only in the second place that responsibility is assigned to individuals – often men, who are supposed to protect female family members from sexual assault.

## **b. “We can support them – but primarily women and children” – the vulnerability narrative**

Another narrative is what I refer to as the selective aid or vulnerability narrative. It refers to supporting mainly or only families with children/women and children among people crossing the border. It is based on the belief that among migrants (and in society in general) there are groups that are particularly deserving of support because of their greater vulnerability to marginalisation or violence. Their position is at the same time the reverse of the hierarchy of the patriarchal social structure – these are people whose agency is considered to be limited in relation to the men dominating in this hierarchy due to cultural conditions.

As a result of broadening the reflection on discrimination and exclusion, such concepts of “vulnerability” have penetrated into law, primarily human rights and EU law (e.g. Morawa 2003; Fineman 2008; Póltorak 2021). In recent years however, its use has been subject to systematic criticism – also around migration. Most laws based on it provide for the automatic recognition of a group as “vulnerable”, even if in a given

case the circumstances would indicate that attention should be paid to other people (Timmer, Baumgärtel, Kotzé, Slingerberg 2021: 194–197; Purkey 2022). Therefore, little account is taken of the context that may make such a “vulnerable” group in each situation, for example, young men (e.g. a situation of conscription to the army). It is also indicated that the introduction of the concept of particularly vulnerable groups among migrants means not so much an improvement in their standard of protection as a lowering of the standard of protection of the rights of others (Fineman 2017; Costello, Hancox 2016: 441–445).

A similar tension between special treatment for some groups and lowering standards of protection for others can be seen in the “selective aid” narrative. It often consists in privileging families, women and children in the aid discourse – emphasizing that since these groups are also present on the Polish-Belarusian border, it is even more important to help there and allow people to submit asylum applications in Poland [e.g. “Stop the pushbacks of children! The Border Guard pushed two families to Belarus, including one with a three-year-old boy who had fallen from a height” (Klimowicz 21.11.2022), “THE BORDER: the Border Guard throw migrants with small children out into the cold again” (Boczek 23.11.2022)]. Such a tendency is visible primarily in media messages, and to a lesser extent in some messages of social actors (individual and collective) supporting or in favor of supporting people crossing the border.

However, this type of narrative is also used by social actors, who we would rather classify as those reproducing anti-refugee discourses. In such cases however, it may appear in slightly transformed forms, for example as an appeal to help, but only to families with children, women and children, or even only children [e.g. “Family separation may be used only in extreme cases of threat to the health or life of the child, whose parents – even in the face of a threat to the child – do not decide to cooperate with the Polish administration to the extent that it is possible to grant protection in Poland” (Ordo Iuris 12.10.2021)]. More often however, the reference to special treatment is a form of argumentation supporting the pushback policy on the Polish-Belarusian border. Speakers maintain that because they believe there are not (any longer) or not enough women and children, state policy should be to push migrants away from the border [e.g. “There are no women with children among those camped on the border with Belarus” (TM, KOAL 19.12.2021), “The government should embrace this because writing tweets of indignation is pathetic, funny and shows the mentality of a slacker. Get to work! With these women with children on the border, it’s like the Independence March of nationalists, only in the other direction. The organizers of the march also say that it is a beautiful event for families with children (and there are none of them)” (Twiit\_vuln\_3)].

The last of the described cases of using this narrative is also firmly rooted in the anti-refugee discourse – in this case, in the belief that non-European asylum-seekers are only young men (“young bulls”) who arouse a sense of threat. Moreover, as men,

they are perceived by the patriarchal ideology as having enough agency that they should be able to fend for themselves. Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February the 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, people crossing the Polish-Belarusian border have been compared to Ukrainian war refugees [e.g. “A few days after Russia’s invasion of In Ukraine, I was at the Polish-Ukrainian crossing in Medyka. Who did I see there? Women with children fleeing the war. (...) On the Polish-Belarusian border, most people who want to enter our country are young men” (Osowski 28.03.2022), “France helps sleazy economic immigrants, Poland to Ukrainian women with children” (Twit\_vuln\_2)].

**“Family” in this narrative.** Within this narrative, the family is also a protected value – but this time it is strongly defined by the presence of women and children. Protection results from the sensitivity of its individual members, although men, especially the young, are beyond the scope of this concern. In this case, the ethnic factor does not matter – a proper family is also considered to be one whose members are neither Poles nor Europeans.

**Securitisation – solidarity.** It is a narrative in which elements of securitisation and solidarity discourse are mixed – depending on which of the variants it appears in. Solidarity, if it is expressed, is selective, embracing particularly vulnerable groups and leaving others out of the picture. It is rooted in compassion towards the “weaker”, perceived as actors deprived partially of full agency. Some of the statements reproducing this narrative in a negative way (“if there are no representatives of vulnerable groups, the migrants should not be helped”) are part of the securitisation discourse, arousing a sense of threat from a group of “young men”. Young men are somehow removed from family life – e.g. adult brothers will not be considered a “family” worthy of protection.

**Responsibility distribution.** Who is responsible for family members depends on which family members are being referred to. As for those who belong to particularly vulnerable groups, it is attributed to the state and institutions – especially when it comes to children. Men, especially young men, are presented as individuals who should take responsibility for themselves – which is sometimes inscribed in the patriarchal social patterns.

### **c. “Families Without Borders”, “Mothers to the Border!” – the parental solidarity narrative**

The second narrative referring to supporting people crossing the Polish-Belarusian border is the one I call the discourse of parental solidarity. It consists in referring to the cross-border (no-border) solidarity of families and in the argument that there are similar families on each side of the border – and therefore similar people with similar affective relationships. The framework for this discourse was set by the informal

group "Families Without Borders"<sup>5</sup>. Its symbolic beginning was the "Letter of Families without Borders", a collective document published by various liberal and left-wing media in early October 2021 – in response to the widely reported pushback of a group of families with children, called "Children from Michałów". It begins with the words: "Like your children, this little girl is wearing a romper. This one is already stiff with dirt. Like your daughters, when they were one and a half years old, she still stands precariously" (e.g. red 3.10.2021) – the sense of solidarity is thus built by referring to parental bonds and parent-child relationships, not the other way around. The titular "families" are thus defined in the first impulse by the presence of children – it is supposed to evoke a sense of community and a willingness to act: "One glance is enough to not agree to their death in the forest. You must do everything in your power to today they got warm milk and medicines. If politicians can't see them, let's help them, let's remind them that they also have children and grandchildren" (Letter of Families without Borders). Similar characteristics can be seen in the second initiative referring to the same narrative, which is called "Mothers to the Border"<sup>6</sup>. However, the actors involved in it are limiting themselves to women-mothers only, and the bond that evokes a sense of solidarity is not a parental bond, but specifically a maternal bond.

Interestingly, in the case of both of these initiatives, a similar dynamic of development and change can be observed. They both started with the protests combined with intensive discourse production (publications and media coverage, campaigns, commenting on the Internet). Then, by force of people joining them from the grassroots, they became platforms for seeking and providing support to people crossing the Polish-Belarusian border – and from February 2022 also to war refugees from Ukraine. As for the narrative, in both cases, at a relatively initial stage, the group of entities covered by solidarity activities was expanded – from children and families with children to all people crossing the Polish-Belarusian border. In the case of "Families without Borders", the extension also concerned the group of people engaged in action – to all people, including those "not being parents".

**"Family" in this narrative.** Again, "family" is defined primarily by the presence of children – and parental ties. The solidarity of families means, first of all, the solidarity of parents or the solidarity of mothers. One of the elements that distinguish the narrative of parental solidarity from the narrative of selective help and distinguish it from others is the awareness of the narrowness of this definition and the tendency to expand the group of supporting or supported entities. The family is perceived here as an intercultural value, making representatives of different cultures similar and creating a sense of community of affects (mostly parental and grandparental). One of the features of the family constituting its value within this narrative is the fact that it constitutes a safe growing environment for children as particularly vulnerable subjects.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://rodzinybezgranic.pl>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://matkinagranice.pl>.

**Securitisation – solidarity.** It is a narrative used to awaken in the recipients a sense of solidarity with people crossing the border. As a result of expanding the group of entities, solidarity concerns all these people, not only children or families with children. This broad approach means that this narrative is used only by entities, individual or collective, expressing support for the humane treatment of people at the border. This is often accompanied by the actual practice of aid activities. At the same time, it is a narrative that speaks directly or implicitly against securitisation as a threat to entities with which one feels solidarity/similarity.

**Responsibility distribution.** Responsibility is understood here very broadly. First of all, the state and its institutions, as well as representatives of the authorities are indicated. However, when the state and its institutions fail to protect families or even resort to practices such as pushbacks themselves, as is the case on the Polish-Belarusian border, the principle of solidarity transfers part of the responsibility to an active civil society. This narrative devotes very little space to pointing out the responsibility of the people crossing the border themselves for their family members, assuming that at the time of crisis their agency is limited.

#### **d. “They use children as human shields!” – the parental responsibility narrative**

The parental responsibility narrative is very closely related to the vulnerability/selective aid narrative because it appears as a direct or indirect response to it. It consists in the speaker admitting that there are children among those who cross the border and that children are a vulnerable group, but the state should not help them or allow them to enter Poland, because parents are primarily responsible for the safety of children. [e.g. “Illegally pushing into the frost crossing the border of another country with small children is a crime. They don’t deserve to be parents” (Twit\_presp\_2)].

Very often, this narrative consists not only of placing parents with absolute responsibility for the well-being of children during migration, but even of accusing them of exploiting children to obtain better treatment. It is said that children are used by their parents as “human shields” or even “weapons” against the Polish border services: “Since they set up such shields, let them not expect that the water cannon will not flood the kid” (Twit\_presp\_3); “Also describe how immigrants throw babies at the barbed wire and how they comment afterwards. Write the truth about what it’s like at the border, And how they turn children into weapons” (Twit\_presp\_4). Narratives of this type usually appear from the bottom up, in the statements of individual social media users, representing positions supporting the pushback policy or even calling for the restoration of even more brutal solutions. They are a form of argumentation against all positions calling for help for vulnerable groups, in particular children – a rationalisation of why in this case violent solutions can (or even should) be extended also to persons regarded as sensitive.

If the "children exploitation" argument appears in more official messages – e.g. in the media supporting the actions of the Polish authorities – it is not the migrant parents themselves, but rather the Belarusian services that are indicated as responsible: "Often Belarusian border guards deliberately direct families with small children to the Polish border children, and even pregnant women, so that media images with their participation would have an even stronger impact on both Polish and international public opinion and on the Polish authorities" (NN, KF 9.11.2021). At the same time, the statements of users comparing children to "weapons" are close to the more general tendency to weaponise migrants in the official discourse of authorities, institutions and the media supporting them. They are described as "tools" or even "weapons" in the "hybrid war" led by Belarusian leader Alyaksandr Lukashenko against Poland (cf. e.g. Pietrusińska 2022).

**"Family" in this narrative.** As part of this argumentation, the reference to the concept of "family" also assumes the presence of children – as particularly sensitive entities that should be protected by parents. In this case however, the parental relationship is characterized by absolute responsibility for the well-being of the child, in which the state is not obliged to interfere, especially if it is not the country of origin. Such a characterisation implies the existence of a head of the family, usually a man, who makes decisions with consequences for all its members – even if those consequences may include loss of health or life. The value of a family is defined by the quality of decisions made by its decision-making members, although it is noted that a "good parent" is one who does not put the family at risk, i.e. does not decide to migrate.

**Securitisation – solidarity.** This is a narrative rooted in the securitisation discourse. Within its framework, migrant families with children are denied parental solidarity, because by making the decision to migrate they become "bad parents" – as they are putting their children at risk or even exploiting them. At the same time, references to "weapons" or "human shields" bring this narrative closer to the generally recognisable tendency to arm people crossing the Polish-Belarusian border. It can be seen as an extreme form of dehumanisation. In this case, solidarity is not allowed by considering migrant people as "bad parents" – implying higher moral standards on the part of the speaker when it comes to protecting their own children.

**Responsibility distribution.** As mentioned, within this narrative, the "head of the family", i.e. the person or persons who made the decision to hit the road, bears complete responsibility for the family members. Thus, if parents have taken their child on a trip, they are perceived as bearing maximum responsibility for the threats that await – even in a situation of forced migration or humanitarian crisis. The possibility of a salvage intervention by the Polish state is not envisaged here – moreover, it is assumed that the pushback policy is an appropriate and proportionate response.

Table 1.

Summary of the described ideal types of the narratives

Short name for the narrative:	Responsibility distribution:	Securitisation:	Solidarity:	Examples:
(a) The "protection of Polish families" narrative	(1) state – responsibility "not to let" people on the move inside the Polish territory; (2) Polish male individuals – protecting their female members from assaults	Yes	No	(1) "It would be better for the left a to cry than for the mothers, because a <i>ciapaty</i> raped their daughter"; (2) "For us, security is a priority. Security on the borders, as here, and security on the streets, all so that Poles can live, work and educate themselves peacefully"
(b) The vulnerability narrative	(1) state – responsibility for subjects considered vulnerable (e.g. women, children); (2) individuals, esp. male adult – sole responsibility for themselves	Yes – partial	Yes – selective, expressed towards subjects considered vulnerable	(1) "Family separation may be used only in extreme cases of threat to the health or life of the child, whose parents – even in the face of a threat to the child – do not decide to cooperate with the Polish administration to the extent that it is possible to grant protection in Poland"; (2) "France helps sleazy economic immigrants, Poland to Ukrainian women with children"
(c) The parental solidarity narrative	(1) state; (2) civil society – when the state and its institutions fail to protect families	No	Yes	(1) "One glance is enough to not agree to their death in the forest. You must do everything in your power to today they got warm milk and medicines. If politicians can't see them, let's help them, let's remind them that they also have children and grandchildren"
(d) The parental responsibility narrative	(1) "Head of the family" (mostly, male adult individuals) – complete responsibility for the family members	Yes	No	(1) "Illegally pushing into the frost crossing the border of another country with small children is a crime. They don't deserve to be parents"; (2) "Since they set up such shields, let them not expect that the water cannon will not flood the kid. Negroes have bad luck"

Source: Author's own elaboration.

## VI. Tensions mapping

What all the narratives described above have in common is the positive evaluation of the family. Most often it is connected with (and even results from) perceiving the family in terms of reproductive potential – and thus as an environment in which children can appear, who in turn can be accustomed to a specific system of values. In this sense, "family" as a value, as a rule, is subject to protection and assistance. However, having examined the various narratives in detail, it is worth noting the significant differences constituting the field of tension around the concept of family.

In the course of interpretation, I distinguished in two axes (spectras) on which the ways in which different narratives refer to the values and protection of the family can be situated. The first of these axes concerns the **tension between "securitisation" and "solidarity"**. In this case, the division of statements seems to be closely related to the "anti-" and "pro-refugee" narratives already described in the literature on the subject, recognisable in the Polish public discourse, especially after 2015 (e.g. Cywiński, Katner, Ziółkowski 2019; Dębska 2019; Pietrusińska 2018). Securitisation arguments would therefore be used to underpin anti-refugee positions, which can be particularly seen in the "protection of Polish families" narrative, in which protection applies primarily to ethnically Polish families. However, this narrative with its connotations goes beyond the strictly understood discussion about the Polish-Belarusian border or migrations, but each time it also appears in relation to other issues perceived as contrary to the conservative worldview (e.g. rights of LGBTQ+ people, women's reproductive rights). So it is already a well-recognized and deeply rooted narrative, which in this case is adapted to the humanitarian crisis rather bottom-up – as a transfer of the general moral panic to the individual level.

On the other side of this axis, the solidarity end, is the narrative of parental solidarity. Its roots can be found in pro-refugee discourses, particularly those using the construction of "refugee as Other-Me" (Pietrusińska 2018: 130) – the analogy also includes a return to the reactionary nature of the dominant securitisation discourse. In this case however, the construction includes not so much the "Other-Me", but rather "Other-Us" in the sense of parents. Appeals to special empathy are therefore directed primarily to and towards adults with children – in this sense, this group is privileged as having a special ability to empathise, based either on a community of experiences (parents for parents) or on a community of relationships ("mothers" for children). Of course, in this case – as is the case, for example, in discussions about the rights of LGBTQ+ people – the figure of an ally is being developed, which could include people who do not have a given privileged feature. We can treat it as an attempt to get closer to the pole of this axis, understood as a radical solidarity no longer based on similarities and analogies – which, however, does not allow to refer to affective arguments from the community of (family) relations.



The other two narratives occupy a much less polarized place on this axis. The “vulnerability” narrative does not refer directly to securitisation, favoring above all solidarity, which is treated selectively, however, because it is shown to particularly sensitive persons. This narrative is easy to use because it is widespread in public discourse – and even equipped with corresponding legal solutions that provide additional legitimacy. On the other hand, we have the narrative of parental responsibility. Looking at it more closely, it can be seen that it belongs to the anti-refugee trend emphasizing securitisation and that it can be attributed to its reactionary character. *De facto*, we can consider it as a response to the vulnerability narrative, designed to refute the arguments put forward there, strengthening the position of the anti-refugee discourse. It can be said that the positive value (desirable nature) of securitisation is in this case a hidden assumption, which these statements defend against more solidarity-based arguments.

The second axis of tension is related to **the concept of responsibility for family members**. At this point, it is worth noting that for all narratives, the constitutive feature of “family” was the presence of (minor) children or parental relationships. In this sense, siblings traveling together are outside the brackets of this category. Particularly exposed – for example, as a source of exceptional care or empathy based on shared experiences – are parental ties (“parents caring for children”), and in even narrower interpretations, maternal ties. It is no coincidence that there is no equivalent of Mothers to the Border, which would be called “Daughters to the Border” and would call for care for refugees as for their own parents. The reverse of the uniqueness of the parental bond is the responsibility attributed to parents for the condition of children, which may – but does not have to – be shared to various extents with state institutions or other entities (e.g. in terms of education).

Parental responsibility is most radically broadly defined by the (*nomen omen*) narrative of parental responsibility, in which parents are to bear absolute responsibility for their children, even in such extreme situations as forced migration and humanitarian crisis. It is a vision strongly rooted in the conservative model of the autonomous family, in which the main role is played by the (male) head of the family, and state intervention in the well-being of the family should be limited to a minimum. The second narrative strongly emphasizing the role of parents is the narrative of parental solidarity – in this case however, the responsibility is much more dispersed, because it is also attributed to state institutions and civil society.

The other two narratives focus rather on emphasizing the state’s responsibility to protect the family and, in particular, to protect children. In the case of the vulnerability narrative, it is included in a broader anti-discrimination framework, which, however, tends to be the source of two types of conclusions. The first can be simply described as: “since children are in principle vulnerable, the state has a responsibility to protect them”. In securitisation discourses however, this kind of argumentation is used to formulate a completely different conclusion: “because young men are not a vulnerable group, the state should not be held responsible for them”. In turn, the

narrative of "protecting Polish families" also emphasizes the role of the state, but narrows this responsibility according to the key of citizenship – or even ethnicity – only to "Polish" families.

## VII. Conclusions

Narratives about "families" on the Polish-Belarusian border are entangled in the contemporary changes in the way of understanding the family and the connotations associated with it. First of all, they testify to the consolidation of the model of a small family, which would include parents and children – possibly also grandparents. This is an understanding rooted in individualism, which cuts off further family members and deprives relations with them of their previous meaning. In addition, the "family" is defined by the presence of "children", who are non-autonomous entities, subject to special protection as endowed with potential for the future. An area that is not so defined and is subject to negotiations reflected in the analyzed narratives is the issue of responsibility for the upbringing and well-being of children. Rooted both in (neo) liberal individualism and in moral conservatism, the model of absolutized parental responsibility competes with the statist model of state responsibility. This is part of the process of cultural redefinition of the model of "parent" and "parenthood" taking place in contemporary Polish culture not only at the level of discourse, but also practices related to, for example, education.

Due to the common connotations (presence of children, parental ties) as well as the common positive evaluation of "family", it is difficult to talk about this category as a floating signifier. However, it is definitely significant in public discourse used to build political postulates. First, because of conservative ideologies, for which the reference to "protecting Polish families" can be considered one of the basic discursive strategies. Interestingly, this entanglement does not lead rival ideologies to explicitly reject "family" as an obsolete concept, but instead we are dealing with various attempts to adopt or redefine it in an inclusive sense.

The presented considerations seem to confirm the hypothesis about the partial possibility of using the "floating signifier" concept to describe the role of the family in the discourse on the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. Partial – because all the described narratives had in common a positive evaluation of the family, describing it in terms of a value that should be protected. Moreover, in all narratives, references to the concept of family most often implied the presence of children as particularly sensitive entities. However, when we look at the political demands – especially those on the securitisation-solidarity spectrum – evoked by the reference to the family, they turn out to be diametrically different. From extreme securitisation (narratives a and d), through selective solidarity expressed towards entities considered sensitive (narrative b), to complete solidarity or even recognition of co-responsibility of Polish

civil society for the well-being of families on the move. It can be assumed that in this case we are dealing with attempts to *floatation* the signifiers “family” and “family protection”, in the face of the aspirations of conservative discourses to establish its meaning and connect it solely with the values they profess.

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