

Production of the Crisis: Discourses on the Polish-Belarusian Border

MATEUSZ KRĘPA, NATALIA JUDZIŃSKA

More than two years have passed since the symbolic beginning of the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, when a group of 32 people on the move from Afghanistan sat down in a meadow in the village of Usnarz Górny as a sign of protest against the illegal practice of pushback being applied to them. This event – the people surrounded by border guards from both countries – became the symbolic beginning of a crisis that is still ongoing. Through amendments to visa regimes to Belarus for citizens of the Global South countries, allowing particular airlines to land at Minsk airport and opening domestic travel agencies in Turkey or Lebanon, Alexander Lukashenko regime triggered the recreation of a route known as the *Eastern Borders Route*. Lukashenko's decision was a response to sanctions (both financial and economic) imposed against the country by the European Union after the fraudulent presidential elections in 2020 and the bloody crushing of anti-government protests. Since 2021 however, much has changed. Firstly, a constitutional and then later, as the courts soon ruled, an unlawful no-go zone was introduced. "The area under the state of emergency", as the territory was called at the time, was inaccessible to anyone who did not live in the space or does work there. Officially, access to the area was restricted for journalists, humanitarian aid workers, and activists. Entrance to the zone was guarded by police, often assisted by the Border Guard, who set up checkpoints. This state of affairs lasted for ten months.

On October the 14th 2021 – in less than 5 minutes – Sejm, the lower chamber of the Polish Parliament, passed a special law that allowed the construction of a wall that stood on the border. The law was structured in such a way that it circumvented anti-corruption regulations and, as a result, the companies creating the wall were selected through a non-tender process. In June 2022, a physical barrier on the border

was completed, which actively involves Poland in the wallification process that is ongoing on external (but not only) EU borders. More than fifty people lost their lives as of December 2023, and the crisis is still going on.

The focal point of this special section is the analysis of discourses about the humanitarian crisis on the Belarusian-Polish border. Apart from the research on the materiality and legality of the events occurring on this border, there is a constant need to examine and deconstruct the narratives produced about them by the governments of both countries sharing the border, but also, by other social actors like the media or activists. The biggest absence we see is that of the narratives of the people crossing the Polish-Belarusian border in an irregular manner themselves; the subjects of this crisis. This special issue is also an attempt to create such a space to the mediated voices.

Of course, as with many other concepts of social sciences, “discourse” also lacks its commonly agreed definition. However, what prevails within the scholars who use this analytical category, is the tendency to locate the power to shape social reality in ways of saying, naming, arguing, categorising, etc. based on the assumption that “[t]he wording is never innocent” (Bigo 2002: 71) and “[n]o knowledge is neutral” (Burke 2013: 80). This approach is particularly visible within Foucauldian (Foucault 1970) analysis which aims to explore the process of development of different “practices of truth” (Bevir and Blakely 2018: 57). *The order of Discourse* is an inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, December the 2nd, 1970, that Michel Foucault delivered which from the beginning of 1970s was the main reference point for critical scholars, giving them a tool for critical discourse analysis. Since its publication however, more than half a century has passed, during which Foucauldian thought has inspired, been criticised, rewritten and, above all, developed. Foucault-inspired scholarship is characterised by the scepticism about all claims of objectivity (Bigo and Tsoukala 2008) and, therefore, it aims to examine not what discourse *is* but what it *does* (Bigo and McCluskey 2018). On the other hand, critical of Foucault’s methodology, critical realists elaborate more on the discourse’s ontology (defining it as one of social practices) and its dialectical relation with social structures (Fairclough, Jessop, Sayer 2002; Fairclough 1992; Fairclough 2003). In line with this approach, discourse is seen as one of the social practices and, as such, being distinctive from ideology belonging to the domain of social structures. However, critical realists also share the conviction that discourse “produces change” (Fairclough *et al.* 2002: 3).

The change resulting from discourse is, thus, the focal point of the presented special section. It underpins the very understanding of migration as a change of place of residence. However, the physical movement alone is only one of the elements of the phenomenon in question. According to Tim Cresswell (2010), physical movement freight with representations thereof constitute *mobility*, and not all forms of mobility (tourism, business travel, trade, commuting) are being named *migration* due to the association with power dynamics (Adey, Hannam, Sheller and Tyfield 2021).

The difference is pivotal because – as Evangelos Karagiannis and Shalini Randeria (2018: 232) argue – “[m]obility reflects the desired norm – migration, an undesired anomaly”. Following this statement, the quoted authors give their definition of migration as mobility interpreted through the prism of the discourse of nation-states and global hierarchies.

Here we come to discourse and its link to the hierarchies of those in the move that was called by Cresswell (2010) to be one of the crucial issues to be addressed by migration scholars. Indeed, there is now an abundance of critical reflection on this topic, and we are not able to present an exhaustive review of the relevant examples here. To mention a few: Mawuna Remarque Koutonin (2015) published an essay about “hierarchical words” in the “lexicon of human migration”. Jasmin Lilian Diab (2022) emphasised how the instrumental use of categories deriving from or embraced by legal language (e.g., “refugee”) impacts the livelihoods of people. Sinah Theres Kloß (2017) defined the “Global South” as social actors considering themselves as subaltern(ized) within global networks of power.

This reflection was also present in the case of the research on the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border – likewise within the research collective *Researchers on the Border*, from its beginning which was in the autumn of 2021. Two years of the life of this grassroots, informal, and non-hierarchical structure was a time of fruitful interdisciplinary cooperation aimed to facilitate theoretically informed, methodologically rigorous, and ethical research on the topic. This special section is an effect of the dynamic process occurring through monthly seminars in Podlasie, co-organised panels at conferences, and different constellations of other encounters and discussions, mixed by some with activism. A year before this special section is presented, one of the collective members, Marta Jadwiga Pietrusińska (2022), published a paper in the journal *Nationality Affairs. New Series* on discourse about people on the move in the narratives of NGO workers and activists in the context of the ongoing crisis. In turn, Alicja Pałęcka (2022), an activist of the *Ocalenie* Foundation, published an article in cooperation with the *Researchers on the Border* on how people on the move communicate with the activists through the alarm phone. These important pieces of scholarship show the power asymmetry resulting from the crisis settings: what was examined was how the activists talk *about* migrants and how the migrants talk *with* activists. Furthermore, the people on the move could contest neither the analysis of their own words nor the production of discourse about them. In turn, the polemical voices of activists were immediately addressed towards Pałęcka’s text on the collective Facebook account and later in the form of a polemical text published on the same website (Anonymous 2022).

Elucidation of this asymmetry is – as we believe – what makes this special section a critical contribution to the literature. Both Pietrusińska and Pałęcka marked an opening of the debate on how the narrative on the crisis in question can be produced in an ethical way based on the principle of “no harm” to the people we study. We

agree with David Turton (1996: 96) that researching other's suffering is legitimate if the researcher explicitly aims at alleviating that suffering. At the same time, the scholars adopting this parlance as their compass, navigate in the sea of contested concepts such as "suffering," "harm," "security," "agency," and so on. It makes the research on discourse a never-ending endeavour of reflecting on the narrative about narrative about other narratives... While acknowledging the elusiveness of the discourse's essence and infeasibility of the holistic examination thereof, we believe that methodologically proper research can be done on who, how, when, what, why, and with which result speaks about the humanitarian crisis in question to understand first and foremost how it impinges lives of people who its main actors are. However, this is not the first time researchers affiliated with the *Researchers on the Border* collective have published a section in a scientific journal. At the end of 2022, the journal *Nationality Affairs. New Series* published the first three studies (Krępa 2022; Judzińska, Sendyka 2022; Pietrusińska 2022) on this ongoing crisis. In addition, since the beginning of that year, articles have been published in popular science form on the collective's website – <http://bbng.org>. In this special section, we will focus on the widely understood discourse.

The special section consists of five papers. In the beginning, Mateusz Krępa and Nasim Ahamed Mondal depict how the main actors of the crisis are producers of the least discourse in this case. In consequence, the authors ask the question about the scholars' responsibility for the representation of both these scarce traces of migrants' discursive presence and what remains unsaid by them. Natalia Bloch touches on the issue of discursive imposition of hierarchies upon migration, focusing on the intersection between gender, ethnicity, and citizenship. The author guides us through the debate from 2015 regarding the representation of refugees in the media, and points out how the productions of anti-refugee discourse affect the reproduction of violence against non-whites. Ada Tyimińska centres her analysis on age by asking how childhood is constructed within the narrative about people on the move crossing the Belarusian-Polish border. Tyimińska points to particular decisions by the dignitaries as the spaces in which the ground for various cases of abuse against people on the move is produced. Additionally, the medicalisation of discourse places it almost automatically into expert space. Both these articles profoundly depict how the imagination of different "vulnerabilities" is being used to divide between "deserving" and "undeserving" refugees. Andrei Yeliseyev analyses how the Belarusian regime talks about the crisis it triggered, which is an important contribution because of the rarity of studies on the agents managing irregular migration like smugglers or human traffickers. The phenomenon of a state-trafficker gives the possibility to the author to research the official discourse produced by the Belarusian government-controlled media. Last but not least, Lidia Zessin-Jurek, in her scientific essay, deepens the focal analysis of this special section by exploring the question of how the crisis has been discursively normalised. Asking about "Western morality," she offers an inquiring

reversal of the word “vulnerable” by writing that “[b]oth on an individual and state level, compassion [...] makes us more vulnerable”. This special section is, actually, partly about this vulnerability – about the attempts to construct the image of “undeserving refugee” to suppress our compassion but also about silencing the voices of people on the move to not destroy our imaginations about them in this context.

Bordering practices, thus, not only control the territory against the physical presence of a given person but they perpetuate the state of play in which – as Edward Said wrote about orientalised Egyptian women – “she never spoke for herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history” (2003: 6). We want to conclude this special section with the words of Alfred J. López, who – while defining the “Global South” – set the “peoples across the planet” embraced by this term as those who “recognise” that “globalization’s promised bounties have not materialized, that it has failed as a global master narrative” (2007: 3). This should serve as a reminder for us that the power upon discourse can be illusive and get out of control. In the future, each story can be told in a different way, but what is being said now impinges on people’s life irreversibly.

References

- Adey P., Hannam K., Sheller M. and Tyfield D. (2021), Pandemic (Im)mobilities, *Mobilities* 16(1), 1–19.
- Anonymous (2023). *Polemika z tekstem Alicji Pałęckiej*, Społeczne Archiwum Kryzysu Humanitarnego, <https://www.bbng.org/polemika-z-tekstem-alicji-paleckiej> [accessed 28 November 2023].
- Bevir M. & Blakely J. (2018). *Interpretive Social Science: An Anti-Naturalist Approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bigo D. (2002). Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease, *Alternatives* 27, 63–92.
- Bigo D. and McCluskey E. (2018). *What Is a PARIS Approach to (In)securitization? Political Anthropological Research for International Sociology* in: Gheciu A. and Wohlforth W. C. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of International Security*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bigo D. and Tsoukala A. (2008). *Understanding (in)security* in: Bigo D. and Tsoukala A. (eds.), *Terror, Insecurity and Liberty. Illiberal Practices of Liberal Regimes after 9/11*. London: Routledge, 1–9.
- Burke A. (2013). *Post-structural security studies* in: Shepherd L. J. (ed.), *Critical Approaches to Security. An introduction to theories and methods*. Abingdon-New York: Routledge, 77–88.
- Cresswell T. (2010), Towards a politics of mobility, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28, 17–31.
- Diab. J. L. (2022), *Refugee, Asylum Seeker or Migrant? Words Matter. People Matter. Politics Matters* in: Schiocchet L. and Nölle-Karimi C. (eds.), *Forced Migration Studies: Current Interventions*. ROR-n Plattform / ROR-n and Austrian Academy of Sciences, 135–144.
- Fairclough N. (1992). *Discourse and social Change*. Cambridge: PolityPress.

- Fairclough N. (2003). *Analysing Discourse. Textual analysis for social research*. London: Routledge.
- Fairclough N., Jessop B., Sayer A. (2002). Critical Realism and Semiosis. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 5(1), 2–10.
- Foucault M. (1970), *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Tavistock Publications Ltd.
- Judzińska N., Sendyka R. (2022). The Crisis at the Polish-Belarusian Border: Sites and Things. *Sprawy Narodowościowe. Seria Nowa*, 54.
- Karagiannis E. and Randeria S. (2018), *Exclusion as a Liberal Imperative. Culture, Gender, and the Orientalization of Migration* in: D. Bachmann-Medick, J. Kugele (eds.) *Migration. Changing concepts. Critical approaches*. Berlin-Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 229–252.
- Kloß S. T. (2017). The Global South as Subversive Practice: Challenges and Potentials of a Heuristic Concept. *The Global South*, 11(2), 1–17.
- Koutonin M. R. (2015). Why are white people expats when the rest of us are immigrants? *The Guardian* 13 March 2015.
- Krępa M. (2022), Split Personality of the Sovereign: The Interplay of Power within Bordering Practices of Exclusion at the Polish-Belarusian Border. *Sprawy Narodowościowe. Seria Nowa*, 54.
- López A. J. (2007). Introduction: The (Post) Global South. *The Global South*, 1(1), 1–11.
- Pałęcka A. (2022). *Freezing face emoji. O komunikacji i autoprezentacji granicznej*, Fundacja Ośrodek Badań nad Migracjami, <https://obmf.pl/publikacje/BBnGA.Palecka.pdf> [accessed 28 November 2023].
- Pietrusińska M. J. (2022). “People From the Forest”: Discourse About Migrants in the Narratives of NGO Workers and Activists Involved in the Humanitarian Crisis at the Polish-Belarusian Border. *Sprawy Narodowościowe: Seria nowa*, 54.
- Said E. (2003). *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books.
- Turton D. (1996). *Migrants and refugees: a Mursi case study* in: Allen T. (ed.) *In Search of Cool Ground: War, Flight and Homecoming in Northeast Africa*. London-Trenton: James Currey/Africa, 96–110.