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ARTICLE

## Support for Polish uniformed services protecting the Polish-Belarusian border as a response to the repercussions of the operation ‘Sluice’ in 2021

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### Abstract

The aim of the article is to describe the support for Polish uniformed services protecting the Polish-Belarusian border, which, as a result of the operation ‘Sluice’ in 2021 have undoubtedly become the object of discredit, as well as the target of physical and psychological aggression. The article discusses the migrants instrumentalisation practice in the policies of Belarus and Russia, then presents selected uniformed services involved in protecting the Polish-Belarusian border. The forms of aggression towards the Polish uniformed services during the operation ‘Sluice’ and the nationwide social campaign ‘United behind the Polish uniform’ were also presented.

### Keywords

Polish-Belarusian border, migration crisis, social campaign ‘United behind the Polish uniform’, instrumentalisation of migrants

## Introduction

The migration crisis on the borders of Belarus with Lithuania, Latvia and Poland was carefully planned. Smuggling mafias were responsible for transporting migrants to the border areas, convincing potential customers of the effectiveness and safety of their services<sup>1</sup>. The migrants were mainly citizens of Middle Eastern and South Asian countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Syria and Libya<sup>2</sup>. For a certain amount (calculated in thousands of dollars), migrants were transported to Minsk, provided with accommodation, and transported to the border of European Union Member States. The practice was carried out in the same way as tourist trips. It was closely monitored by the authorities from Belarus<sup>3</sup>. The EU has imposed sanctions on many entities involved in migrant smuggling. This group includes: Belarusian Belavia Airlines, Syrian Cham Wings Airlines, Belarusian travel agencies – CentrKurort and Oskartour, Minsk and Planeta hotels as well as the Turkish company Vip Grup<sup>4</sup>. The locations where migrants are smuggled into Europe coincide with the Eastern European migration route, which covers over 6000 km and runs along the borders of EU Member States – Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria<sup>5</sup>. Among the Belarusian services involved in triggering the migration crisis were the State Security Committee of the Republic of Belarus (Russian: Комитет государственной безопасности Республики Беларусь, KGB), the State Border Committee of the Republic of Belarus (Russian: Государственный пограничный комитет Республики Беларусь) as well as the Special Service for Active Operations (Russian: Отдельная

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<sup>1</sup> D. Niedźwiedzki, *Kryzys humanitarny na granicy polsko-białoruskiej. Analiza zjawiska w perspektywie ładu społecznego* (Eng. Humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. Analysis of the phenomenon from the perspective of social order), "Politeja" 2024, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 58–59. <https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.21.2024.88.3.04>.

<sup>2</sup> Z. Śliwa, A.K. Olech, *Wyzwania w kontekście migracji i kryzys na granicy polsko-białoruskiej* (Eng. Challenges in the context of migration and the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border), "Wiedza Obronna" 2022, vol. 278, no. 1, p. 93. <https://doi.org/10.34752/2022-d278>.

<sup>3</sup> J. Maciejewski, *Wewnętrzny front. Łukaszenki wojna informacyjna i kryzys migracyjny na granicy polsko-białoruskiej* (Eng. The internal front. Lukashenka's information war and the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border), Warszawa 2022, p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> *Organizatorzy nielegalnego przetrzutu migrantów do Polski objęci zachodnimi sankcjami* (Eng. Organisers of illegal migrant smuggling to Poland subject to Western sanctions), InfoSecurity24, 27 I 2022, <https://infosecurity24.pl/za-granica/organizatorzy-nielegalnego-przerzutu-migrantow-do-polski-objeci-zachodnimi-sankcjami> [accessed: 4 VII 2025].

<sup>5</sup> J. Werner, *Ochrona granicy wschodniej Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w kontekście nielegalnej migracji* (Eng. Protection of the eastern border of the Republic of Poland in the context of illegal migration), "Studia Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego" 2024, vol. 31, no. 1, p. 90. <https://doi.org/10.37055/sbn/178377>.

Служба Активных Мероприятий)<sup>6</sup>. According to Belarusian oppositionist Aliaksandr Azarau, the migrant smuggling operation was part of the KGB and the Border Guard activities and was developed by the Chairman of the KGB – Ivan Tertel. The operation was given the code name ‘Sluice’<sup>7</sup>. A distinction should be made between two operations: the first in 2010 and the second in 2021. The aim of the first was to check the tightness of the EU’s borders as well as to obtain financial support from the European Community for Belarus to strengthen the state border. The Caucasian people and foreigners residing in Belarus were used in this operation. In the following decade, the direction of migrant recruitment changed, as did the purpose of their use in political activities<sup>8</sup>.

The aim of the article is to describe manifestations of solidarity with Polish uniformed services guarding the Polish-Belarusian border, using the example of a social campaign ‘United behind the Polish uniform’. The author formulated the following questions: what were the reasons for starting the social campaign ‘United behind the Polish uniform’? What was the course of the action? He put forward the thesis: the social campaign ‘United behind the Polish uniform’ was a response to the discrediting of Polish uniformed services following the operation ‘Sluice’. The article employs the method of analysis and criticism of literature, synthesis as well as descriptive method.

### **Instrumentalisation of migrants in Belarusian and Russian politics, as exemplified by the operation ‘Sluice’**

The instrumentalisation of migrants by the Belarusian regime fits into one of the four types of migration engineering described by Kelly Greenhill<sup>9</sup>. A staged border crisis is equivalent to so-called forced migration engineering, characterised

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<sup>6</sup> B. Fraszka, *Sytuacja na granicy polsko-białoruskiej: przyczyny, aspekt geopolityczny, narracje* (Eng. The situation on the Poland-Belarus Border: Background, Geopolitics, Narratives), Warsaw Institute, 23 XII 2021, <https://warsawinstitute.org/situation-poland-belarus-border-background-geopolitics-narratives/> [accessed: 14 II 2026].

<sup>7</sup> J. Maciejewski, *Wewnętrzny front...*, pp. 73–74.

<sup>8</sup> A. Szachon-Pszenny, A. Zaręba, *Instrumentalizacja migrantów jako forma destabilizacji bezpieczeństwa na wschodniej granicy zewnętrznej UE w kontekście wojny w Ukrainie* (Eng. Instrumentalisation of migrants as a form of security destabilisation in the context of the war in Ukraine), “Politeja” 2024, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 97–98. <https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.21.2024.88.3.06>.

<sup>9</sup> A. Szachon-Pszenny, A. Zaręba, *Etapowość instrumentalizacji migrantów na przykładzie granicy z Białorusią – wyzwania współczesności* (Eng. Stages of migrants instrumentalisation on the Polish-Belarusian border example – contemporary challenges), “Przegląd Geopolityczny” 2024, vol. 49, p. 55.

by the exploitation of people for political purposes<sup>10</sup>. In modern conflicts between states, military action is not the only way to gain an advantage over the enemy. There are many more means and tools available to exert pressure<sup>11</sup>.

Referring to Europe's experience with mass migration, Russian Major General Alexander Vladimirov, highlighted the problems arising from the presence of newcomers, including the loss of European identity and the possible rise of radical attitudes in the host society. According to Vladimirov, controlling mass migration is a modern strategic weapon that can be used to influence the political, economic and cultural spheres of a country. He also drew attention to the trap of moral dilemma. It concerns whether the state will maintain a humanitarian stance in the face of mass migration, or whether it will decide to marginalise this approach due to the need to ensure national security<sup>12</sup>.

Krzysztof Chochowski draws attention to another dilemma related to the previous one. He points to two forms of action in response to the instrumentalisation of migrants: legal (i.e. lawful but unproductive) and effective (i.e. productive but violating legal norms). In Chochowski's opinion, choosing any of the options will cause internal destabilisation of the state and polarisation of society, because, as he stated (referring to the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border): *This is precisely where the trap of the Belarusian regime lies (...)*<sup>13</sup>.

The consequences of the events of 23 May 2021, related to the forced landing of a Ryanair airline plane in Minsk, can be considered the impetus for the start of the operation 'Sluice'. The plane was carrying Belarusian oppositionist Raman Pratasevich, who was arrested by Belarusian KGB officers. In response to repeated incidents of Alexander Lukashenka's suppression of the legal opposition, the EU decided to impose sanctions on Belarus<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, the European Community

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> A. Gruszczak, *Hybrydowość współczesnych wojen – analiza krytyczna* (Eng. The hybrid nature of modern warfare – a critical analysis), in: *Asymetria i hybrydowość – stare armie wobec nowych konfliktów*, W. Sokała, B. Zapala (sci. eds.), Warszawa 2011, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> M. Wojnowski, *The genesis, theory, and practice of Russian coercive migration engineering. A contribution to the study of the migration crisis on NATO's eastern flank*, "Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego" 2022, no. 26, pp. 263–300. <https://doi.org/10.4467/20801335PBW.21.042.15702>.

<sup>13</sup> K. Chochowski, *Kryzys na granicy polsko-białoruskiej jako przejaw wojny hybrydowej. Aspekty administracyjnoprawne* (Eng. The crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border as a manifestation of hybrid warfare. Administrative and legal aspects), "Roczniki Nauk Społecznych" 2021, vol. 49, no. 4, p. 94. <https://doi.org/10.18290/rns21494.8>.

<sup>14</sup> G. Baziur, *Operation "Sluice". The so-called migration crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border: an example of hybrid actions taken in the second half of 2021 as documented in the reports of the Polish border guard*, "Bezpieczeństwo. Teoria i Praktyka" 2022, vol. 46, no. 1, p. 137. <http://dx.doi.org/10.48269/2451-0718-btip-2022-1-008>.

did not acknowledge Lukashenka's victory in the presidential elections on 9 June 2020. This deepened the isolation of Belarus on the international stage and, for Lukashenka, became yet another argument confirming his belief that the EU's goal was to destabilise the internal situation in Belarus<sup>15</sup>. Operation 'Sluice' was intended to lead to the lifting of EU sanctions, Belarus's emergence from isolation, and the acquisition of the financial support needed to resolve the crisis<sup>16</sup>. According to Jerzy Marek Nowakowski, one of the reasons for the migration crisis could also have been Lukashenka's desire for the international community to recognise him as a fully-fledged president of Belarus<sup>17</sup>. However, operation 'Sluice' did not lead to the achievement of the intended goals. The European Union condemned the actions of Lukashenka's regime and imposed another, fifth package of sanctions on Belarus (including, among others, the elites of the Belarusian regime)<sup>18</sup>. The decision to choose Poland or Lithuania as targets of attack was based on these countries' membership of the EU, their support for the Belarusian opposition and their approval of sanctions against the regime of Lukashenka<sup>19</sup>.

Operation 'Sluice' was important for several reasons, primarily for the Russian Federation (RF). Firstly, Russia enabled the testing of the crisis response capabilities of EU Member States and the North Atlantic Alliance. Secondly, the RF led to the polarisation of society in a country affected by migration crisis, as well as maintaining constant anxiety and uncertainty about the legitimacy of the state apparatus's actions in response to the growing external threat. Thirdly, it destabilised the borders of the attacked countries (their authorities were forced, among other things, to significantly increase financial expenditure on border security). Fourthly, the migration crisis in Eastern Europe diverted attention from Russia's actions

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<sup>15</sup> J. Szyszka, *Zjawisko state-sponsored human trafficking na przykładzie Białorusi* (Eng. The phenomenon of state-sponsored human trafficking as exemplified by Belarus), in: *Wybrane zagadnienia handlu ludźmi i zagrożonymi gatunkami roślin i zwierząt*, B. Stępień-Załucka, J. Uliasz (sci. eds.), Rzeszów 2023, pp. 122–123. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15584/978-83-8277-037-7.9>.

<sup>16</sup> A. Wawrzusiszyn, *Rosyjsko-białoruskie działania hybrydowe na granicach Unii Europejskiej i NATO* (Eng. Russian-Belarusian hybrid activities on the borders of the European Union and NATO), "Journal of Modern Science" 2025, vol. 61, no. 1, p. 19. <https://doi.org/10.13166/jms/203108>.

<sup>17</sup> J.M. Nowakowski, *O co idzie gra?* (Eng. What is the game about?), in: *Raport IV. Granica dyktatora. Polska i Białoruś wobec kryzysu granicznego*, J. M. Nowakowski, J. Olędzka, M. Rust (eds.), Warszawa 2021, p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> K. Wańczyk, *Relacje Unii Europejskiej z Białorusią po sierpniu 2020 roku. Powrót do przeszłości* (Eng. The European Union's relations with Belarus after August 2020. A return to the past), in: *Raport V. Białoruś 500 dni po: od społecznej mobilizacji do neototalitarnej konsolidacji?*, J.M. Nowakowski, J. Olędzka, M. Rust (eds.), Warszawa 2022, pp. 96–97.

<sup>19</sup> A. Szabaciuk, *Forced migrations in Eastern Europe after 2020*, series: *Prace Instytutu Europy Środkowej*, no. 9, B. Surmacz, T. Stępniewski (eds.), Lublin 2022, p. 28.

in Ukraine and the Caucasus<sup>20</sup>. As the border incidents took place on Belarusian territory, Russia avoided direct responsibility for triggering the crisis<sup>21</sup>.

The practice of instrumentalisation of migrants was supported by Belarusian and Russian propaganda centres: the Belarusian Telegraph Agency, the Russian News Agency TASS, RIA Novosti, Regnum and TV channels: Belarus-1, ONT and CTV, Rossiya 1 as well as Pervyj Kanal. In the case of Poland, a narrative referring to Nazism, racism, xenophobia and brutality of Polish uniformed services was used<sup>22</sup>. Using distorted or inaccurate information, Belarus questioned the effectiveness of the actions taken by individual countries and international organisations. In its information operations, it placed particular emphasis on undermining the rule of law, the legitimacy of the authorities, their ability to ensure security, as well as compromising the reputation of Central and Eastern European countries, particularly Poland, on the international stage. This image blurred responsibility for the migration crisis in Eastern Europe. Belarusian media centres strongly influenced viewers' emotions by using images of children, among other things<sup>23</sup>. The uniformed services were primarily accused of crimes and violations of the law. Belarusian state apparatus used analogies to Nazi troops from World War II and their methods of operation. Terms such as 'tormentors' in reference to Polish uniformed services and 'concentration camps' in reference to places where migrants were held were used in public discourse<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> See in more detail: A. Wawrzusiszyn, *Rosyjsko-białoruskie działania...*, pp. 19–27.

<sup>21</sup> J. Maciejewski, *Wewnętrzny front...*, pp. 64–66.

<sup>22</sup> B. Ociepka, *Dziennikarzom wstęp wzbroniony: kryzys na polsko-białoruskiej granicy w 2021 r. jako wydarzenie (nie)relacjonowane przez media* (Eng. Journalists barred: the 2021 crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border as an event (not) covered by the media), *Studia Medioznawcze* 2023, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 198–199. <https://doi.org/10.33077/uw.24511617.sm.2023.2.715>.

<sup>23</sup> K. Kuśmirek, *Information activities during the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border as a threat to society's resilience*, *Bezpieczeństwo. Teoria i Praktyka* 2022, vol. 48, no. 3, pp. 312–315. <http://dx.doi.org/10.48269/2451-0718-btip-2022-3-023>.

<sup>24</sup> A. Szabaciuk, *"Natowskie wojska szcękające gąsienicami czołgów". Polska i granica polsko-białoruska w propagandzie białoruskiej po 2020 roku* (Eng. 'NATO troops chattering with tank tracks'. Poland and the Polish-Belarusian border in post-2020 Belarusian propaganda), in: *Bezpieczeństwo granic – granice bezpieczeństwa*, D. Karczewski, R. Zenderowski (eds.), Warszawa 2023, pp. 347–349.

## Strengthening security along the Polish-Belarusian border in response to the operation 'Sluice'

According to the data of the Headquarters of the Border Guard, in 2021 as many as 39 697 people attempted to cross the Polish-Belarusian border illegally. In previous years, few such cases were reported: 4 in 2018, 20 in 2019 and 129 in 2020. In 2021, the migration crisis peaked in October (17 447 attempts to cross the border). Most attempts to cross the border were made on sections belonging to the area of Podlaski Border Guard Regional Unit. These were sections under the jurisdiction of the following Border Guard institutions: Michałowo, Czeremcha, Białowieża and Kuźnica<sup>25</sup>.

Both traditional and modern security measures were used to strengthen the Polish-Belarusian border protection. Traditional measures include round-the-clock patrols, carried out on foot or using various types of vehicles. The catalogue of modern measures includes the use of cooled thermal imaging cameras, camera traps and drones. These measures are characterised by resistance to temperature differences, accuracy in identifying threats, and are also difficult to detect, which is why they are important part of border protection<sup>26</sup>.

The *Act of 29 October 2021 on the construction of state border security* was passed by a decision of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland. Both physical and electronic security measures were put in place along the Polish-Belarusian border. A physical barrier consisting of steel spans measuring 5.5 metres in height covered a total of 186 km of the border. Secondly, an electronic barrier was built along the entire border with Belarus. The perimeter system consists of day/night cameras, thermal imaging cameras, detection cables and telecommunications containers. The total cost of the border fortifications amounted to PLN 1.6 billion<sup>27</sup>. The security measures proved insufficient, so in 2024, a decision was made to install cross beams with an additional coil of razor wire to prevent the steel spans from being bent. In addition,

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<sup>25</sup> E. Szczepańska, *Nielegalne przekroczenia granicy z Białorusią w 2021 r.* (Eng. Illegal border crossings with Belarus in 2021), *Straż Graniczna*, 12 I 2022, <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/9689,Nielegalne-przekroczenia-granicy-z-Bialorusia-w-2021r.html> [accessed: 1 IV 2025].

<sup>26</sup> J. Werner, *Ochrona granicy wschodniej...*, pp. 95–97.

<sup>27</sup> K. Szwed, *Zakończenie odbioru bariery elektronicznej na granicy polsko-białoruskiej* (Eng. Completion of the acceptance of the electronic barrier on the Polish-Belarusian border), *Straż Graniczna*, 15 VI 2023, <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/11875,Zakonczenie-odbioru-bariery-elektronicznej-na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej.html> [accessed: 5 IV 2025].

the electronic barrier was reinforced with more cameras and lighting, along with sensors<sup>28</sup>. The modernisation of the barrier was completed on 30 March 2025<sup>29</sup>.

The Border Guard was supported in protecting the Polish-Belarusian border by the Police, soldiers of the Polish Army and the State Fire Service. The Police carried out its tasks as part of an operation codenamed 'Barrier' (Pol. Zapora). A total of 32 759 officers from various fields were involved, including counter-terrorism officers, pilots, and service dog handlers<sup>30</sup>. This enabled the exchange of experiences and mutual training of uniformed services present at the Polish-Belarusian border. The Police conducted patrols along the border, repelled mass attacks by migrants and combated the activities of smuggling networks. It used multi-purpose type S70i Black Hawk and Bell 407GX helicopters to identify threats. Operation 'Barrier' came to an end on 19 December 2024<sup>31</sup>.

Soldiers of the Polish Army assisted Border Guard officers in several operations. One of them, codenamed 'Strong support', began on 3 September 2021<sup>32</sup>. Military units of the Territorial Defence Forces (WOT), including the 1<sup>st</sup> Podlasie Territorial Defence Brigade and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lublin Territorial Defence Brigade, conducted foot, water and horse patrols, and also used unmanned systems. These activities resulted in numerous arrests of migrants and smugglers. Due to the state of emergency introduced in the border areas, WOT soldiers provided support also to the local community<sup>33</sup>. The Military Police and operational troops were also involved in the operation, for instance: the 12<sup>th</sup> Szczecin Mechanised Division named after Bolesław Krzywousty, the 16<sup>th</sup> Pomeranian Mechanised Division named after King Casimir IV Jagiellonczyk, 18<sup>th</sup> Mechanised Division named after Lieutenant General

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<sup>28</sup> *Szef BBN na granicy polsko-białoruskiej. Wzmacnianie zabezpieczeń to „dowód ciągłości myśli strategicznej państwa”* (Eng. The Head of the National Security Bureau on the Polish-Belarusian border. Strengthening security measures is 'proof of the continuity of the state's strategic thinking), Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego, 11 X 2024, <https://www.bbn.gov.pl/pl/wydarzenia/10003,Szef-BBN-na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej-Wzmacnianie-zabezpiezen-to-quotdowod-ci.html> [accessed: 5 IV 2025].

<sup>29</sup> *Modernizacja bariery elektronicznej na granicy Polski z Białorusią (WIDEO)* (Eng. Modernisation of the electronic barrier on the Polish-Belarusian border (VIDEO)), Telbud S.A., <https://telbud.pl/strefa-informacji/modernizacja-bariery-elektronicznej-na-granicy-polski-z-bialorusia-wideo> [accessed: 14 II 2026].

<sup>30</sup> *Zakończenie operacji policyjnej „Zapora”* (Eng. End of the police operation 'Barrier'), "Gazeta Policyjna" 2025, no. 49, pp. 24–25.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> *3 miesiące operacji #SilneWsparcie* (Eng. 3 months of the operation #SilneWsparcie), Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej, 3 XII 2021, <https://media.terytorialsi.wp.mil.pl/informacje/712389/3-miesiace-operacji-silnewsparcie> [accessed: 6 IV 2025].

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

Tadeusz Buk<sup>34</sup>. The increase in the number of soldiers at the border was the result of an operation 'Griffin'. It strengthened the actions of the officers of the Border Guard and the Police. Operation 'Rengaw' was of a training and defence nature<sup>35</sup>. By decision of the Minister of National Defence, a military task force was established to carry out a training programme for soldiers in the Podlaskie Province. Increasing their presence in border areas as part of training activities was also intended to serve as a deterrent<sup>36</sup>. To ensure the full effectiveness of the measures taken, both operations were replaced on 1 August 2024 by a single operation 'Safe Podlasie'<sup>37</sup>.

Officers of the State Fire Service also played an important role in protecting the Polish-Belarusian border. During mass attempts by migrants to cross the border, they ensured constant access to water for specialised police vehicles equipped with water cannons. They were also responsible for the safety and efficient operation of military aviation. Together with other uniformed services, they strengthened border security and provided assistance to migrants in need<sup>38</sup>.

## Forms of aggression towards Polish uniformed services

The uniformed services were exposed to both physical and psychological violence from migrants and other groups. Provocations by the Belarusian services towards Polish soldiers and officers were intended to test their mental resilience and training. Pyrotechnic materials were thrown at Polish services, grenade throws were simulated, so-called blank shots were fired, people were blinded with torches,

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<sup>34</sup> E. Moczuk, D. Czekaj, *Kryzys migracyjny jako element wojny hybrydowej. Analiza działania wojska na granicy polsko-białoruskiej* (Eng. Migration crisis as part of hybrid warfare. Analysis of military operations on the Polish-Belarusian border), Rzeszów 2024, p. 224.

<sup>35</sup> J. Dziemiańczuk, "Bezpieczne Podlasie" zastąpi dwie dotychczasowe operacje (Eng. 'Safe Podlasie' will replace two existing operations), *Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej*, 31 VII 2024, <https://media.terytorialsi.wp.mil.pl/informacje/838336/bezpieczne-podlasie-zastapi-dwie-dotychczasowe-operacje> [accessed: 6 IV 2025].

<sup>36</sup> E. Korsak, *Nowa operacja wojskowa na Podlasiu* (Eng. A new military operation in Podlasie), *Polska Zbrojna*, 12 VIII 2023, <https://polska-zbrojna.pl/home/articleshow/40146?t=Nowa-operacja-wojskowa-na-Podlasiu> [accessed: 7 IV 2025].

<sup>37</sup> *Nowa operacja wojskowa na wschodniej granicy: OP Bezpieczne Podlasie* (Eng. A new military operation on the eastern border: OP Safe Podlasie), *Wojsko Polskie*, <https://www.wojsko-polskie.pl/articles/tym-zyjemy-v/2024-07-176-op-bezpieczne-podlasie/> [accessed: 7 IV 2025].

<sup>38</sup> M. Łozowski, *Państwowa Straż Pożarna w obronie granic RP* (Eng. The State Fire Service in defence of the borders of the Republic of Poland), *Krajowa Sekcja Pożarnictwa*, 7 XII 2021, <https://kspnsz.org/index.php/2021/12/07/panstwowa-straz-pozarna-w-obronie-granic-rp/> [accessed: 8 IV 2025].

and suspicious packages were left behind<sup>39</sup>. According to the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Belarusian services also used physical violence against migrants to force them to cross the border illegally and provoke reaction from Polish soldiers and officers<sup>40</sup>. One example was the attack on the Kuźnica–Bruzgi border crossing in November 2021. This was preceded by the Belarusian authorities bringing in a thousand migrants. They took on the role of observer of the events. Migrants repeatedly attacked Polish soldiers and officers using various tools: stones, paving stones, bottles, logs, and stun grenades. The health and lives of officers of the Polish uniformed services and soldiers were exposed to great danger. This is confirmed by photographs and reports from these events<sup>41</sup>.

Some Polish politicians and celebrities also joined in the attacks on Poland's uniformed services. They made derogatory remarks about the people guarding the border<sup>42</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> J. Maciejewski, *Wewnętrzny front...*, pp. 248–249.

<sup>40</sup> K. Czarnota, M. Gorczyńska, *Gdzie prawo nie sięga. Raport Helsińskiej Fundacji Praw Człowieka z monitoringu sytuacji na polsko-białoruskiej granicy* (Eng. Where the law does not reach. Report by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights on monitoring the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border), Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, Warszawa 2022, pp. 39–40.

<sup>41</sup> M. Jurkowska, *Masowy szturm na przejście graniczne w Kuźnicy. Mija rok od ataku cudzoziemców na granicę i funkcjonariuszy SG* (Eng. Massive assault on the border crossing in Kuźnica. A year has passed since the attack by foreigners on the border and Border Guard officers), Sokółka Nasze Miasto, 16 XI 2022, <https://sokolka.naszemiasto.pl/masowy-szturm-na-przejscie-graniczne-w-kuznicy-mija-rok-od/ar/c1-9090195> [accessed: 11 IV 2025].

<sup>42</sup> M. Koźdoń-Dębecka, *Polaryzacja medialna na przykładzie kryzysu migracyjnego na granicy polsko-białoruskiej latem 2021 roku w relacjach trzech polskich telewizyjnych serwisów informacyjnych* (Eng. Media polarisation on the example of the migration crisis taking place on the Polish-Belarusian border in the summer of 2021 in the reports of three Polish television news services), "Media Biznes Kultura" 2023, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 170–171. <https://doi.org/10.4467/25442554.MBK.23.010.18033>; K. Orzech, *Zagrożenia dla Polski kreowane przez Republikę Białorusi w kontekście sytuacji kryzysowej na granicy polsko-białoruskiej* (Eng. The threats to Poland posed by the Republic of Belarus in the context of the crisis situation on the Polish-Belarusian border), "Studia Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego" 2021, vol. 22, no. 4, p. 63. <https://doi.org/10.37055/sbn/147013>; P. Rojek-Socha, K. Żączkiewicz-Zborska, *SN: Sprawa aktorki oskarżonej o zniesławienie Straży Granicznej do ponownego rozpoznania* (Eng. Supreme Court: Case of actress accused of defaming the Border Guard to be re-examined), *Prawo.pl*, 6 XI 2024, <https://www.prawo.pl/prawnicy-sady/sn-sprawa-aktorki-oskarzonej-o-znieslawienie-strazy-granicznej-do-ponownego-rozpoznania,529890.html> [accessed: 27 II 2026]; *Znany aktor Piotr Z. usłyszał zarzuty zniesławienia i znieważenia rzeczniczki Straży Granicznej* (Eng. Well-known actor Piotr Z. has been charged with defamation and insulting a spokesperson for the Border Guard), *Polska Agencja Prasowa*, 31 III 2022, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C1137489%2Cznany-aktor-piotr-z-uslyszal-zarzuty-znieslawienia-i-zniewazenia> [accessed: 27 II 2026].

## Recognition of the Polish uniformed services from state authorities and society

In connection with the events at the Polish-Belarusian border and negative narratives concerning the activities of the Polish uniformed services, both the state authorities and the society expressed their support for the officers and soldiers serving at the border. The Sejm of the Republic of Poland passed two resolutions, and the Minister of National Defence established a special badge. The public expressed its appreciation as part of a nationwide campaign under the slogan 'United behind the Polish uniform', which consisted of various initiatives.

### Resolutions of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland and Decision of the Minister of National Defence

The Sejm of the Republic of Poland passed the *Resolution of 17 November 2021 on solidarity in the protection of Polish borders*. It clearly pointed to the Belarusian regime's responsibility for destabilisation of the Polish-Belarusian border by instrumentalisation of migrants. The Sejm of the Republic of Poland also expressed its gratitude to all those involved in protecting the national border. Special thanks were extended to Border Guard officers, Police officers and Polish Army soldiers. According to the text of the resolution, it is the duty of every Polish citizen to (...) *support state institutions and services and to stand (...) side by side with Border Guard and Police officers, Polish Army soldiers, including Territorial Defence Forces, and representatives of other services who proudly wear the Polish uniform and guard the borders of the state and the sovereignty of our Homeland*.

Another expression of support from the Sejm of the Republic of Poland was the *Resolution of 24 July 2024 on expressing appreciation for the service and dedication of soldiers and officers guarding border security of the Republic of Poland*. The Sejm again condemned the Belarusian regime as well as Russian regime for hybrid actions on the Polish-Belarusian border. The resolution strongly emphasised appreciation for the uniformed services, their dedication, devotion to the homeland, professionalism, courage and resilience in the face of hardship. The resolution also expressed gratitude for numerous grassroots social campaigns supporting Polish uniformed services.

As expression of gratitude to the soldiers for maintaining the security of Poland's eastern border, the Minister of National Defence, by Decision no. 148 of 17 October 2022 introduced a special badge 'For the Protection of the Border of the Republic of Poland' as a form of (...) *honouring soldiers of the Armed Forces of the Republic*

of Poland, employees of the Ministry of National Defence, soldiers of other countries and other persons who contributed to ensuring the security and inviolability of the borders of the Republic of Poland<sup>43</sup>. The decoration has a three-tier hierarchy. Tier I (gold) is awarded for heroic deeds, tier II (silver) for special merits, and tier III (bronze) for performing tasks ensuring security and integrity of the Polish border<sup>44</sup>.

## Nationwide social campaign ‘United behind the Polish uniform’

In defence of Polish soldiers and officers, internet users took action under the slogan ‘United behind the Polish uniform’, which transformed into a nationwide social campaign. It became a symbolic gesture of support for the Polish uniformed services guarding the border with Belarus<sup>45</sup>. Polish citizens, local government institutions, government agencies, non-governmental organisations, the media and many other entities were involved in the campaign.

One of the most recognisable initiatives was the ‘Card for Border Defenders’ campaign, initiated by the Independence Foundation<sup>46</sup>. Children and schoolchildren in particular were encouraged to participate in it. The artwork was to be in the form of a drawing. The subject matter was not strictly defined. The prizes were teaching aids, including a historical comic book. The campaign was supported by the Board of Education in Lublin, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lublin Territorial Defence Brigade and the Radio Lublin<sup>47</sup>. Later on, the campaign gained the support of the Military

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<sup>43</sup> *Decision No. 148/MON of the Minister of National Defence of 17 October 2022 on the introduction of a special badge named ‘For the Protection of the Border of the Republic of Poland’, Appendix no. 7: Special badge regulations ‘For the Protection of the Border of the Republic of Poland’.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Murem za polskim mundurem* (Eng. United behind the Polish uniform), Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej, 21 XI 2021, <https://media.terytorialsi.wp.mil.pl/informacje/708475/murem-za-polskim-mundurem> [accessed: 3 VIII 2025].

<sup>46</sup> The Independence Foundation, based in Lublin, is primarily concerned with promoting Polish history both at home and abroad. It also conducts educational and scientific activities in this field and protects national heritage. It organises training courses, conferences and public debates, publishes magazines and develops educational programmes. See: *Statut fundacji „Fundacja Niepodległości”* (Eng. Statute of the ‘Independence foundation’), [https://www.fundacja-niepodleglosci.pl/images/STATUT\\_FUNDACJI/Fundacja\\_Niepodleg%C5%82o%C5%9Bci\\_Statut\\_17.11.2021\\_r.pdf](https://www.fundacja-niepodleglosci.pl/images/STATUT_FUNDACJI/Fundacja_Niepodleg%C5%82o%C5%9Bci_Statut_17.11.2021_r.pdf) [accessed: 29 VII 2025].

<sup>47</sup> *Kartka dla obrońców granic* (Eng. A card for border defenders), Fundacja Niepodległości, 10 XI 2021, <https://www.fundacja-niepodleglosci.pl/9-dzialalno/aktualnoci/2451-kartka-dla-obroncow-granic> [accessed: 30 VI 2025].

Property Agency – Regional Office in Lublin, which provided pocket first aid kits for the authors of selected works<sup>48</sup>.

The Polish authorities, including the President and Prime Minister, were involved in the ‘United behind the Polish uniform’ campaign. They showed solidarity with the uniformed services defending the Polish-Belarusian border, opposing the hostile propaganda of the Belarusian and Russian regimes. In one of his statements, President Andrzej Duda declared: *I bow my head to all Polish officers of the Border Guard and other services, Polish soldiers (...) for their extraordinary effort, sacrifice and dedication to the Republic of Poland (...)*<sup>49</sup>. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki made similar remarks during his speech in the Sejm regarding the situation at the Polish-Belarusian border: *(...) we owe our gratitude for their honourable service, for defending the dignity of the Polish soldier’s uniform, the Polish officer, to all the wonderful officers, soldiers of the operational forces, soldiers of the Territorial Defence Forces*<sup>50</sup>.

The slogan ‘United behind the Polish uniform’ was also used in a campaign carried out by the Polish Post Office. The campaign involved writing a letter or preparing a card expressing support for the Polish uniformed services. The formal requirement was to include the phrase ‘To the defenders of the border’ in the work and not to address it. However, participants in the campaign could specify the recipient (a person or unit)<sup>51</sup>. Furthermore, the Polish Post Office issued a special postage stamp together with an FDC envelope, expressing gratitude to the Polish uniformed services for protecting the eastern border of the country. Both

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<sup>48</sup> *Kartka dla obrońców granic – nasza akcja się rozszerza* (Eng. A card for a border defenders – our action is expanding), Fundacja Niepodległości, 25 XI 2021, <https://www.fundacja-niepodleglosci.pl/9-dzialalno/aktualnoci/2456-kartka-dla-obroncow-granic-nasza-akcja-sie-rozszerza> [accessed: 30 VI 2025].

<sup>49</sup> *Murem za polskim mundurem!* (Eng. United behind the Polish Uniform!), prezydent.pl, 13 X 2023, <https://www.prezydent.pl/multimedia/wideo/murem-za-polskim-mundurem,1148,33> [accessed: 2 VII 2025].

<sup>50</sup> *Wypowiedź premiera Mateusza Morawieckiego w Sejmie nt. sytuacji na granicy polsko-białoruskiej* (Eng. The statement of the Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki in the Sejm on the situation on the Polish--Belarusian border), <https://www.gov.pl/attachment/f93dffbc-f0ea-48c5-990b-7c01608b2213> [accessed: 2 VII 2025].

<sup>51</sup> *Jesteśmy z Wami – wyślij kartkę mundurowym na granicy* (Eng. We are with you, send a card to the border guards), Poczta Polska, 11 XI 2021, <https://media.poczta-polska.pl/releases/jestesmy-z-wami-wyslij-kartke-mundurowym-na-granicy#:~:text=Poczta%20Polska%20bezp%C5%82atnie%20prze-ka%C5%BCe%20takie%20kartki%20s%C5%82u%C5%BCbom,dor%C4%99czane.%20LISTA%20plac%C3%B3wek%20ze%20specjalnymi%20pojemnikami:%20Lp.> [accessed: 30 VI 2025].

products bear the ‘#♥ZaPolskimMundurem’ (We stand behind the Polish uniform) logo<sup>52</sup>.

The National Bank of Poland (NBP) issued a silver collector coin entitled ‘Protection of the Polish Eastern Border’ with a face value of PLN 10. The obverse of the coin depicts a Polish border post, military camouflage and forest areas, while the reverse shows silhouettes of officers of the Border Guard, the Police and a soldier of the Armed Forces. A helicopter is positioned above the figures. The Police officer is depicted wearing a helmet and carrying a protective shield, while the soldier is armed with a long weapon. The outline of the Polish border is visible in the background, with the Polish-Belarusian border clearly marked<sup>53</sup>. A few months after the release of the silver coin, the NBP bank issued a collector’s banknote entitled ‘Protection of the Polish Eastern Border’ with a face value of PLN 20. It featured a similar graphic design to that of the collector’s coin<sup>54</sup>.

The celebrations of the anniversary of Poland regaining independence, organised under the slogan ‘Day of Respect for the Uniform’, had a special significance in 2021. In 103 military units (in connection with the 103<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of Poland regaining independence), presentations on the symbolism of the uniform were held. Furthermore, on the day before the central celebrations of the Independence Day, an exhibition entitled ‘Uniforms of Polish Soldiers – Respect for the Uniform’ was opened in the Sejm of the Republic of Poland<sup>55</sup>.

The official website of the Border Guard also presents the positions of institutions and social organisations, including the Association of Veterans of Polish Border Formations, Lubliniec City Council, Spytkowice Municipal Council, Lubomino Municipal Council, the Association of Persons Repressed

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<sup>52</sup> *Poczta Polska ze specjalną emisją „#♥ZaPolskimMundurem” poświęconą obrońcom wschodniej granicy* (Eng. The Polish Post Office with a special mission ‘We stand behind the Polish Uniform’ devoted to defenders of the eastern border), Poczta Polska, 27 I 2022, <https://www.poczta-polska.pl/news/poczta-polska-ze-specjalna-emisja-%E2%99%A5zapolskimmundurem-poswiecona-obroncom-wschodniej-granicy/> [accessed: 1 VII 2025].

<sup>53</sup> *“Ochrona polskiej granicy wschodniej” na srebrnej monecie NBP* (Eng. ‘Protection of Poland’s eastern border’ on a silver coin issued by the National Bank of Poland), Narodowy Bank Polski, 26 I 2022, <https://nbp.pl/ochrona-polskiej-granicy-wschodniej-na-srebrnej-monecie-nbp/> [accessed: 1 VII 2025].

<sup>54</sup> *NBP wprowadza banknot kolekcjonerski “Ochrona polskiej granicy wschodniej”* (Eng. The National Bank of Poland introduces a collector’s banknote entitled ‘Protection of the Polish eastern border’), Narodowy Bank Polski, 18 VII 2022, <https://nbp.pl/nbp-wprowadza-banknot-kolekcjonerski-ochrona-polskiej-granicy-wschodniej/> [accessed: 1 VII 2025].

<sup>55</sup> *Narodowe Święto Niepodległości – „Dzień szacunku dla munduru”* (Eng. National Independence Day – ‘Day of respect for the uniform’), Wojsko Polskie, <https://www.wojsko-polskie.pl/weterani/articles/aktualnosci-r/narodowe-swieto-niepodleglosci-dzien-szacunku-dla-munduru/> [accessed: 3 VII 2025].

during Martial Law, the Christian Culture Movement ‘Rebirth’, expressing gratitude for service on the Polish-Belarusian border<sup>56</sup>.

Soldiers on the border were accompanied by military chaplains who, in addition to sacramental ministry, provided psychological support. As pointed out by Priest, Second Lieutenant Artur Janczarek (chaplain of the 15<sup>th</sup> Gołdap Anti-Aircraft Regiment), soldiers are exposed to constant aggression from the Belarusian services, which affects their physical and mental condition<sup>57</sup>. Spiritual support was offered to them by the President of the Polish Episcopal Conference, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki, in a statement concerning the escalation of tensions at the Polish-Belarusian border<sup>58</sup>. In turn, due to the Orthodox Ordinariate of the Polish Army, in cooperation with the Orthodox Christian Charity ELEOS, essential supplies were delivered to the Border Guard facilities<sup>59</sup>.

During the Christmas season of 2021, numerous initiatives were undertaken by state institutions and authorities to thank uniformed services for their efforts in maintaining security and public order. The ‘#WolneMiejsceDlaMundurur’ (Save a seat for the uniform) campaign was organised with soldiers and officers in mind who are away from their families during the Christmas season. The form of involvement in this campaign was to leave a place card next to an empty plate during Christmas Eve dinner<sup>60</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> #MuremZaPolskimMundurem – stanowiska instytucji i organizacji (Eng. United behind the Polish Uniform – positions of the institutions and organisations), Straż Graniczna, 3 XII 2021, <https://strazgraniczna.pl/pl/pozostale-informacje/muremzapolskimmundurem/muremzapolskimmundurem/9548,MuremZaPolskimMundurem-stanowiska-instytucji-i-organizacji.html> [accessed: 3 VII 2025].

<sup>57</sup> K. Stępkowski, *Ks. ppor. Artur Janczarek: nasza posługa na granicy to realizacja przysięgi Wojskowej* (Eng. Priest, second lieutenant Artur Janczarek: our service at the border is the fulfilment of military oath), Ordynariat Polowy, 18 XI 2021, <https://archiwum2023-ordynariat.wp.mil.pl/pl/articles/wiadomosci-listopad-2021/ks-ppor-artur-janczarek-nasza-posluga-na-granicy-realizacja-przysiegi-wojskowej/index.html> [accessed: 19 VIII 2025].

<sup>58</sup> M. Pietraszczyk, *Komunikat Przewodniczącego Konferencji Episkopatu Polski wobec eskalacji napięć na granicy polsko-białoruskiej* (Eng. Statement by the President of the Polish Episcopal Conference on the escalation of tensions on the Polish-Belarusian border), Straż Graniczna, 11 XI 2021, <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/pozostale-informacje/duszpasterstwo/rzymskokatolickie/9542,Komunikat-Przewodniczącego-Konferencji-Episkopatu-Polski-wobec-eskalacji-napiec-.html> [accessed: 3 VII 2025].

<sup>59</sup> *Duchowe wsparcie na granicy* (Eng. Spiritual support on the border), Straż Graniczna, 26 XI 2021, <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/pozostale-informacje/duszpasterstwo/prawoslawne/9573,Duchowe-wsparcie-na-granicy.html> [accessed: 3 VII 2025].

<sup>60</sup> Ł. Wilczewski, *W tę wigilię zostawmy #WolneMiejsceDlaMundurur* (Eng. On this Christmas Eve, save a seat for the uniform), Wojsko Polskie, <https://www.wojsko-polskie.pl/1bot/articles/aktualnosci-w/w-te-wigilie-zostawmywolnemiejcedlamundru/> [accessed: 19 VIII 2025].

Local communities were also active. For instance, on the initiative of Polish Senator Maria Koc and the Head of Garwolin District Mirosław Walicki, a collection of sweets was organised for uniformed services. Among others, companies, rural housewife's clubs and volunteer fire brigades (OSP) joined the campaign<sup>61</sup>. The slogan 'United behind the Polish uniform' was preserved in the form of a mural on the wall of the OSP Kochcice fire station. It presents profiles of Border Guard, OSP, Police officers and the Polish Army soldier<sup>62</sup>.

## Summary

The migration crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border has demonstrated how dangerous and problematic migrants instrumentalisation practice is. People were used as means of combat, including as psychological weapons<sup>63</sup>. In accordance with the guidelines of the Belarusian services, migrants carried out numerous assaults using dangerous tools. The border and state uniformed services were the targets of the attack<sup>64</sup>. Propaganda and disinformation had a negative impact on the Polish society. Belarusian media centres, with Russia's support, presented a distorted picture of reality, consistent with the political goals of those regimes. Polish uniformed services responding to the artificially induced phenomenon of mass migration were accused of exceptional brutality and inhumane treatment of migrants. This narrative was also perpetuated by certain circles in Poland. The result of these actions was growing polarisation of the Polish society<sup>65</sup>.

One expression of opposition to these events was the nationwide social campaign 'United behind the Polish uniform'. Officers and soldiers received words of support from representatives of state authorities and members of the public, cards made by children and young people, basic necessities and much more. These

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<sup>61</sup> Powiat Garwoliński wspiera służby mundurowe! (Eng. Garwoliński District supports uniformed services!), Starostwo Powiatowe w Garwolinie, <https://samorzad.gov.pl/web/powiat-garwolin/zbiorka-slodycz> [accessed: 3 VII 2025].

<sup>62</sup> P. Ciastek, *Na remizie OSP Kochcice powstał mural z przesłaniem. Są na nim polskie służby Mundurowe* (Eng. A mural with a message was created at the OSP Kochcice fire station. It depicts Polish uniformed services), *Lubliniec Nasze Miasto*, 25 IX 2023, <https://lubliniec.naszemiasto.pl/na-remizie-osp-kochcice-powstal-mural-z-przeslaniem-sa-na/ar/c1-9464993> [accessed: 3 VII 2025].

<sup>63</sup> K. Chochoński, *Kryzys na granicy polsko-białoruskiej...*, p. 96.

<sup>64</sup> M. Pieczyński, *Granica propagandy. Łukaszenka i Putin na wojnie hybrydowej z Polską* (Eng. The limits of propaganda. Lukashenka and Putin in a hybrid war with Poland), Warszawa 2022.

<sup>65</sup> K. Orzech, *Zagrożenia dla Polski...*, pp. 62–64.

actions showed that Polish uniformed services could count on the support of their compatriots.

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