

Building solidarity against Poland's two-faced refugee policy

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The reception of Ukrainian refugees in Poland has painted an image of a country welcoming refugees. But the crisis at the border with Belarus tells a different story.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has forced more than 10 million people to leave their homes in search of safety. The majority of those have sought refuge elsewhere within the country, but approximately 4.2 million people have fled abroad, as of early April, around 2.4 million of whom are currently in Poland. For those that have been received, we see the capacity for support in response to a brutal crisis situation. In and of itself, it is an example of how societies can partially break with the deception of scarcity and meet people's basic needs.

At the same time, the ease with which aid and accommodation is now being arranged for millions of people in a matter of a few weeks undermines the basic premise of Europe's supposed "refugee crisis" which was never about a lack of space or resources. As one person summed it up on [Twitter](#): "Europe never had a migrant crisis. It has a racism crisis." This truth is not only confirmed by the way in which non-white refugees leaving Ukraine have been treated at the borders, but also by the humanitarian crisis that has been playing out at Poland's border with Belarus since the summer of 2021. Here, refugees are not met with cups of hot tea and free transport, but rather with volleys of tear gas, barbed wire and pushbacks.

Since last summer, thousands of people have sought to cross into Poland from Belarus, forced on by the Belarusian authorities and violently beaten back by Polish border guards. For weeks and months, they have been trapped between the two borders, desperately immobilized between the two states. While this crisis entered the mainstream news cycle intermittently, for the most part — true to the saga of Fortress Europe on all fronts — it has largely been ignored.

Several solidarity groups organizing alongside the local population in the border region have been offering support to people on the move in the mountainous terrain. Among them is [Grupa Granica](#), a coalition that was formed as part of the grassroots response to the crisis at the border with Belarus. We spoke with them to learn about the situation at the border, another focal point of Europe's racist, violent and criminal border regime.

N.B. Since this interview took place, several members of the Grupa Granica coalition have been [detained](#) by the Polish authorities on trumped-up charges of illegally smuggling people over the border. This shows the lengths to which the Polish state is willing to go to criminalize and obstruct the life-saving solidarity work by the activists working in the border region.

In response to this clear act of intimidation, Grupa Granica has [stated](#): "Bringing criminal charges against four activists who selflessly help refugees on the Polish-Belarusian border should be considered as an example of unlawful harassment and intimidation of people who save the lives of others. What makes them heroes on the Ukrainian border brings an unjust label of criminals on the

border with Belarus. Polish law not only does not prohibit, but even orders to help those whose lives are at risk. That is why we strongly oppose the criminalization of humanitarian aid provided to refugees!"

ROAR condemns the actions of the Polish state and stands in full solidarity with the comrades of Grupa Granica. You can make a contribution to their work [stated](#).

ROAR: Could you give an overview of how the situation has been at the Polish-Belarusian border since last summer?

Grupa Granica: The humanitarian crisis at the border between Poland and Belarus has been ongoing for over nine months. Since July 2021, the autocratic government of Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko had been encouraging people largely from Afghanistan and destabilized parts of the Middle East and Africa to travel to Belarus with a promise of passage to the European Union via the Polish border. This was part of a sinister power play between the Belarusian regime and the European Union in response to the EU sanctions following the crackdown on electoral opposition and street demonstrations in 2020-'21.

In August 2021, in the Polish border town of Usnarz Górny, 32 refugees got stuck between the two national borders, with border guards on either side preventing their movement. The group included 27 men and five women, all from Afghanistan. They were sleeping in tents, and besides some bread they were given by the Belarusian border guards, they received no aid and were forced to drink water from a nearby river. Activists from Poland were prevented from helping the group by Polish border guards. After a few weeks of stalemate, Polish police and border guards surrounded them and violently forced the group back to Belarus. It was a symbolic moment when the authorities revealed their extreme violence, and society was not able to react. The activists in the area were forced to leave.

From August onwards, small groups of activists started to become active along the Polish-Belarusian border, trying to help the people on the move crossing from Belarus. This was the beginning of what the government and media have labeled as a "migration crisis," but what in reality — because of the scale of the violence, including deaths — is clearly a humanitarian crisis. Belarusian authorities lured people to the border with false promises, where many were caught, beaten and pushed back by Polish border guards. Some people attempted to cross to the Polish side up to 20 times.

As a result of the cruelty and ineptitude of the Polish state's response, local communities and grassroots organizations have been radicalized and taken matters into their own hands, delivering humanitarian relief to those stuck in the forests along the border and documenting this violence. The Grupa Granica network — an informal coalition of 14 NGOs and activists from different backgrounds, including No Border groups, anarchists and other leftists — has emerged in this context.

Many local resident groups are defying martial law conditions, doing what they can to stop the suffering and death that they see brought on the refugees and migrants. Despite the authorities criminalizing relief efforts by implementing martial law in border areas, activists continue to provide relief services and document the situation.

Could you elaborate on the roles of the Belarusian and Polish states in bringing about this situation?

Both are responsible for this crisis in their own way, seeing the migrants as disposable tools, pawns or even as strategic assets in a context of "hybrid warfare." Since late summer 2021, Lukashenko's

regime has cynically exploited the anxiety of EU leaders and societies concerning migration. His government has been issuing visas to thousands of people seeking a route into the EU, only to force them to make irregular entry into Poland, Lithuania or Latvia. Taking advantage of the lack of safe humanitarian corridors and the possibility of applying for international protection, Lukashenko introduced a system of “visas and tickets to Europe.” People would arrive in Minsk with little knowledge of the context and then a network of travel agencies or taxis or military vehicles ensured passage to the border. Once there, they were subjected to extreme violence — beatings, electrocution, rape, starvation, detention and much more. Of course, they had no chance to simply cross over into Polish or EU territory and from the outset have been met with barbaric treatment from the Polish authorities.

The Polish government’s response has been in keeping with the hostility and brutality that has become the norm for Western border regimes — pushbacks, military deployment and the construction of a border wall. It is either unable or unwilling to effectively manage the crisis or to adhere to international humanitarian law. The state’s primary framing of the situation — backed by a complicit Polish media — is of a conspiratorial “[hybrid war](#)” waged by Belarus. This so-called hybrid war is rooted in disinformation and social divisions. Yes, Lukashenko is using the migrants as strategic assets to respond to the EU sanctions. But the Polish state was already more than ready to view migrants in just that way, and this “hybrid war” line gives them the justification to act out that violence.

Following this war narrative, Poland declared a state of emergency in early September, covering three kilometers of the borderzone regions (Podlaskie and Lubelskie). As a result, both Polish and international reporters, activists, organizations and medical aid teams were banned from accessing the border area. In accordance with the Polish constitution, the “Martial Law Zone” (or “Red Zone”) should only have been permitted for three months. However, after that period elapsed, they simply changed the law and have since indefinitely extended martial rule in the area. The result has been the systematic militarization of the border and of daily life in the border region and a policy of zero access to the border area for activists, journalists and relief organizations. Only inhabitants from inside the Red Zone can enter.

By preventing the media and activists from entering, most of the information from the border area is effectively state propaganda. In October, when due to the pressure mounted by activist groups and journalists it was no longer possible to hide the scale of the violence at the border, the Polish government organized a press conference. There, the national and international media were presented with obscene, racist fictions about “predatorial” migrants set on “infiltrating and assaulting” the nation. The absurd level of racist disinformation that has become the norm in Polish political discourse and the wider media defies belief. The overall message of the press conference was that each migrant was male, and some variation of a zoophile, a Russian agent, or a person addicted to drugs. The first fatalities of the pushback policy were alleged to have died as a result of “taking drugs.”

The Polish government’s fear of having its illegal and oppressive methods exposed is shown from the fact that they have even banned Frontex — whose headquarters is in Warsaw — from entering the Red Zone. Fuck Frontex, obviously, but this shows the extent to which the right-wing government is set on maintaining control there and it is indicative of how they will flout the EU in favor of pursuing its nationalist agenda.

Could you offer some broader context for the Polish state response as you view it, historically or in terms of its place within the EU border regime?

Poland’s policy of pushbacks on the Belarusian border is not a recent development; similar practices

were widespread between 2013 and 2015, with accounts of multiple pushbacks at official border crossing points of [Chechens](#) in particular. As has become a general trend along the hostile borders and routes of the EU, the Geneva Convention ceased to be applied in practice — normalizing divisions of who is entitled to safety.

Under the banner of a politics of “security,” Polish state authorities have cynically reinforced racist clichés and bred a permissiveness towards state violence. This also helps to legitimize its own nationalist power plays. State borders have always served the purpose of preserving hierarchies and social divisions on the geopolitical world map. The crisis stoked by Lukashenko opens up an opportunity for the Polish state to assert a harder border and further entrench defensive xenophobic loyalties at home.

Ever since the end of the Communist regime in 1989, Polish migration policies have been founded on international agreements and treaties concerning security measures around the eastern border of the Schengen Area, i.e. border reinforcement and an organized deportation system. Since the Second World War, the country has also been especially insular and homogenous. There has been little public debate around any kind of base idea of multiculturalism, little contact with people from outside Poland and in this environment, a fear of the “Other” has been allowed to thrive. It’s a familiar story.

For years, Politicians and the media have presented migrants as a threat to national security. The xenophobic and racist language is straight out of the neo-Nazi dictionary. Already in 2015, when the “refugee crisis” discourse was gaining more traction across Europe, the Polish authorities spoke publicly and openly about the “parasites” brought by refugees and the necessity of defending the nation-state against so-called rapists and terrorists.

Of course, regardless of whether it’s Poland or elsewhere in Europe, we should remember that the great majority of the world’s refugees and migrants are located in the Global South. Poland’s racist hysteria is just another version of a more generalized European delusion about a “migrant crisis.” And it works to better control society and strengthen the state. All of this illustrates the deep crisis of western political institutions when it comes to assuming responsibility for the Western world’s ongoing history of resource extraction and destabilization in the Middle East and the Global South. Poland is a far cry from an imperialist power, but in joining NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004, it has decisively aligned its interests with that of the more traditional Western powers.

By now, certain basic standards (like the basic refusal to allow people to die) have dangerously shifted. What for many used to be considered an exception — an aberration from the law and exemption from the rule — has now become the norm, and is rarely questioned. We see this in the normalizing of, and habituation to, the rising number of deaths caused by state-imposed policies and cases of missing persons in the borderland area — and the fact that no one is held accountable for these injustices. The dehumanization of the “Other” which is seen as existentially different from the Polish majority — in a society that is largely homogeneous — laid the ground for the violence.

On top of the militarized zone and blocking access to the border, how else has the Polish state responded? There are also plans for the construction of a massive border wall. Can you talk about that?

The decision to introduce a state of emergency was dictated above all by the need to block all possible parties from keeping an eye on the authorities and publicizing the scale of the government-orchestrated brutality and violence. This includes concealing the real number of deaths resulting directly from the policies applied, the number of children being pushed back and the forms of torture to which migrants have been subjected.

To this day (mid-March 2022) the estimated number of confirmed deaths on the Polish side is 19. On the Belarusian side, of course there is no information, because the Belarusian regime's media will not cover it. No one is able to give the right estimation. But from what we have seen, it is not unreasonable to expect to find mass graves on the Polish side.

In addition to pushbacks and martial law, the state has rolled out plans for the construction of a steel wall topped with razorwire all along the Polish-Belarusian border. Construction began on January 25, 2022 and is supposed to take at least several months.

Aside from the humanitarian impact of making the border even more dangerous to cross, we also strongly oppose the plan due to the enormous environmental and economic costs of its construction, which will be irreversible. It will be built along a valuable and protected area, one of the most valuable forests in Europe — the Białowieża Primeval Forest— which has been defended against devastation by activists for years.

As to the economic costs, the government has decided to spend a staggering amount of up to PLN 1.6 billion złotych (approx. 360 million Euros) on an “investment” doomed to failure. It is doomed because no wall has yet stopped the forced migration of people seeking refuge from war, poverty, violence, persecution or torture. All this in times of rapidly rising inflation and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The amount of money being allocated to the wall is more than 10 times higher than this year's budget of the Polish Office for Foreigners. This institution is responsible for conducting proceedings for international protection and managing refugee centers. These centers are where those who do manage to cross end up detained if they enter formal procedures for asylum. They are effectively prisons, with overcrowded rooms, scant medical care, poor food and minimal contact with the wider society. Multiple protests have occurred on the part of those being contained — across genders and age groups depending on the center — demanding dignified treatment.

Instead of such walls and prisons, the government should allocate public funds for the development of institutions, offices, and organizations that have the resources and competence necessary to implement a migration policy that puts the rights, dignity and safety of migrants at the center. These are the principles the grassroots solidarity groups have demonstrated in practice over the past months.

The state has emphasized this hybrid war framing, and made the question of migration an issue of national security. How has this played out in terms of the pressures on groups acting in solidarity?

The Polish state has criminalized people who provide assistance and bring visibility to the issue. By declaring the humanitarian crisis to be a political-military conflict with Belarus, they have created a situation in which even Polish state emergency services are restricted in the border area. Ambulances, medics and the Polish Red Cross, as well as all institutions and international organizations that would be able to find the migrant people and provide them with immediate help are not allowed to enter the Red Zone. Fearing political backlash, these organizations stay within the rules set forth by the government and thus do not apply enough pressure for the rules to change.

All of the Polish NGOs that are part of Grupa Granica have declared that they want to enter the Red Zone, as have some international ones. But the government doesn't allow it. The response is clear: according to the new law, “it's a no-go zone. We need to defend the country.” Those who are supporting the migrants are “useful idiots” in Lukaszienka's hybrid war and they also pose a threat to the security of the country.

Parallel to what you see elsewhere with the repression of solidarity, volunteers are facing charges for smuggling, supporting illegal migration and more. Simple acts like providing tea or blankets to hypothermic migrants are criminalized. All access to the border zone is forbidden, even if a person is in danger of death — calling for an ambulance after weeks in the forest eating leaves and drinking water from the river.

However, many in Polish society have realized that a humane response to the situation at the border is a basic duty. That is why we have seen the emergence of coalitions like Grupa Granica, which would have never existed in a different context. Different NGOs, activists and local inhabitants are cooperating together and are determined to continue to intervene and respond practically to the crisis. Likewise, only self-organized structures and temporary coalitions like our own can force politicians and put on the pressure for any changes in policy.

The real heroes are those women, men and children who have suffered wars and who-knows-what other repressions in their own countries or along their way here. Maintaining solidarity, support and forms of cooperation to make all violent border mechanisms visible — this is our basic duty.

What has changed primarily since the invasion of Ukraine?

In short, the situation at the Polish-Belarusian border since the mass exit from Ukraine has not improved in any way. It is well documented that there has been a discriminatory process for receiving people that have been forced to flee Ukraine. There is little that we can add to this fact. We still continue with our work, even as the state escalates its criminalization of solidarity. For those at the Belarusian border, they are still faced with the same reality of being stuck there — pushed forward and pushed back — denied any safety.

On the one hand, with the mass exodus from Ukraine, the Polish state changed its policy to allow for easier crossings. This allowed for a faster escape from the war and obviously has shown that an entirely different approach to migration is possible. In the pictures from the border area we can see soldiers and the army helping people, Polish and foreign NGOs providing basic help. In reality the most important work is being done by society (individuals or NGOs, not only from Poland but from different countries as well. A lot of them are self-organized and working for free.) This network of solidarity cannot hold out under such prolonged pressure, without power and tools for social change. Frustrations are rising, because at the same time the Polish authorities are using the situation in Ukraine for political purposes — to erase the history and daily violence along the border with Belarus and show the world that Poland “welcomes refugees.”

Indeed, in the international arena, Poland is now largely perceived as a country that is providing aid and sanctuary to refugees. And this is not true, because it is a very superficial aid based on racist divisions. This policy is an expression of systemic racism that divides people on the move into those who are deserving of help or basic rights and those who aren't.

Along the border with Belarus there are still huge numbers of people who have no other choice and — despite the freezing cold, the lack of shelter or food or medical care — are still trying to cross. Today, every pushback is a risk to their health and life. A lot of people who have been trying to enter Poland since last autumn are still trying. They spent the winter time at a warehouse in a former Belarusian military base, or in Minsk or Grodno and still they are fighting for a better life in the best way they see fit — by trying to get to Europe.

So long as a political discourse rooted in lies and dehumanization is left unchallenged, the violent policies that follow from it will continue, with the complicity of wider Polish society. In response to this racist state violence, we must intervene and organize, building structures of support in

collaboration with people on the move. Together we will continue to fight back.

Grupa Granica is a coalition of humanitarian aid NGOs and autonomous groups that has been providing support to people trapped at the Poland-Belarus border and documenting the situation there since August 2021.

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P.S.

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