



### The paradox of Polish migration policy

*Poland has opened its border with Ukraine to war refugees. Not so at another border, with Belarus.*

Since February 24th, more than 4.5 million people have entered Poland fleeing from Ukraine. This influx of war refugees met an open border and an unprecedented grassroots response.

Citizens organised help: they took families home, brought food, offered transport. According to opinion polls from the beginning of March, not only were the vast majority of Poles in favour of providing Ukraine with humanitarian, financial and military help, but also they supported taking in more Ukrainian refugees.

This solidarity reached beyond political animosities. The Polish populist far right, whose prominent figures were in the past sympathetic towards the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, and questioned the extent of Russian war crimes in Ukraine, were boycotted by media outlets.

The outburst of Russian imperialism also proved formative for bilateral Polish-Ukrainian relations, severely scarred by their history. In recent years, the two nations have grown closer with the migration of Ukrainian labour to Poland. Facing a sudden threat together sealed this relationship and brought reconciliation.

During his visit to Kyiv in May, the Polish president, Andrzej Duda, called for a new Polish-Ukrainian treaty on good neighbourliness and declared support for Ukraine's European Union membership. »The Polish-Ukrainian border should connect, not divide us«, he said.

### That other border

Yet Poland has another eastern border, further north, which war refugees have also tried to reach. The situation there is very different.

Since June 2021, many citizens of Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, Sudan, Eritrea, Gambia, Cameroon and even Cuba have been trying to cross to Poland from Belarus, in the hope of receiving asylum in Europe. The actions of Polish border guards—regular pushbacks and repeated denial of access to non-governmental organisations providing legal and medical help—have caused outrage at home and abroad.

The Polish government's official line is that the Belarusian regime is pursuing a hybrid war against Poland, weaponising migration to destabilise the country and the EU. Clashes between

Polish law enforcement and refugees are presented as provocations orchestrated by the »Belarusian dictator«.

The narrative adopted by the Polish authorities does recognise that some of the people trapped at the border with Belarus are indeed fleeing wars or life-threatening situations in their countries of origin. But it still considers this »illegal migration« and frames it as a matter of national security and violation of the territorial integrity of Poland.

The Belarus president, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, is certainly playing a cynical game, misleading those desperate to reach Europe by issuing tourist visas to them. Yet what causes alarm is the response of the Polish authorities—violating human rights and limiting access to information in the border region (an official press centre was only established in December 2021, half a year into the crisis). In February 2022, around 20 migrant deaths were confirmed, the real toll remaining unknown. In the first half of this year, Polish border control encountered more than 5,500 attempted crossings.

On the last day of June, the completion of a 186-kilometre barrier on the Polish-Belarusian border was proudly proclaimed, with the prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, visiting the site. Thirty-three years after the fall of the Berlin wall, Poland has erected its own border fence.

### **Politicisation of movement**

One country, two contrasting images. The common denominator is the politicisation of population movement. In the past, the government led by Law and Justice (PiS), together with allies such as the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, vocally opposed the idea of EU quotas for relocating Syrian and Iraqi refugees.

At the height of the influx in 2015, the *de facto* Polish leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, claimed refugees brought parasites and protozoa. The following year, the then prime minister, Beata Szydło, defended the Polish position on rejecting refugee quotas by asserting that one million labour migrants from Ukraine were »war refugees« from the Russia-captured Donbas region. In 2018, apocalyptic images of a Poland set in flames by foreign hordes of migrants, used in the PiS campaign for regional elections, proved too much for the general public. Yet harm was done: the moral panic against non-European arrivals continues to be activated.

This intense politicisation is a result of a cold calculation. Polish society does not generally support an open-door policy. According to polls before the invasion of Ukraine, more people are against taking war refugees than in favour (48 *versus* 41 per cent), and even the latter prefer temporary stays, not permanent asylum.

Indeed, since the first wave of selfless help towards Ukrainian refugees, most Poles consider their right to remain conditional on gainful employment, regardless of whether the war continues. High inflation and uncertainty provoke a turn to economic nativism.

As for the situation at the Belarusian border, the majority of Poles (52 per cent) simply do not want the authorities to grant asylum to people stuck there. Prejudice makes Polish society differentiate between victims of violence, in terms of the sympathy they are deemed to deserve.

### **Recovery funds**

Meanwhile, the Polish government has been exploiting the war in the EU's neighbourhood. Undoubtedly, the immediate humanitarian help and welfare for Ukrainian refugees, as well as the military support delivered by Poland, have entailed considerable government expenditure. But the dramatic circumstances and the generous response of Polish society have been used as a lever in confronting the EU institutions over the recovery funds for Poland frozen under the rule-of-law mechanism. The Council of the EU last month decided that the funds would be released if »milestones and targets« were met by Poland.

The EU faces a dilemma — to act in line with its values or be »pragmatic«. The choice it finally makes will weigh heavily on its future.

*Article was first published on 12th July 2022 on the website of Social Europe: <https://socialeurope.eu/the-paradox-of-polish-migration-policy>*

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