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## **Migration Crisis on the Polish-Belarusian Border (2021–2022) From a Humanitarian and Human Rights Perspective**

### **Abstract**

The aim of this article is an attempt to answer the questions: how should Poland's policy towards the crisis on the border with Belarus be assessed from the humanitarian and human rights perspective? How should a country, in this case Poland, behave towards those crossing the border of that country, in a situation of deceitful importation and the subsequent use of innocent immigrants/ refugees as tools for hostile actions against a neighboring state by the authoritarian regime of Belarus?

The article also attempts to answer a question about the challenges faced by non-governmental organisations and the important role they play in a situation where state policy is at variance with international law and basic ethical principles whereby human rights are violated.

The analysis of the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border, based on the assumption that each state has a duty to protect its border, but at the same time it has a duty to protect human life and to make sure that the law is respected on that border, allows for the conclusion that Polish policy is in conflict with international law and basic ethical principles. The article also shows the challenges faced by civic organisations and the very important role that civic organisations play in this situation.

**Keywords:** Migration Crisis, Belarusian Border, Humanitarian Perspective, Human Rights

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## Introduction

Christopher Bertram, in his book: *Do States Have the Right to Exclude Immigrants?* (Bertram, 2018), poses the question, do states have the right to expel immigrants from their territory? It seems that citing this author's dilemma may be useful when trying to assess Polish policy towards the migration crisis, or more precisely the humanitarian crisis, on the border with Belarus, which was deliberately provoked by Alexander Lukashenko as retaliation for EU sanctions. Since mid-2021, the Belarusian regime has embarked on a large-scale campaign to bring in immigrants from Asia, the Middle East and Africa, promising to help them reach Western Europe.

According to an Amnesty International Report, tens of thousands of people, mainly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, who were promised "help" to cross the border into Poland, Lithuania or Latvia, found themselves in Belarus for a very long period of time. Polish authorities reported nearly 40,000 attempts to cross the border in 2021. After a pause due to the colder winter months, more migrants and refugees again attempted to cross into Poland in early 2022, encountering barbed wire fences and multiple and repeated pushbacks by the Polish Border Guard (Amnesty International Report, 2022, p. 5).

Lukashenko's actions are, in a way, reminiscent of the method used against the United States in 1980 by Fidel Castro, a dictator close to him in ideology and personality, who 'pushed' not only his political opponents to Florida, but also emptied prisons of criminals and psychiatric hospitals of patients in order to threaten the stability of the region (Griffin, 2022).

Of course, we are not comparing in this case the people who were used by Fidel Castro and Lukashenko, only their methods. Within two months, around 120,000 Cubans arrived in Miami, Florida. At first they instilled fear in the people of Florida and Castro triumphed, but in the end "the city rose from its economic collapse, racked up billions in debt, and ceased to be primarily a place for rich American renters to live. The Cubans changed the demographic proportions, made Miami a largely Spanish-speaking metropolis, but also a prosperous one, the window of the US to the Caribbean Sea and Latin American countries. The crisis caused by Fidel Castro became Florida's opportunity. The dictator died and Miami lives better than before the wave of refugees. Disaster was expected and success was achieved" (Smoleński, 2022).

Comparing Lukashenko's actions to Fidel Castro is not entirely accurate, because we do not have people on the border who the dictator wanted to get rid of, but people, often families with small children, who

themselves left their own country because of the prevailing conflicts, human rights violations and poverty.

The aim of this article is to try to answer the questions: what was the Polish policy towards the crisis on the Belarusian border from the humanitarian and human rights perspective? How should a country, in this case Poland, behave towards those crossing the Polish border in a situation of deceitful importation and subsequent use of innocent immigrants/refugees as tools for hostile actions against a neighboring country by an authoritarian Belarusian regime? The provocative question posed at the beginning of the Introduction from the title of Christopher Bertram's publication, 'do states have the right to expel immigrants', may prompt a deeper reflection on the treatment of immigrants/refugees in Białowieża (East Poland).

The main source materials in this article, apart from the Amnesty International Report (Poland: Cruelty not Compassion, At Europe's other Borders, 2022), are the Report of the Granica Group (GG) (Klaus, 2021) and materials on the situation at the border published by organisations and associations cooperating with the GG. The Granica Group is a social movement helping forced migrants who have found themselves on the territory of Poland. The movement monitors cases of human rights violations. It works closely with the following entities: Nomada. Association for the Integration of a Multicultural Society; Association for Legal Intervention; Homo Faber; Polish Migration Forum; Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights; Salam Lab (Peace Laboratory); Open House; Halina Nieć Legal Aid Centre; Chlebem i Solą; Uchodźcy.info; RATS Agency; Conflict Kitchen Foundation; Strefa WolnoSłowa Foundation and Przystanek "Świetlica" for refugee children.

It is worth mentioning that as part of the project "Social Archive of Humanitarian Crisis" funded by a grant from the Batory Foundation, a series of articles is being written presenting selected stories of migrants from the Arab Middle East countries – Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Yemen – trying to get to Europe through the Belarusian-Polish border (Centrum Archiwistyki Społecznej, 2022).

This article consists of three parts. The first presents the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border on the basis of the Amnesty International Report (2022), the Granica Group Report (2021) and current media news. The second chapter analyses the Polish Government reaction to the crisis on the border with Belarus in the light of international and EU law documents. The third chapter focuses on assessing Poland's reaction to the crisis on the border with Belarus from a humanitarian and human rights perspective.

## **Situation on the Polish-Belarusian Border From the Beginning of the Crisis Until Mid-2022 Inclusive**

The presentation of the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border is necessarily incomplete. Already at the beginning of its appearance, the Polish authorities introduced a state of emergency, preventing or severely hampering the work of journalists. The same was and is true for NGOs trying to monitor and help people trapped between one border and the other. Nevertheless, situations have been documented which make it possible to reconstruct, at least in a limited way, the experiences of those there.

An example of this is the open letter that Murad Ismael – a Yazidi – wrote to the Polish public on this issue. Here is an extract from it: “As I write this letter to you, Polish people, my heart is filled with fear about what may have happened to a group of refugees who have been abandoned on the border, in the wilderness, in sub-zero temperatures, for over two weeks. The group, which includes children, women and elderly people, sent me a plea for help via social media on Saturday, 9 October. On the same day, a young Yazidi man who was asking for help sent me a video of the group. It included people from the Yazidi minority and Kurds from Iraq and Syrian Arabs. Some of the Yazidis in the group had previously spent seven years in camps in Iraq” (Klimowicz, 2021).

Both I and many people who saw this testimony and the images of terrified young children and elderly people were devastated. For example one elderly Yazidi couple had not been in contact with their family in Iraq for almost two weeks (Klimowicz, op.cit.).

According to research contained in the Amnesty International Report, foreigners who arrived in Belarus were “lured by attractive travel packages” containing information about the possibility of easily reaching the Europe of their dreams. Upon arrival in Belarus, they were given instructions on how to go to the Belarus-Poland border and what to do next. It seemed that all they had to do was walk a few kilometers to the border, cross it and wait for further transport to their destination countries. However, the reality turned out to be far from the promises of the organisers of the “excursions”. This is clearly shown in this extract:

“After entering the ‘zone’, often with difficulty and after paying the Belarusian border guards, people had to make their way to the Polish border fences, avoiding capture by the Belarusian border guards, who often forcibly transported people to ‘assembly points’, where they violently forced them to attempt to cross the Polish border in groups. After inevitable pushback by Polish border guards or capture by Belarusian border guards,

people were forcibly detained at ‘assembly points’ for days or weeks along with dozens or even hundreds of others, without food, water or shelter, and then brutally and repeatedly forced to repeatedly cross into Poland, beaten, chased by police dogs and forced to cross frozen rivers” (Amnesty International, 2022, p. 5).

According to Amnesty International, some of the refugees made 20 to 30 or even more attempts to cross the border. Although many had experienced torture and persecution in their own countries, they were completely unprepared for the experience they faced at the Polish-Belarusian border:

“I believed I was building a safer future for my daughters somewhere in Europe, but if I had known I would end up in the forest for 53 days, living worse than an animal, begging for food and melting snow to drink water, I would never have left Syria,” 36-year-old Khafiz from Damascus told Amnesty International during an interview on 15 March 2022, after leaving a guarded detention centre for foreigners in Poland (Amnesty International, *op.cit.*).

### **Poland’s Attitude Towards the Migration Crisis on the Border with Belarus in the Light of International and EU Law Documents**

It is hardly surprising that in the international law on the admission of immigrants and refugees there is no case study that appeared as a result of Lukashenka’s policy, although, as noted in the Introduction, the idea of ‘punishing’ migrants was applied in 1980 by Fidel Castro against the United States. Nevertheless, if we take a look at the basic documents of international and EU law on immigrants and refugees, we can find the basic principles enabling the assessment of Poland’s response to the migration crisis.

The Geneva Convention of 28 July 1951 is a continuation of agreements concluded in the interwar period within the framework of the League of Nations and after the war – the UN Charter and the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (10 December 1948). The preparation of the Geneva Convention was a need arising from the massive population movements during and after the Second World War. It is estimated that during the six years of the Second World War, almost 60 million Europeans were forcibly relocated. This number was more than 10 times greater than the migration during and after the First World War. The Convention was therefore drafted to deal with the hundreds of thousands of refugees who, after the war, did not want to return to their countries because of the Yalta division of Europe.

It is widely believed that the Geneva Convention represented the first international agreement covering the most relevant aspects of the refugee issue.

**According to the Convention:**

A refugee is a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country, or who has no nationality and, being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of similar events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to that country (art. 1, para. 2) (Balicki, 2012, pp. 156–157).

**Non-refoulement:**

The Convention obliges States not to expel a refugee lawfully present in their territory on grounds other than national security or public order (Art. 32). It guarantees that a State shall not expel or return a refugee to the frontiers of its territory where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. However, this does not apply to a refugee who is a danger to the security of the state or society (Art. 33) (Balicki, 2012).

With time, the Geneva Convention of 1951 was incorporated into the law of the European Union, as can be clearly seen in the findings of the European Council Summit in Nice (2000) creating the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. The Charter contains two articles dealing explicitly with the issue of refugees – Article 18, which speaks of the right to asylum, and Article 19, which prohibits collective expulsion and extradition in specific cases.

Article 18: Right to asylum: The right to asylum shall be guaranteed, respecting the provisions of the Geneva Convention of 28 July 1951 and the Protocol of 31 January 1967 relating to the status of refugees and in accordance with the Treaty establishing the European Community.

Article 19: Protection in the event of removal, expulsion or extradition:

(1) Collective expulsions shall be prohibited.

(2) No one may be removed or expelled to a State or surrendered to a State where there is a serious risk that he or she would be subjected to the death penalty, torture or other inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the Charter has become a document binding on Member States and plays an even greater role in the protection of refugees in the European Union. It guides the drafting of asylum and immigration legislation and the work of the Commission in this area (Gondek, 2003, p. 209).

In turn, the Laeken European Council (14–15 December 2001) dealt with many important issues relating to asylum and immigration policy. The European Council committed itself to adopting a common asylum and immigration policy on the basis of the Tampere conclusions as soon as possible, striking the necessary balance between the protection of refugees, in accordance with the principles of the 1951 Geneva Convention, their legitimate aspirations for a better life, and the capacity of the Union and its Member States to take in third-country nationals (39).

The Seville European Council (21–22 June 2002) expressed the will to press ahead resolutely with the Tampere program to create an area of freedom, security and justice in the European Union and the need to develop a common Union policy in the separate but closely related fields of asylum and immigration. The handling of migratory flows in cooperation with countries of origin and transit, and the inclusion of migration issues in the work of future Presidencies, were considered to be a priority (27).

Efforts to manage migratory flows together must balance a policy of integrating immigrants in accordance with international law and conventions, in particular the 1951 Geneva Convention, with determined action to combat illegal immigration and human trafficking (28). It is important to provide refugees with immediate and effective protection, while at the same time putting in place measures to prevent abuse of the system and to ensure the speedier return to their home country of those whose asylum applications have been rejected (29) (Balicki, 2021, *op.cit.*, p. 43).

The Lisbon Treaty was signed by EU leaders in 2007 and ratified in 2009. Article 78: states that the Union shall develop a common policy on asylum, subsidiary protection and temporary protection with a view to offering appropriate status to any third-country national requiring international protection and ensuring compliance with the principle of non-refoulement. This policy must be in accordance with the Geneva Convention of 28 July 1951 and the Protocol of 31 January 1967 relating to the status of refugees, as well as with other relevant treaties (Wersja Skonsolidowana Traktatu o funkcjonowaniu Unii Europejskiej, 2008).

**Polish Law, Regulating Humanitarian Protection:  
The Act on Foreigners (Legal status updated on  
29.05.2022):**

Journal of Laws 2021.0.2354 i.e. Act of 12 December 2013 on foreigners

Chapter 8. Control of the legality of the foreigners' stay on the territory of the Republic of

Poland and the foreigner's obligation to return

Chapter 3. Consent for residence for humanitarian reasons and consent for tolerated stay

Article 348. Act on foreigners

Conditions for granting a permit for humanitarian residence:

A foreigner shall be granted a permit for residence on humanitarian grounds on the territory of the Republic of Poland if the obligation to return:

1) may be effected only to a country in which, within the meaning of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, signed in Rome on 4 November 1950:

(a) his right to life, liberty and security of person would be threatened or

(b) would be liable to be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, or (...).

2) would violate his/her right to family or private life, as defined in the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, signed in Rome on 4 November 1950,

3) would violate the rights of the child, as set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989, to the extent that it would seriously endanger the child's psycho-physical development (LexLege 2022; Chlebny, 2019; Dąbrowski, 2011).

It follows from this summary presentation of international and EU law on the issue of non-refoulement of immigrants and refugees that Poland's policy towards persons arriving in Belarus and attempting to cross the Polish border is in clear breach of this law. Under the Geneva Convention and EU law there is an obligation to accept and examine an application for refugee status. If there are no grounds for granting refugee status, it may be deported to the country of origin, if it is a safe country, but not to Belarus, which is not such a country.



## **The Polish Reaction to the Belarusian Border Crisis From a Human Rights Perspective**

Poland's reaction to the crisis on the border with Belarus is not, however, only about the violation of international and EU migration law, but also about the human dimension, and one could even say that it is about taking actions that are contrary to the values of European civilisation.

These actions are all the more incomprehensible because, as we know, migration law, which governs a very sensitive human sphere, provides for the possibility, in certain cases, of granting so-called humanitarian protection. Why has this not been used? As *Wprost* magazine reported, at the end of September 2021, Polish services took illegal migrants with children to the border, who had earlier been seen near the Border Guard post in Michałów, leaving them in an unspecified place. In mid-October, information was published by Tomasz Molga in "Wirtualna Polska", citing Iraqi Faruq Khalaf Hasan, that the wanted children were camping with other children and twenty elderly women in the forest, starving on the border strip near Białowieża ("We are in the cold forest, some of us are sick, especially the elderly women and children. We hardly have any food"). They cannot turn back to Belarus because the guards do not allow them. When they tried, they were beaten by the Belarusian guards. They cannot go to Poland either, because the border guards there do not allow them. They also have no chance to return from Belarus to Iraq (Molga, 2021).

In the photos presented by Tomasz Molga in "Wirtualna Polska", they are 10-year-old Emad Ali Saado and Thamr Kamal Khlaf. There is also 8-year-old Danila Dakhil Sado among them. The youngest child is only a few months old Malak Mahir Sado, who according to the man was unwell. According to Faruq, the member of the group, at the border have been a total of 150 people. Some of the people have been stuck there for 32 days. "We need political asylum anywhere. It does not matter to us whether it is in Poland or Germany. We were already caught by the Polish Border Guard. They didn't even take documents or fingerprints from us, they just pushed us back across the border. Polish policemen or guards are watching us all the time. I can see them even now, they are standing nearby. They are watching whether we will try to cross the border again. We are afraid of them (...)" (Molga, op.cit.).

The description of this situation immediately raises the question: why is this happening? How to explain it? It is not about the attitude of the Border Guard, because it is a service which only carries out orders from the central authority.

Christopher Bertram, mentioned at the beginning, says that immigration is one of the most controversial topics in politics today. In the UK, concerns about immigration contributed to the vote to leave the European Union in June 2016. In the United States, migration from Mexico and Central America had a major impact on Donald Trump's victory in the presidential election. In 2015, forced migration, in the form of hundreds of thousands of people seeking safety from conflicts in Syria and other parts of the Middle East, became central to the European political agenda before the election, eagerly exploited by populist politicians, especially in Hungary and Poland (Bertram, *op.cit.*, pp. 1–2).

Bertram notes, despite deep differences on both facts and principles, politicians and commentators from the populist right, the 'neoliberal' centre and the traditional left share the assumption that immigration policy should be determined by what 'we' need. The question he poses is whether the state has the right to exclude immigrants and whether individuals have the right to migrate and start new lives in countries other than those in which they were born or of which they are citizens?

Politicians, commentators and opinion makers who present the immigration debate in terms of costs and benefits for 'us' assume that the state (and democratic electorates) have the right to shape immigration policy as they see fit (Bertram, *op.cit.*).

Is this really the case? Is it possible to view newcomers from countries of extreme poverty, undemocratic states where human rights are violated or there are constant conflicts, as people who should be accepted or deported, only in terms of their suitability for our country? Worst of all, however, are the behaviours that insult basic moral standards and humanity in "civilised" Europe. This issue was already present in the migration crisis of 2015–2016, when thousands of people drowned trying to reach Europe. No wonder Pope Francis described the Mediterranean as a great graveyard and while on the island of Lampedusa he eloquently recalled the words from Genesis: "Cain, where is your brother?" (Balicki, 2021, p. 291).

## **Conclusions**

The aim of this article was to try to answer the question: how to assess the Polish policy towards the crisis on the border with Belarus in 2021–2022 from the humanitarian and human rights perspective? In the situation of deceitful importation and subsequent use of innocent immigrants/refugees as tools for hostile actions against a neighbouring state by the authoritarian Belarusian regime, how should a country, in this case Poland, act towards those crossing its border?

The article also attempted to draw attention to the question of the challenges faced by NGOs and the important role they play when state policy contradicts international law and violates basic ethical principles and human rights. As the Border Group points out, “it is not fair to present the two values – protecting human rights and protecting state security – as contradictory or mutually exclusive. This is not the case. Every state has a duty to protect its border, but at the same time it has a duty to protect human life and to seek to ensure that the law is respected on that very border” (Klaus, 2021, p. 29).

It is also difficult to dispute another opinion of this Group, ‘putting up walls on borders makes hostile countries even more hostile’. This results in increased violence and human trafficking. Walls do not bring security or a sense of comfort – neither to the inhabitants, nor to the migrants, nor to the neighbours on the other side of the wall. It is worth remembering that Belarusians have needed help for many years and have benefited from this help in Poland. The Wall additionally traps these people (Klaus, op.cit.).

Christopher Bertram, author of *Do States Have the Right to Exclude Immigrants?* – reflects on the responsibilities of citizens of a state whose authorities do not deal with immigrants and refugees as they should. He cites, among other examples, the infamous Greek islands (for example Lesbos).

Given the willingness of states to criminalise and punish the actions of those who help illegal migrants, one can understand, in his opinion, individuals who do not want to expose themselves to such punishments, limiting their actions to protests against injustice or choosing the usual political means. All the more praiseworthy, according to him, are the attitudes of ordinary citizens who help unfairly treated foreigners.

Finally, it is worth quoting the statement of the founder of the Polish Migration Forum, currently MEP Janina Ochojska on the crisis at the border, entitled: “A wall on the border as a symbol of double standards”. It is impossible not to notice how diametrically different is the approach to refugees coming from Ukraine and those on the Polish-Belarusian border. As Janina Ochojska says, the latter “have become hostages”. She emphasises that the wall built on the border has separated those in need from access to medical and legal assistance and information. Janina Ochojska states explicitly that what is happening on the Polish-Belarusian border is a violation of the Geneva Convention (...). “Holes have already been cut in the wall, undermines have been made – because nothing can stop people saving their lives and their children’s lives”. According to Janina Ochojska, there is no justification for this particularly cruel solution. It is

important that all cases of violence at the border are documented. “This must not be forgotten. It must be constantly brought to the attention of those in power and spoken of in the European Parliament. (...) This is not the most important topic for the EU, even though it concerns human life – a lot needs to change here”. A proposal to solve the problem is to use new technologies. “In the age of electronic security, it is possible to protect the border in a modern way. (...) The EU border in particular is the most sensitive border, so it should not be guarded by primitive means but by modern ones” (Pikuła, 2022).

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