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Migration management – A comment on the last 12 months at the border.

No Borders Team



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The border in the game of politics

It's been a year since migration once again became the most discussed topic in Poland. We have not seen so many important events unfold in almost a decade.

At the anniversary we can follow plenty of summaries of all kinds of organizations and groups that are in some way linked to the situation at the border, or just want to use a popular topic solely to promote themselves in the public eye. Summaries are given by everyone – government authorities, foundations, NGOs, state and “opposition” media, and the media which declare themselves as independent.

Can you base on that a picture of what has been happening in the last twelve months? Yes, probably. Can you better understand the broader picture of what's happening in the world and why? Unfortunately, much less so.

The border, similarly to other aspects of our reality, is being appropriated by two dominating narratives that have dictated the political discourse for more than ten years. Both these visions are, in fact, two sides of the same coin and they both lead us into the abyss.

On the one hand, the government, using primitive social engineering tools, is feeding us with the most disgusting, racist propaganda. On the other, the opposition – known for its stubborn implementation of neoliberal policies created by Sachs and Balcerowicz, that marked the first two decades of post-communist Poland (privatisation, welfare cuts, deconstruction of collectivity in favour of a consumer society) – is displaying a cult-like belief in the European Union, its institutions and officials.

These narratives completely dominated politics in the last couple of years, leaving no space for any kind of radical perspective. As long as we don't get out of this self-replicating circle we won't be able to answer the questions about what is going on and what will our future be like.

War on the people on the move

We don't intend to discuss whether the government's approach is appropriate or not. It's doubtful anyone reading this would believe anything Anna Michalska says. Further in the text we will explore how the government reacted to changing situation and how it shaped it across last years.

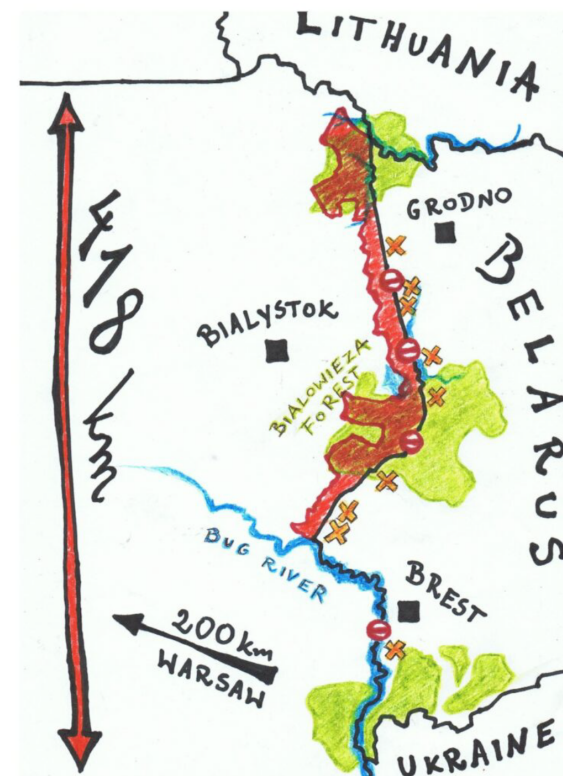
Politics of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice Party) regarding migration has been more or less the same since 2015, when the first battle on migrants started. We remember well the racist attacks manufactured by the government media, reproducing racist clichés straight from the history of the III Reich, so we didn't expect the authorities to react in any other way this time. Situation in Usnarz Górny, despite its dread, showed how big a decision paralysis was created by a few weakened people on the verge of life and death. Several days in mud and rain with no way to deliver food or drink. No one who could make a decision and take responsibility for it. Relaying to the ministry questions like can you give a thirsty person a bottle of water. On the one hand, soldiers jittery during their inhuman work, on the other, soldiers pouring out water in front of those who haven't drunk in over a dozen hours. Full circle. But we knew it was just the beginning.

When faced with such suffering for the first time, you can't pass by it indifferently, it has to make some impression. It was a time for human impulses. Later comes something else – normalization of suffering, death, human segregation. What many of us have seen before at the borders between Greece and Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary or in Calais. After this, no one asks "how is that possible" – we know that forces of the state kill and look at death without emotion. Neutralization is our bodies' normal reaction. And if we add to that power, possibility to excessive violence and impunity, we get a perfect for the state myrmidon. No one who has been at the border will ever wonder again how death camps were created and how genocides start.

Implementing the state of emergency was a reaction to how much media coverage Usnarz got. Women and children laying in mud, guarded by soldiers with rifles – such images don't make the authorities look good.

It is not about turning our heads away from the suffering happening on our backyard. On the contrary, we should be “grateful” that it is so visible and in plain sight.

Because when people suffer far away, it’s easier for us to forget and pretend that we didn’t know...



the exclusion zone

Thus, the “zone” was created. Despite the fact that Polish law allows to implement a state of emergency maximum for three months, the area on the PL-BY border was cut off for ten months, in which people making the crossing in the forests were left on their own.

There were hunts for them – soldiers, fascists from territorial defense units, dogs, drones, thermal imaging devices. Hunger games, safe game of war for boys and girls in uniforms. Sounds of barking dogs blasted from police speakers to scare even more the children in the forests. In the middle of all of it, people from nearby villages and those who came a very long way trying to find people in the wilderness before the worst happens.

All it takes to devalue human life is drawing a line on the map.

All major organisations with huge budgets, who like to brag about protecting human rights, turned out to be ineffective, and incapable to act.

What’s left is grassroots, informal actions. We were there together – together we experienced pushbacks of our new friends met in the forests; when we were receiving news about more corpses found in the wilderness; We were there with frightened children, raped women, tortured men, many of which were forced to sell their organs to make this journey. We were together, when the government decided to build a wall along the border – because what else could such government come up with?

We were together in Krosno Odrzańskie, protesting against detaining people in overcrowded cells simply because of their passports. That’s where the authorities who feel hate and fear towards any sign of solidarity, used violence against us – several people were hospitalised. Did any officer face consequences? Of course not. Instead, ten of us are facing charges of assaulting a police officer – a standard accusation in Poland.

We were together in all those situations, sharing this major burden and getting closer to each other. Such experiences allowed us to see a completely new side of each other. A beautiful side.

That’s why we want to wholeheartedly thank all of you, with whom we worked along the last year. Regardless whether it was in the forests, detention camps, looking for missing people or fighting this fucked up system in courts. Grassroots organising and being independent were our strengths and we succeeded in creating something not long ago many considered to be impossible.

We find ourselves in a situation in which there is simply no other solution – looking for answers in the current political framework can only lead to wars, encroaching totalitarianism, new forms of slavery and life reduced to a mere fight for survival.

Yes – moving away from the current system seems not realistic, but it is our only chance. Actions that fail to address this wider context cannot bring any durable, long-term results. That’s why, on the contrary to many individuals and organisations and despite this isn’t exactly the message that guarantees social media outreach, we are not afraid to say it. We often hear that society is not ready for change, that it is not even ready to discuss any alternatives. Following this way of thinking narrows down our capability to reactive, performative acts that further reinforce the current system. Following this logic, we treat people like fools – but this is exactly the essence of charity and humanitarian aid. Leaving aside the moral concerns arising from this type of activities, they will never bring any real change. This is not their purpose.

We are not proposing simple solutions, because the problems we are facing are extremely complex. The post-capitalist reality wants us to believe that every obstacle can be overcome if we “work hard enough”. It makes us think that everything can be solved in an easy, painless way.

We don’t have ready-made solutions or simple answers – we must work them out together. It is only possible if we keep communicating with each other, avoid treating people as someone to be protected from the truth, to be kept in their bubble of ignorance. Also, we can’t close ourselves off from the broader context of the struggle and shy away from actions deemed “not realistic” by the rest of the “civil society”. Because we all deserve better.

This (anti)report shouldn’t be treated as an accurate sum-up of our activities and actions. It would be impossible to squeeze all of the things that happened during this year into one text. Also, we are not interested in doing that. For us, as witnesses of certain political and historical processes that unfolded on the border, it is more important to open a discussion about what kind of actions can bring real benefits and change. Acting blindly, schematically can only lead to further burn-outs and disappointments.

Let’s not get enclosed into a narrative in which people on the move are seen as the root of the problem; let’s not believe, opportunistically, that making “return migration” policies safer will solve the situation we are facing.

Epilog

During a recent chat with an activist engaged in the struggles against deforestations, they stated that they don't see themselves protecting nature, but rather saving humans. A destroyed ecosystem will swallow us up first only to quickly regrow – this time without us. It is simple – by caring for our environment, we prolong our existence on Earth.

The analogy to migration is obvious – by helping people on the move we are saving our- selves as well.

The consequences of global warming are going to displace more and more people, forcing them to migrate from their places of origin. What we are witnessing now is just a fraction of what is awaiting us in the near future. Keeping up with the current production rates is impos- sible. Maintaining a quality of life to which we are used to will soon become unrealistic, that's why we have to start reconsidering our approach to the future we want to live in. Incoming mass migrations will change this world forever. Tomorrow, we might become the refugees hunted down by border guards.

Our only hope lies in imagining a world in which we can coexist with each other, initiating processes of wealth redistribution and putting an end to (post)colonial policies based on extraction and expropriation. This cannot be done without deeper social, political changes, in which intersectional struggles are of crucial importance.

The situation of the people on the move reflects, and cannot be separated, from the current global crisis of the capitalist system. Already, we can see many places becoming uninhabita- ble because of droughts, soil exhaustion and poisoning.[7] Despite that, there are still mil- lions of people living in these deprived areas. We have no right to tell them to “stay home”, without any perspectives for them and their children. Forced “return migrations” often mean condemning people to hunger, poverty, violence, illness, political repressions and death.

Putting an end to the current system, based on unlimited accumulation and exploitation of people and resources might not seem realistic. It surely won't be a gradual passage to a new era, in which we'll all live in peace. It will rather be a painful process, especially for those from the Global North who never suffered hunger or known the violence of the everyday. We will have to give up the comforts and privileges which we have treated as innate for far too long.

The zone was revoked, the wall built. Number of people crossing the borders sometimes goes up, sometimes down. The media forgot about the topic – there is war in Ukraine, there's inflation, and there are celebrities and their problems. Meanwhile, you should know that the eastern route will stay open for good. Łukaszenko, bringing people from the Middle East and Africa, surely was to some extent implementing Putin's plan regarding destabilizing Poland in the context of invasion on Ukraine. It isn't the only reason for his actions. Having a direct border with the European Union he wanted to have safeguards of his absolute power other than the Russian ones, unreliable in the perspective of war. Like other dictatorships bordering the EU he used the same old trick – he showed he can open his borders, but he can also make it much harder to cross it, of course at a cost.

Other dictatorships around the EU play the same politics. Turkey ruled by Erdogan – second largest NATO army – can wage genocide on the Kurds and torture members of the opposition, and still be seen as respected partners by european leaders. All of that because EU needs it to control it's borders. Dictatorship in Morocco can run politics of purges and discrimination against people of occupied western Sahara for the same reason.

Turkey

In 2014, because of military operations in Syria, millions of people in need of immediate humanitarian help turned up in turkey. They implemented a system based on a special act, similar to the one we have now in Poland following the beginning of war in Ukraine. However, after the fall of Aleppo in 2016, the situation drastically changed, a lot more people who didn't want to stay there turned up in turkey. That way since 2016 in effect is so-called “bloody deal”, euphemistically called the agreement between Turkey and European Union, meant to stop boats crossing the sea to Greek islands. Many reports, books and publications have been published about what happens on the Turkish side. When boats with refugees sink in the Mediterranean sea, no one reacts. It starts to look like a premeditated political murder.

The tragedy of these people is a result of actions of smugglers, corrupt police officers, EU politicians, lawyers and courts. How many people never reach Greek shores? Nobody keeps a list of missing persons. Grassroots investigations indicate that there are many unanswered questions. Who identifies the victims? Where are the bodies taken? Who decides where to bury

them? How do families learn about deaths of their relatives and is it possible for them to find the graves? Those who have succeeded in crossing the sea are then taken to the largest outdoor prison in Europe – so-called hot spot Moria, and, after it was completely burned down in September 2021 – Moria 2.0.

Border outsourcing has caused unimaginable harm to thousands of people on the move who, apart from suffering war trauma or other forms of PTSD, are often still forced to live in appalling conditions that are certainly not in accordance with any convention about human rights. The existence of tent camps on Greek islands is a stain in our modern history and nothing can erase that disgrace.

Libya

Another grim example of EU's migration policies are the, so-called, reception centers in Libya. From there sail the boats to Italy and Malta, whose chances of reaching their destination are for the most part one big question mark. The biggest tragedy at the shore of Italian island Lampedusa, called the doors of Europe for decades, took 366 victims and in one moment became the symbol of helplessness, at the same time forcing EU to take on help actions. The mission was supposed to help people, but it became yet another oppressive system of control and suffering.

In response to regime migrant politics rescue boats of grassroots initiatives sailed out to the sea. A real war against the activists was started, their ships were often stopped in harbor and the crew arrested, effectively stopping them from carrying out rescue operations.

EU struck another financial deal (after the one with turkey) with Libya, sending so-called Libyan coast guard against people on the sea, upon seeing which some prefer to jump in the water and drown... Why? Because so-called reception centers in Libya are famous for being places where tortures, rapes, murders and slavery happen on a daily basis.

Libyan law states that you can become a prisoner of detention center both when you go there and when you want to leave the country.

Those camps are “ran” not only by the authorities, but also by slave traders, gangs and smugglers. Doesn't that resemble the situation of the people on the move who crossed the border between Poland and Belarus? Arbitrary



Moreover, this comfort is only accessible to some within its borders, regardless if they are there “legally” or not.

trarily putting people in guarded centers for foreigners has just as strong negative consequences as those that people imprisoned in Libya are facing.

Everybody knows about the situation of people in Libyan camps, but nobody is doing anything about it. Lifesavers at sea, who literally rip people out of the Libyan hands, know about it. They are themselves victims of criminalization and many of those working on missions are facing criminal charges and they are awaiting trials, while their only crime is strong need to help and save people from death.

At this section of the border there is no official European coast guard, because EU once again bought peace and used the form of border outsourcing. Memories of those who survived Libyan camps, told after a dangerous journey, prompt us to answer the question – why do we allow such visible violations of human rights on such a large scale?

Spain

There are two important hotspots of migrant movement in Spain – the enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta on the Northern African shores. Despite the wall surrounding them is six metres high, it is regularly breached. This year, in June, when a big group of people tried to cross the wall, the Spanish and Moroccan police opened fire. It is estimated that as many as 45 people were shot (the numbers are not exact because the state of the wounded taken back to Morocco is not known). This border is one of the places where brutalization of migration takes place on a great scale.

Spain, as a colonial power, does not see a need to take responsibility for its past, making it a key element of the project of Fortress Europe. At the Canary Islands, among thousands of tourists, there are also “human shadows”. They are people on the move who got there from Western Africa. Sometimes, local fishermen find empty boats – a sign that someone didn’t make it. Sometimes, they find corpses. That’s the price for trying to reach Europe.

Why human shadows? Because upon getting to the islands they become invisible – to the system, to the world. They are trapped and cannot get out. They wait on the islands for months for a chance to move to the Spanish metropole.

Apart from managing borders, Frontex is also a key organiser of deportation programmes in the European Union. It works as EU’s “return operations” agency by coordinating deportation flights, initiating expulsions,

aiding in “forced returns” and pressuring non-EU countries to take back deported refugees.

The belief in Frontex’s and European Union’s role as human rights guarantors is simply without foundations. Thousands of people sentenced to torture or death on EU’s peripheries should be enough to caution us against these institutions and their activity on the borders. Following their logic, human rights should be granted only to citizens of the EU and the Global North.

We could see a transformation happening in the people at the border. Trust in the authorities – huge at the beginning – melted quickly with every notice of push-backs, violence, and inhumane treatment of the people on the move. No words could have had that result – people had to see it for themselves. Frontex builds its reputation as an organisation that protects us against the “threat” of uncontrolled migration while collaborating with who profits from it.

Poland – The eastern border of Fortress Europe

The problems on the outer borders of the EU were not created by Łukaszenko. All he did was use the plight of millions of people seeking shelter in Europe for his own machinations. If he did not create the eastern passing, many refugees would attempt to reach Europe in other ways. In reality Łukaszenko is no different from dictators of countries like Turkey, who secure the outer borders of the EU, in exchange for financial gains.

In many cases, the polish government does go against the wishes of Brussels – cutting down old-growth forests or its homophobia are two examples of this, but it is naive to believe that there is any conflict when it comes to border policy. The charade of a dispute is only kept up so the right wing politicians can pretend that they are defending the independence and traditions of the polish state which gains them voters. Theatrical gestures like threatening to not let Frontex in, mean little when Poland is fully compliant with the EU’s wishes when it comes to border and army policies.

Frontex, as an organisation, is responsible for all of EU’s outer borders, and just because we will not meet any of its goons on the polish border, it’s not a proof that it does not coordinate the policies and behaviour of the border guards there. The actions taken against those seeking shelter are no different in Poland than in Greece or Spain. Like everywhere else, push-backs, physical violence and refusal to start any legal asylum procedures are everyday occurrences.

Thus, an artificially created “migrant crisis” is useful to all sides of the conflict. Łukaszenko was able to use it to strengthen his negotiation position. Poland was able to mobilize a large amount of soldiers and volunteers from the territorial defence units, as well as building over 100km of walls in the middle of one of the last truly old-growth forest in Europe. No one can estimate how much that last year has cost us all, though it’s much easier to guess where the money went (for a report on the companies building the wall and their connections to the authorities see our blog). [6]

Millions has flowed from Brussels. The EU tightened the security on its eastern border. This was all done at the cost of normal, everyday people who were just looking for a better life, and were (falsely) led to believe that their basic human rights will not be violated in Europe.

Let us be clear, we do not believe that the EU is somehow different from other empires. We realize that the comfort its average citizen enjoys is only possible because of the exploitation of those that are outside of its borders.



Freedom not Frontex

Regrettably, we have heard many times people sympathetic to our actions – even from people active on the polish-belarusian border – saying that the presence of Frontex officials could put an end to the violations of human rights perpetrated by the polish authorities. To the people from the no borders movement, active on the Mediterranean Sea and the Balkan route, this argument sounds like a bad joke. Unfortunately, in Poland still only few people are aware of this institution's actions.

Frontex was created in 2004 with the aim of “helping EU member countries, and those in the Schengen area, in guarding external borders of the Union's free movement area”. Since 2016, the european agency is not only in charge of overseeing migratory flows, but also of border management. From Frontex's website we can learn that their mission is to uphold the “European Area of Freedom Security and Justice”. Let's take a closer look. In Greece and the Balkans Frontex is present and works alongside border guards and the police.

European Border and Coast Guard Agency faces serious accusations of covering up illegal push-backs of boats on the Mediterranean Sea. An investigation concluded that the agency's top brass intentionally hid information about the Greek coast guards' push-back practices, deemed illegal by international law. Following these revelations, Fabrice Leggeri, Frontex's CEO, was forced to resign. This incident shows how important is the existence of grassroots, independent organisations who can monitor sea borders.

A good example is Aegean Boat Reports which, since 2015, publishes detailed reports on illegal push-backs happening on land and sea. Their work is made possible thanks to the people on the move themselves, who share their position before, during, and after making the crossing. In 2021, Aegean Boat Reports documented 629 push-backs on the Aegean Sea, in which 15803 women, men and children were turned back from the safety of Europe. One third of them, 5220 people, were already on the Greek islands (Lesvos, Kos, Chios, Leros) when, arrested by police, were forced to go back to the pontoons and life rafts only to get deported by the Greek Coast Guard (HCG) and Frontex.

Almost 60% of all boats intercepted by the turkish coast guard in 2021 were initially pushed-back by the greek authorities. To this we have to add a high number of push-backs happening near Evros, on the land border between Turkey and Greece. There, similarly to other outer borders of the

EU, local border guards are aided by Frontex officials. It is in areas like these – flashpoints and buffer zones – that many violent push-backs happen.

The procedure looks similar to the one we are used to in Poland – refusal to accept the application for international protection, seizure of phones and documents, deprivation of food and drink, violence, beatings... No one gets registered – instead, people get loaded on trucks and driven back to the border, thrown on beaches, back into rivers, forests and forced to cross to where they came from.

Detailed reports on violence on the outer borders can be found on the Border Violence Monitoring Networks' website. Working alongside grassroots initiatives and formal organisations, they managed to document 1558 cases of violence perpetrated by border guards in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Turkey and Slovenia. Some of the testimonials are so drastic, that it is hard to believe in the depravity of the uniformed services.

Other region in which Frontex collaborates with the local coastguard with deadly consequences, is the Libyan coast. It is enough to read Sea Watch's reports, especially from May 2021, to get a picture of the situation.