

Eyewitness report from the Poland-Belarus border area

Preliminary remark:

I am a political scientist and for many years was responsible for the work of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. For the past 15 years, I have been working independently as a consultant and supporter for groups active in civil society in many, mostly Eastern European countries. I have been visiting the Polish-Belarusian border area for the last three years mainly to prepare and carry out political educational trips (politische-radreisen.de). I speak Polish and have been watching social developments in Poland for 40 years. I have also visited Belarus frequently in the past ten years. On my own initiative, with the aim of understanding the situation on site in order to then report about it to a broader public, including political decision-makers, I set off—together with my son Paul, a trained nurse. From October 27th to 31st, we stayed in the primeval forest area, just before the exclusion zone, and joined a local aid organization.

Description of the situation

Hundreds, maybe thousands, of people are currently on the run in the large forest area around Bialowieza. These are families with children, single travellers, and sometimes men with suits and briefcases, who have chosen the supposedly easy escape route via Belarus. They come from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq or Iran, or from North African countries. During the day, they hide far away from the forest paths in the depths of the forest, at night those who are strong enough try to move further westward towards Germany. Once they have managed to move approx. 20-30 km from the border into Poland without being discovered, there is a chance that relatives, friends or smugglers may pick them up by car and transport them to Germany or to the German border. Yet, along the way the refugees are often picked up by border units who patrol the paths with helicopters and vehicles. In this case, there is almost always a push-back to the border to Belarus. Some have already been pushed back many times in this way and are extremely weakened. For this reason, most of the weakened people stay currently in the immediate border area in the forests. It is thanks to the (still) relatively mild and dry autumn temperatures of around 3° C at night and up to 13° C during the day that not more people have died so far. Nobody knows how many already have. A local forest expert told us that there are swamp areas in the region that can be fatal for people without local knowledge. The dead would then only be discovered someday here as bog bodies.

The immediate border area (approx. 3 km along the border) is cordoned off from the outside world by roadblocks. A temporary barbed wire fence was rolled out on the previously barely secured border to Belarus. The state of emergency imposed since the beginning of September in the exclusion zone to protect against illegal immigration is designed exclusively for military purposes. Only residents, soldiers, police, border guards and members of the so-called "Territorial Defense Army" have access to the exclusion zone. The latter was launched in 2017 by the PiS to protect the fatherland.¹ Humanitarian aid organizations, human rights monitors, journalists or opposition politicians are not allowed in the exclusion zone. The hotels and pensions in the tourist town of Bialowieza, which lies within the exclusion zone, are occupied by emergency services, the local stadium is used as a military camp. Large calibre machine guns are also stored there. Most recently, in talks with the Ministry of the Interior, the leader of the Catholic Church in Poland has tried to obtain approval from the Polish government for the aid organization *Medycy na Granicy* ("Doctors

¹ <https://taz.de/Paramilitaerische-Gruppen-in-Polen/!5412371/>. Now they operate with the inscription "Border Group" on the uniform and are assigned to the police or the border guards.

at the border”) to operate in the exclusion zone—in vain.² The Polish government has also refused to involve the European border agency *Frontex*, which has its headquarters in Warsaw. Support for refugees in the border region is growing in Polish civil society. In the town of Bialowieza, located within the exclusion zone, despite the massive presence of the border units, many cannot be dissuaded from helping the refugees in the forest with food and basic first aid. Some even take the refugees to their homes. Whether this is legal or prohibited is of secondary importance to them. Still, this cannot solve the problem that there are too many sick, weak, traumatised people who need professional first aid. The untrained helpers constantly overwhelm themselves and reach the limits of their physical and psychological resilience. I was told of border guards who could not cope with the situation either and quit their duties.

Outside the exclusion zone there are voluntary helpers who have joined forces in the border network *Granica* or in the *Ocalenie* (“Salvation”) foundation. They provide on-site catering assistance around the clock and advise the refugees about their legal options. My son told me that during his visits with the helpers in the forest he found totally frightened people. Just holding their hands for a longer time was infinitely important to build trust. If medical help is needed, the “mobile doctors at the border”, also a volunteer organization, are on hand. But: All aid groups are only allowed to perform lifesaving activities outside of the exclusion zone. If they accidentally cross the exclusion zone, they face several days of uncomfortable imprisonment.

In a few weeks, the largest non-governmental aid organization in Poland, the so-called “Great Orchestra of Christmas Aid”, will open a humanitarian centre for refugee aid in Michalowa and strengthen the ongoing work of the aid organizations. So far, the criminalisation of refugees and the establishment of the exclusion zone by state organs have made work extremely difficult. There are also roadblocks outside the zone and the helpers have to pursue the refugees on secret routes so that the border units do not discover them.

Asylum application in Poland as an opportunity?

If the refugees are at the end of their tether, they theoretically have the option of applying for political asylum in Poland. In theory, because nobody knows whether the border units will take their asylum application seriously. Often they do not transport the refugees to the reception centre but back to the border. In these cases, the helpers of the *Granica* group not only inform the border units, but also let opposition Polish politicians and journalists join the meeting as witnesses. This creates more publicity, but even that is sometimes not enough, as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* was able to research in one case.³ Filing an asylum application for a stay in Poland is almost equivalent to capitulation for the refugees. Poland recognises almost no asylum applications. Last year, only a few hundred persons were granted asylum rights.

When an ambulance needs to be called, it can sometimes take hours to arrive. The hospital in Hajnowka only has two ambulances and is currently totally overcrowded with refugees and Covid sufferers. A stay in hospital is also no guarantee of an asylum procedure. On the contrary: medical care there is often followed by a push-back to the border.

² <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2021-11/eu-aussengrenze-polen-migranten-hilfsorganisation-mediziner-belarus>

³ <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/belarus-polen-migranten-fluechtlinge-eu-alexander-lukaschenko-1.5449779?reduced=true> (26.10.2021: „Wo, bitte, ist Europa?“)

How does the push-back work?

A few days ago a law was passed that now enables border officials to decide for themselves immediately after apprehending refugees whether the person or family should even be given the chance to apply for asylum. The examination of the application for recognition is left to the border official—contradicting any legal standards. The Polish border police have now issued a three-year entry ban to refugees who have been arrested. They are transported back to the border and pushed through a hole in the fence to the Belarusian side. The Belarusian border police then drive them back—sometimes beating them—to the Polish side at another point. Residents in the border area have also heard gunshots. On the Polish side, there are not enough personnel to continuously monitor the entire border. With the help of drones, the Belarusian side is able to find weak points in the Polish border guard all and over again, cut open the fence, and drive the refugees to Poland. Most of the refugees return to the life-threatening route without any alternative.

Situation in Belarus?

Nobody knows how many refugees are currently in the Belarusian-Polish forest. On the Polish side of the primeval forest area, there are estimates of 1000–2000 refugees staying in the Polish part of the forest. It is speculated that on the Belarusian side, several thousand people across the region are waiting to cross the border. The number of refugees in Belarus can only be estimated: 5,000, 10,000, perhaps 15,000? There are pictures on the Internet of refugees sleeping in Minsk. They are not sent away by law enforcement officers and spend the night, among other places, near warming shafts along the subway. During the day, they sit on benches in the shopping centre or in the park. They have recently arrived, cannot afford to stay in a hotel, and are waiting for an opportunity to catch a transport to the border. Some of them may already have returned from the border or have learned from their acquaintances that the border crossing may cost their lives, and are now stuck in Minsk. Independent reporting in Belarus is only possible to a very limited extent, Lukashenko has also disbanded humanitarian human rights organizations like “Human Constanta”.⁴ Apparently, there is a plan that the refugees will gradually be led to the border by Belarusian border troops. Close to the border, there is a larger camp on the Belarusian side at the eastern entrance gate to the Bialowieza nature reserve, in Belyi Lesok. Here the refugees, including many families with children, live in the forest without much contact with the village population, as I was told.

Worst off are those who are practically staying in the no man's land between the Polish and Belarusian border troops. The Polish border units block their way to the west and the Belarusian units block their way back. A group of over a hundred refugees has been trapped south of the primeval forest area for a whole week. Obviously, the border is tight here, and the refugees are giving up hope of being able to cross the border into Poland. They want to try to get back to Minsk and then back to their homeland. If the Polish border remains cordoned off and the way back due to Lukashenko as well, many of them will die. As already mentioned, life-saving aid organizations are not allowed in this area.

Conclusions

A humanitarian catastrophe is currently taking place on the Polish-Belarusian border, in fact on both sides of the border region. This has already been documented in detail through journalistic research in eastern Poland as well as in the German media. Information about the situation in Belarus should be available to intelligence services, but has not yet been made public. The topic has not yet become

4 https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/gefluechtete-als-druckmittel-lukaschenkos-versuch-die-eu-zu.2897.de.html?dram:article_id=504436V

a focus of daily reporting in Germany. A few thousand people who could easily be saved and then integrated have become the plaything of politics.

The Belarusian and Polish governments are directly responsible actors. Both hope to draw a benefit from this crisis. Belarusian President Lukashenko uses the refugees as an instrument to press the EU to stop its sanctions. The death of many people is accepted—there is even money earned from the entry of the refugees. In the background, Putin watches the further destabilisation of the European Union.

The Polish government not only overrides international law (the Geneva Refugee Convention, right to asylum procedures, the EU ban on push-backs), but with its behaviour contributes to the likely deaths of more people, including children. Yet the Polish government hopes that its decisive rejection of the refugees at its border will find domestic political recognition: it propagates that the Polish nation protects itself against illegal immigration by defending the national border. It knows that in this point its foreign policy is supported by a part of the EU states and social forces that advocate isolation from further migration.

What is to be done?

The desirable goals for the Polish territory are obvious:

1. Approval of medical and humanitarian aid organisations in the restricted area.
2. Termination of push-backs.
3. After temporary admission and registration in camps near the border, distribution of the refugees to European countries willing to admit them. If relatives already live in EU countries, family reunification should be a priority.

At the same time, a conversation should be sought with Lukashenko with the following aims:

1. Medical and humanitarian care for refugees stranded in Belarus.
2. End of the visa-free invitation policy for those willing to flee.
3. Orderly return to their home countries (if this is possible at all, as many are persecuted in their country or are already living in refugee camps outside their home country). Alternatively, the refugees in Belarus should also be distributed to the willing EU states and receive a legal asylum procedure there.

A government coalition is currently being formed in Germany which has set itself the goal of ending the deaths at the EU's external borders. It would be urgent that the newly forming German government set a sign **by sending a delegation to the Polish-Belarusian border**.

This could bring movement to the situation on the ground. At the same time, to set an example like this in Poland—and in all other EU states—would strengthen civil society forces who perceive with horror that human rights are being massively violated along their borders and who believe that a fortress Europe must have no future.

Not only the liberal, cosmopolitan, solidary Poland is currently looking at Germany.

Another goal of the coalition agreement on the topic of migration is ensuring orderly, safe immigration. Lukashenko is subverting this goal by all means. It is currently difficult to imagine that German and European foreign policy would want to enter into a secret deal with Lukashenko similar to the one with Erdoğan. Therefore, other effective ways of stopping the flow of refugees into Belarus are needed. The plan to stop flights to Minsk will not work. How, for example, should Damascus be persuaded by German foreign policy to remove Minsk from its flying destinations?

Where politics fails, **civil society actors** are all the more important. They provide concrete help and create a counter-public through reports of their work. In Poland, there is great willingness to provide humanitarian support, as we have just been able to convince ourselves.

Supporting German initiatives would be very welcome!

It is urgently required that political decision-makers make decisions immediately to save human lives, enable orderly immigration, and help relax international political tensions.

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