

SELECTIVE SYMPATHY: POLAND'S CONTRASTING TREATMENT OF THOSE SEEKING REFUGE

Claudia Ciobanu
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Poland's extraordinary mobilisation to help Ukrainian refugees raises some uncomfortable questions about the country's toughness shown towards asylum seekers and migrants from the Middle East and Africa.

Somewhere in a forest, three children under the age of five, dressed in winter clothes, are seated around a fire; two stare up at the camera, expectantly, the other is perhaps asleep. In another scene, also in a forest, four young men are sleeping on the ground in squalid conditions, leftover food packaging strewn around.

These are images that, alongside the coordinates of where the people are located, appeared before the Polish public over the last week. And while all of the country is engaged in a massive effort to collect warm clothes, food and medicine for the thousands of refugees that are flowing across the border from Ukraine, nobody it seems is reaching out to the people in the photos.

And that's because, rather than Ukrainians, they're people from the Middle East that are stuck on the border between Belarus and Poland.

Even if few are paying much attention these days, those migrants – tempted to Belarus last year by the regime of dictator Aleksandar Lukashenko and herded across the border as unwitting participants in a hybrid war against the EU – are still trying to make their way over.

On February 22, Polish authorities found the dead body of 26-year-old Ahmed Al-Shawafi in the Bialowieza forest in eastern Poland, in a hard-to-access area full of marshes. Ahmed was travelling with a larger group that included children, who were pushed back into Belarus by the Polish border authorities, according to their accounts.

Access to a 3-kilometre-stretch of land along Poland's border with Belarus is still blocked to journalists and humanitarian organisations. The people needing help in the forest are alone.

About 400 kilometres south, on Poland's border with Ukraine, the situation is completely different. Polish authorities are fully mobilised to support Ukrainians fleeing war: the state opened refugee reception centres along the border, entry to the country is problem-free, and authorities are preparing to make access to the country's health and education systems easy for the people fleeing Russia's unprovoked attack.

An enormous grassroots effort is happening in parallel: regular Poles wait at train stations or border crossing points to transport Ukrainian families further inside Poland; volunteers in cities are matching up Poles opening their doors to refugees with those needing accommodation; and donation drives are taking place for everything from bulletproof vests and helmets to medical supplies and help for orphanages in Ukraine suffering under the Russian bombardment.

Public communication by the Polish Border Guard neatly encapsulates the stark discrepancy.

On March 2 in the morning, the institution tweeted: "Yesterday, 98,000 people entered Poland from Ukraine. Since February 24, our staff cleared the entry of over 453,000 people fleeing war-torn Ukraine. #BorderGuardhelps #solidaritywithukraine"

An hour later, another tweet from the Polish Border Guard: "Last night, 51 foreigners tried to illegally cross into Poland from Belarus. 11 people from Syria, 33 from Iraq, 1 from Burkina Faso and 6 from Congo were arrested."

What's the difference?

The massive mobilisation witnessed for the Ukrainian refugees solves at least one puzzle about Poland's reluctant attitude to refugees in the past: it's not a matter of capacity.

Like other countries in the region, Poland has resolutely opposed an EU open-door policy to asylum seekers and migrants from outside the continent. Part of Warsaw's rhetoric, including during 2015 when Syrians were fleeing war, has been that countries like Poland in Europe's east are still too poor to help.

Today, however, it's become evident that if there is a will, there is a way. These days, Poland is managing to offer first aid and house up to 100,000 refugees per day. Rallied by the central government, municipalities across the country have been preparing accommodation and regular citizens are filling in the gaps. Every night, for example, at Warsaw's Western Station tens of Poles show up to pick up Ukrainians and take them to their homes.

Compared to the size of the current refugee wave, last year's "migration crisis" was tiny. Throughout last year, the Polish Border Guard said it had "prevented" over 39,000 "attempted entries" into Poland from Belarus. That number does not equate to those trying to enter, as many attempted to cross the border several times after being pushed back into Belarus by the Polish border police. In all of last year, the number of people from the Middle East, Afghanistan and Africa trying to enter Poland was smaller than the number of refugees from Ukraine crossing in one day.

That Ukrainians fleeing war need immediate help is beyond discussion in Poland, as elsewhere in the EU. But could the people that were pushed back by Polish border guards since August last year have benefitted from some of the same sympathy?

The Polish government has never acknowledged that those people were in need of help: in an infamous speech on September 20 last year, Polish Interior Minister Mariusz Kaminski claimed that, among the migrants, were terrorists, drug addicts and even bestialists – claims mostly debunked by the Polish media.

The more mainstream understanding in Europe is that the migrants crossing from Belarus were being used by the Belarusian regime in a hybrid war, were trying to enter illegally via irregular routes (i.e. non-official crossing points), and were mostly economic migrants, who were nevertheless privileged enough to pay the thousands of euros charged by Belarusian and other travel agents for the visa and flight to Belarus and the hotel in Minsk before being bussed to the border.

Critics and NGOs say the problem with Poland's approach of simply shutting down the border – largely endorsed by the EU – is that we simply don't know who those people are, at least not from official sources. Because the vast majority were not allowed to register an asylum application in Poland, the Polish state has no record of their identities and whether they face persecution back home.

In reality, the situation is more complex. Data on around 1,000 migrants who tried to enter Poland via Belarus in the second half of last year, which BIRN will publish in full later this month, shows a large proportion of Syrians and children, for example. BIRN has also documented in depth at least one case of an Iraqi Kurd who survived two recent assassination attempts for his political activism and was at risk of being killed if he returned home.

EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson said in January, during a meeting of the LIBE Committee in the European Parliament, referring to the Polish approach to migrants incoming via Belarus, that even in a situation of 'instrumentalization', where people are being used, they still have the right to apply for asylum and the right to have access to the asylum procedure.

"We still have to stay true to our values and our Treaty when it comes to the best interests of the child, protecting the vulnerable and so on," she said. "In an instrumentalization situation, most people are probably not refugees. But we don't know that, because to define whether a person is a refugee or not, they have to have access to the asylum procedure."

In a statement published on March 1, Grupa Granica, a Polish coalition of NGOs assisting migrants, commended the mobilisation across Poland to help Ukrainian refugees, saying it deserves “the highest recognition”. But they also appealed for fair treatment of all those seeking refuge.

“Given its international commitments, Poland is obliged to offer protection to all people escaping war and violence, no matter their origin, faith and skin colour,” the group wrote. “We remind everyone that protection against the effects of war and violence is a right, not a privilege. We do not agree that desperate people are pushed back to Belarus, a state which supports the Russian invasion of Ukraine.”

The most glaring difference between the Ukrainians who are crossing into Poland today and the Syrians stuck between the Belarusian and Polish borders at the time of writing, or those fleeing in 2015 when Poland also rejected them, is not the degree of devastation of their respective countries, but their race, religion and culture.

Different experiences

And there are signs this difference is having an impact even on the treatment of some of those fleeing the war in Ukraine.

While EU officials have told Politico privately they believe some of the social media and other reports about EU border officials turning back non-white refugees stem from deliberate disinformation from Russia, the Ocalenie Foundation, one of the main organisations in Poland helping refugees, published on February 27 an account of some Poles coming to pick up refugees at Warsaw’s Western Station refusing to take non-white students into their homes.

Similar observations have been made by volunteer groups coordinating housing at the grassroots level, who are finding it more difficult to place non-white people escaping the war in Ukraine.

“In the last days, we are observing increasing discrimination and aggression against people fleeing from Ukraine who are of a nationality other than Ukrainian,” Grupa Granica wrote in a statement on March 2. “It particularly affects people from Arab and African countries.”

“This is clearly the effect of the hate narrative propagated by the Polish government for years, the permission granted to fascist groups to operate and even associating with initiatives which openly call for hatred and aggression,” it claimed.

On the evening of March 1, three Indian citizens fleeing the war in Ukraine, two men and a woman, were beaten up in Przemysl – the first town on the Polish border where most refugees from Ukraine arrive – by as-yet unidentified perpetrators, according to the local police, who also reported an increased presence of “groups of men connected to the football fan environments” that day.

“Faced with this tragedy in a neighbouring country, the bulk of Polish society and the Polish ruling class seems to have radically changed their attitudes to the question of refugees, from a negative one to welcoming,” Rafal Pankowski, head of the Never Again anti-racist association in Poland, told BIRN. “There is a genuine outpouring of sympathy and solidarity, and thousands of Polish people are offering their homes, cars and voluntary work.”

“However, the past seven years of non-stop xenophobic propaganda has left some permanent traces, too,” the expert added. “In the last few days, members of the far-right party Confederation have been using social media and mass-audience YouTube channels warning against an alleged influx of Muslims and blacks among the refugees.”

“Inevitably, it resulted in violence against non-white refugees as seen in Przemysl, apparently led by local football hooligans and racist thugs,” he said. “The responsibility rests with the far-right preachers of hate as well as the social media platforms enabling them.”

On March 1, the Polish Ombudsman's Office called on the Interior Ministry to look into claims of unequal treatment on both sides of the border, including by Polish authorities, of students from African countries and other non-Ukrainian, non-Polish citizens crossing into Poland via Ukraine.

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