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## NARRATING MIGRATION IN TIMES OF “CRISIS”: PERSPECTIVES FROM POLAND<sup>1</sup>

### *Abstract*

This study delves into the visual narratives surrounding the cross-border movement during events that have entered public and academic discourse as a “crisis”. It focuses on the governmental narrative surrounding the Polish-Belarusian and Polish-Ukrainian border management between August 2021 and September 2023. Four key aspects of differentiation in the visual narration of the two border emergencies are explored: the role and type of uniformed services, the material objects featured, the depiction of the people on the move, and the ambience and symbolism conveyed in the visuals.

The study offers an analytical discussion of the findings formulating three directions for further investigation of the differences in the depictions of the two border events: the construction of a patriarchal myth of a deserving refugee, the performance of a border spectacle, and the role of racialisation in shaping governmental narratives. It highlights how the responses to both emergencies align with broader EU de facto immigration policies.

**Keywords:** Visualising migration, migration governance, Poland, EU, Belarus, Ukraine

### **Introduction**

In this contribution, I examine the visual narratives spread through the official channels of the Polish governing apparatus, with the aim of explaining their role in the presentation and management of the ramifications stemming from two recent border events involving Poland: one at the Polish-Ukrainian border (2022) and the other at the border with Belarus (2021). Depending on the actors narrating them, these events were framed in public and academic discourse as “crises”: a migration crisis, a humanitarian crisis and a crisis of border management. Remaining critical to the contested concept of ‘*crisis*’ used to describe these situations, I refer to them as “border events”, while acknowledging in the analyses the public reception of them as representing a crisis. The situation at the Ukrainian border emerged as a result of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The tension at the Polish-Belarusian border was connected to what has been termed by various actors as a “hybrid war” – a coordinated action of Belarussian authorities to create tension on the Polish-Belarusian border as an emergence of a new migration route into the EU, or as a systematic violation of Human Rights, with the first incidents registered in August 2021.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter was presented at the Marie Curie Workshop on visual governance: Theorising the role of images in migration governance hosted on 24 October 2023, organised by CERC in Migration and Integration at Toronto Metropolitan University.

Contrary to the events unfolding after 22 February 2022, the Polish-Belarusian border situation received scant media coverage (Judzińska & Sendyka, 2022), characterised by the repeated use of the same images. The reason for this is connected to the regulation of the Ministry of the Interior and Administration from 28 February 2022, on the introduction of a temporary ban on being in a specific area in the border zone adjacent to the state border with the Republic of Belarus. This meant that journalists were effectively prohibited from accessing the affected areas and allowed the Polish government<sup>2</sup> to effectively maintain a tight grip on images representing border events. Despite the alternative visual narrations of these events circulated by the activists and scholars working at the border, few caught the extended public's attention (Judzińska & Sendyka, 2022). Then, in September 2023, Agnieszka Holland's movie titled "*Zielona Granica*" [The Green Border] made its debut in Polish cinemas. This fictionalised cinematic work delved into the Polish-Belarusian border situation, offering insights from the perspectives of border guards, activists, and asylum seekers. It seemed that Holland's work, even though fictionalised, addressed the void of visual coverage of border events, attracting people to theatres. This interest sparked concerns among politicians from within the Polish governing coalition, who criticised the work for its alleged anti-Polish stance and its portrayal of Polish uniformed services in a negative light. Pre-premiere screenings sparked protests both against and in support of the movie. The intense reactions to the film from politicians may stem from concerns that Holland, known for her critical stance toward the ruling Law and Justice party's governance, might disrupt the carefully crafted visual narrative that the government sought to establish regarding events on the Polish-Belarusian border just before the parliamentary elections that took place on 15 October 2023. The active engagement of high-profile politicians, activists, and civil society actors in the discourse surrounding Holland's movie underscores the importance of visual narratives in governing migration, showing its potential to shape societal responses to ongoing events. The fact that the visuals in the movie were fully fictional raises the issue of the contested nature of the "authenticity" of images employed in the creation of visual narratives of migration (Nikielska-Sekuła & Desille, 2021).

This chapter theorises the border spectacle (De Genova, 2015) taking place around the eastern EU borders. Taking the perspective of Poland, it sheds light on a striking disparity in the presentation of two highly similar situations: the substantial influx of individuals seeking asylum, shelter or transit in/through Poland. Rogier van Reekum and Willem Schinkel (2017: 28) claim that:

"border crossings belong to a specific visual genre, that of visualizations. Visualizations are schematized, standardized, and often strategic. That is, they are made with practical purposes in mind."

The border spectacles that this paper is concerned with are indeed made with a practical purpose in mind, though the means used to present the border crossings are different. Rather than featuring maps with arrows (van Houtum & Lacy, 2019), the visualisations of the border crossings presented in this chapter show the bodies of the individuals entering Poland and the material infrastructure of the border itself. The border crossings are therefore directly "seen" (Mirzoeff, 2011), and yet this seeing is done within a particular frame adjusted to the official narratives of those producing the images.

This chapter builds its findings on an analysis of visual materials, encompassing videos, photographs, and other graphical content generated by various governmental entities concerning the two events. The data were sourced from the governmental information portal, *gov.pl*, a comprehensive information system designed to serve all the Polish public

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<sup>2</sup> At that time, Poland was ruled by the United Right Coalition, which was at power from 2015 to December 2023, which is when the events described here occurred.

administration – a digital gateway providing access to diverse types of information and e-services offered by the public sector. The *gov.pl* website features news and updates from the Prime Minister's Office, the Council of Ministers, ministries, as well as other institutions in the Republic of Poland, including diplomatic missions, fire departments, hospitals, provincial offices and more. Theoretically, the analyses presented here depart from the literature regarding a similar border spectacle – the one happening around the southern EU borders through the Mediterranean Sea (De Genova 2017). I draw the lines between the events in Poland, their repercussions and the EU border policy.

## **Re-bordering Europe**

Since 9/11, the process of re-bordering has replaced the tendencies of debordering, as popularised in the United States after the Cold War. As Pieterse (2021: 171) presents, the US policy went from “tear down this wall” in 1987, to “build the wall” in 2016. Europe, and in particular the European Union, has mirrored this trend, introducing a closer protection of its external borders. While the securitisation of migration in Europe dates back to 1990 (Korec, 2020: 77), it became particularly visible after 2015, when the mass influx of people seeking shelter in Europe and arriving through the Mediterranean Sea was observed. This induced complex strategies to control the southern EU borders. In 2016, the activity of the European Agency of border protection – “Frontex” – was extended. Frontex was transformed into the Border and Coast Guard Agency, with tasks involving not only migration control but also border management, including “combating transborder crime” (Frontex, n.d.). Indeed, cross-border mobility to the EU, already the subject of national and international legislation, has more frequently become seen through the prism of crime. Additionally, as Odutayo (2018: 120) suggested, “over the past few decades, public discourse has increasingly framed the asylum process in negative terms.” Asylum seekers started to be seen as a threat to the national security of the receiving countries and means were taken to limit their arrival (Odutayo, 2018). The trend of criminalising migration (Rumbaut et al., 2020) was assisted by certain strategies to execute the strict border control policy, also covering cooperation regarding cross-border mobility between the EU and third countries (dos Santos Soares & Beck-Mannagetta, 2021), including a safe third country agreement (Odutayo, 2018) performing pushbacks and pullbacks (Barnes, 2022), criminalising the activism oriented on various forms of helping those arriving in EU, including rescuing them at sea (Gordon & Larsen, 2022), and fencing the countries (Duarte et al., 2018: 2). These actions have been widely criticised and claimed to be violations of the International Human Rights Law (Barnes, 2022), as well as of the non-refoulement law (Odutayo, 2018: 120), the Treaty on the European Union (dos Santos Soares & Beck-Mannagetta, 2021), and a way of preventing people from being able to seek the protection granted by the Geneva Refugee Convention (Odutayo, 2018: 120).

Today, the tendency to maintain strict border control followed by criminalising migration continues. The borders have become “the institutionalization of relations of power” (Pieterse, 2021: 168). The events on the EU’s eastern borders, starting in 2021, have shown similar securitisation of migration as with regard to the border along the Mediterranean. The Baltic States and Poland have joined (Buchholz, 2021) the already fenced EU frontier countries, such as Hungary, Bulgaria, Greece, and Slovenia (Duarte et al., 2018: 2), constructing fences along their borders with Belarus and Russia.

The migration to the EU through the Mediterranean in 2015 was widely covered in visual narratives produced by the mass media, national and supranational governing agencies, politicians, activists and NGOs. Researchers have identified two basic trends in these narratives regarding the visual depiction of the subjects on the move, both burdened with various ethical

constraints (Nikielska-Sekuła & Desille, 2021; Franko, 2021). The first was showcased by humanitarian units and presented asylum seekers as vulnerable individuals, usually women and children, lacking agency and overall depicted in miserable circumstances. The other presented migrant people heading to the EU as a threat, depicting males with darker skin sitting in masses in the boats, forcing the fences at the borders and sometimes being aggressive. Part of the visual narration of people on the move as a threat were graphics regarding the influx of foreign citizens into the EU, marked by bold red arrows showing the direction of the movement, similar to those used when visualising military invasions (van Houtum & Lacy, 2019; van Reekum & Schinkel, 2017). Despite some alternative works,<sup>3</sup> little space in the mainstream public discourse in Europe was left for visual depictions of migrant people using non-reductionist approaches and granting agency to the depicted people.

There is no doubt that both these responses to the migration flows into Europe in 2015, as well as the visual narratives of these influxes, have significantly influenced the responses to border management at the eastern EU border today (Balogun, 2023). Building on the scholarship tackling the 2015 border management events and their repercussions, as well as the visual narratives of these events, I analyse the visual discourse created by the Polish government around the influx of migrant people to the EU through the Polish-Belarusian and Polish-Ukrainian border between August 2021 and September 2023, along with the ways it was used to govern migration. By doing so, I point at the strategies employed by the Polish conservative United Right governing coalition, showing how close, rather than far, the implemented actions have been to those on other EU borders, despite the declarative mismatch of the principles between the EU and the Polish governing coalition. In what follows, I present the methodology employed in the analyses and then move to a description of four threads recurring throughout the analyses: (1) Uniformed Services: Type and Role, (2) Material Objects, (3) Depiction of the people on the move, (4) Ambience and Symbols. In the final parts of the chapter, I discuss the descriptive findings, looking at them through the prism of three axels: 1) the performance of the border, 2) the patriarchal myth of a refugee, and 3) the racialisation of mobile bodies.

## Methodology

This paper employs a postmodern grounded theory methodology known as Situational Analyses (Clarke, 2003). Sensitising concepts were formulated concerning the events occurring at Poland's borders: *depiction of the people on the move, narrating cross-border movement, and visualising the border mobility*. Subsequently, I conducted multiple searches on the *gov.pl* portal using the webpage's search tools and external search engines, utilising keywords in Polish that translate as *Belarus, Ukraine, the situation at the eastern border, Polish-Belarusian border, Polish-Ukrainian border, (im)migrants, (im)migration, refugees, asylum-seekers, asylum, war in Ukraine, hybrid war*. Additionally, I applied these keywords to the webpage of the Border Guards (*Straż Graniczna*), a significant entity involved in administrative decisions related to border management. While this organisation's webpage was not integrated into the *gov.pl* portal, it was frequently cited in official notes, particularly concerning the Polish-Belarusian border, and for this reason, it was included in the analyses.

From the search results, I selected news articles concerning the two events of interest and their consequences. Subsequently, I collected and analysed the visual content associated with the news. This analysis was conducted with the objective of identifying primary themes within the visuals. Once initial findings had been established, I revisited the search process to retrieve

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the Vision not Victim project, featuring photographs of girls with refugee backgrounds posing in their future dream jobs. Available at <https://visionnotvictim.org/>

potentially overlooked news items and subjected them to the same analytical methods. I also revisited the visuals collected during the initial round of analysis to ensure the complementarity of findings with the collected data. This iterative process allowed for the refinement and modification of the findings. Subsequently, I inductively grouped recurring thematic threads identified during the analysis and provided separate descriptions for each border.

The conducted analysis was qualitative and focused on the content of the images. In addition to visual observations, I gathered multisensory data (where feasible) conveyed by the images, such as sound and the ambience of the images. The images were examined in relation to their textual and oral contextualisation, as articulated by the news publisher (in accordance with Becker, 2005). However, this contextual information was treated as a starting point for interpreting the images rather than constituting its complete framework.

### **Visualising the “crises” at the EU’s external borders – perspectives from Poland**

This study has identified notable differences in the visual information produced regarding two distinct borders. Specifically, the Polish-Belarusian border events received extensive coverage from entities such as the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of National Defence and the Border Guard, while news related to the influx of people fleeing the war in Ukraine primarily originated from the Fire Brigades, the Ministry of Education (pertaining to the education of Ukrainian children), the Ministry of the Interior and Administration as well as the Border Guard. In terms of the Ukrainians fleeing the war, the Prime Minister's Office focused more on geopolitical aspects of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, with limited engagement regarding the cross-border movement of Ukrainians.

These disparities in coverage were accompanied by significant distinctions in the portrayal of the two border events, irrespective of the originating body. To systematise these observations, the findings were categorised into four thematic threads corresponding to the themes occurring in the analyses: (1) Uniformed Services: Type and Role, (2) Material Objects, (3) Depiction of the people on the move, (4) The Ambience and Symbols. I describe them below.

#### *Uniformed Services: Type and Role*

Visuals from the Belarusian border prominently featured the army, police and border guards engaged in patrolling, guarding and occasionally repelling physical attacks against the border (Figure 1). In these visuals, the officers typically refrained from making direct contact with individuals attempting to cross the border and their faces were often obscured, except when depicted in representative meetings with officials. The uniformed officers were primarily portrayed as border protectors rather than as assisting people seeking refuge.

Conversely, images from the Ukrainian border predominantly depicted border guards actively helping people cross into Poland. This assistance included carrying children, helping with luggage and providing directions. Border guards were frequently shown in direct contact with those crossing the border, often surrounded by them and offering welcoming smiles to newcomers. The military was notably absent from these images, with rare appearances by the police. Subsequent reports on the settlement of Ukrainians in Poland also featured firefighters, who adapted fire stations to accommodate incoming people, provided transportation and organised activities for children who had fled the war, such as showcasing firefighting equipment.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

### *Material Objects*

In visuals related to the Polish-Belarusian border events, a substantial focus was placed on military equipment, which often served as the backdrop for press briefings conducted by officials, including the Prime Minister and Minister of National Security. Notably, the visuals highlighted the construction of the fence, referred to as a "barrier" ("*zapora*"), which was erected along the Polish-Belarusian border following initial crossing incidents in August 2021. The process of constructing the wall, along with the equipment used and subsequent official visits after the wall's completion, received visual prominence. Fully equipped military personnel and border guards were frequently photographed and filmed while patrolling the border. The border was materialised in these images along a physical line initially delineated by barbed wire, later replaced by the wall. On occasion, the wall was framed alongside Belarusian and Polish boundary posts. Makeshift camps were sporadically depicted, often from a distance.

Conversely, visuals concerning the influx of Ukrainians predominantly showcased the facilities established to welcome these individuals, featuring beds and dining areas. These facilities were typically depicted as unoccupied, although occasionally people were shown occupying them. Additionally, visuals often included depictions of people's belongings, such a

s luggage and toys. Importantly, the border was materialised as a crossing point, rather than a dividing line between Poland and Ukraine.

### *Depiction of the people on the move*

At the Polish-Belarusian border, those who tried to cross were predominantly depicted as males with dark hair and beards, some of whom wore hoods or had their faces covered. Their actions, as presented in visuals, often appeared to be focused on attempting to breach the border, though some were merely depicted as standing and observing clashes between Polish forces and civilians attempting to cross. Over time, there was a shift in how these people were portrayed, with visuals framing the role of Belarusian forces in attempts to breach the Polish border. Belarusian military personnel were shown positioned behind the border-crossers, preventing them from turning back to Belarusian territory (Figure 2).

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

Women and children were seldom featured in the visuals from the Polish-Belarusian border. However, a discerning viewer could occasionally spot individual children and females, particularly among those shown in the makeshift camps along the wall. The presence of children was more evident through audio material, which featured recorded voices of minors ([Film dated 8 November](#)). Those attempting to enter were often portrayed as adversaries rather than victims. Although, the official oral and textual narration did acknowledge that these individuals were acting under orders from the Belarusian authorities, the visual narrative still tended to portray these people as a threat.

This perception was directly confirmed during a press briefing by the Minister of National Defence and the Minister of the Interior and Administration that generated a great deal of controversy in Poland. During this event, the ministers presented selected images reportedly retrieved from the phones of detained newcomers as evidence of their affiliations with terrorist

and military organisations, residences in Russia and socially unacceptable sexual preferences such as paedophilia and zoophilia.

By contrast, Ukrainians were predominantly portrayed as white females with children, often depicted as travellers with luggage who received assistance from Polish officers, including carrying their belongings, providing transportation, and offering directions. Notably, the depictions of Ukrainians on the *gov.pl* portal mostly did not conform to the humanitarian discourse (Nikielska-Sekuła & Desille, 2021) observed during the 2015 influx of people to the EU through Mediterranean Sea, according to which people on the move were depicted as vulnerable victims. Visual narrations around Ukrainians fleeing the war featured at *gov.pl* leaned towards showcasing the agency and dignity of the subjects. They posed in pictures, exuding dignity and often smiling, with many (yet certainly not all!) visuals featuring children from the back, in order to protect their privacy

It is important to note that, while the profile of Ukrainians fleeing the war is mostly demographically explanatory (UNHCR 2023), the data regarding individuals attempting to cross the Polish-Ukrainian border indicate that not only white Ukrainians crossed into Poland. Among those escaping the war were many black students from various African countries (Balogun, 2023: 4). This diversity, however, was not reflected in the visuals. Furthermore, women and children were not uncommon among those crossing from Belarus. Data presented by Grupa Granica<sup>4</sup> shows that, between October and December 2022, a total of 9718 individuals crossing the Polish-Belarusian border requested assistance, including 672 children and 229 women. Between 1 January 2023 and 26 October 2023, Grupa Granica received 6311 requests for assistance, 553 of whom were women, 331 children and 101 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Their presence was, however, relatively absent from the visuals featured on the *gov.pl* portal.

### *The Ambience and Symbols*

Visuals from the Polish-Belarusian border conveyed an atmosphere reminiscent of a war zone. They depicted chaotic voices of masses attempting to cross the border, military orders being shouted, and military and border guards patrolling the border. All this contributed to a somewhat common atmosphere of the images featuring fear and uncertainty. The dominant visual element was the fence, which loomed prominently in these images. Instead of framing the situation as a humanitarian crisis, for example, it was presented as a war-like threat. The response by the uniformed services was reminiscent of a military conflict situation. Symbols in these visuals emphasised Poland's military forces, border fencing and the Polish flag, which featured prominently in various visual reports from the border. Additionally, these visuals sought to highlight the cooperation between the government and the military in safeguarding the border.

In stark contrast, visuals from the Polish-Ukrainian border focused on portraying Poland as hospitable, emphasising the helpfulness of Polish officers, including border guards and firefighters, and the happiness of people who had found peace and shelter. Graphics often featured a combination of Polish and Ukrainian flags sometimes represented through images such as shaking hands in the national colours of both countries. Alternatively, visuals featured solely the Ukrainian flag. The Ukrainian language was used in infographics and leaflets. Moreover, these visuals aimed to demonstrate the smooth operation of the state in managing

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<sup>4</sup> Grupa Granica is a social movement opposing the government's response to the events taking place on the Polish-Belarusian border. Find out more: <https://hfhr.pl/en/about-us/cooperation-network/grupa-granica>

the situation through its permanent institutions, with less emphasis on showcasing cooperation between various services and the government.

## **Discussion**

The disparities in narratives surrounding the events at the two borders are notably distinct, so in this section I aim to theorise these depictions, offering some explanations for the differences. In what follows, I discuss the concept of the border seen as a performance, the construction of a patriarchal myth of a refugee and the racialisation of the bodies at the border. The way the border is performed in the discussed cases is heavily influenced by the approach to those crossing the border, expressed in what I would call the patriarchal myth of a refugee and the racialisation of the bodies. In other words, the border performance depends on how people on the move are seen in the mainstream discourse that steers the border management structures. This is discussed in detail below.

### *Performing the border*

In contemporary Border Studies, borders are not perceived merely as physical demarcations on maps or in the field; rather, they are understood as social constructs and a series of performative actions undertaken by governments to maintain them (De Genova, 2015). A border “exists or, better yet, takes place by being enacted” (van Reekum & Schinkel, 2017). The *gov.pl* portal has provided an overview of these performative actions at the Polish-Belarusian border that include patrolling, constructing the wall and physically repelling attacks. These practices differ significantly from common border activities within the EU, where border performances are typically focused on passport checks, or in some cases, not even that, as seen at internal EU borders. They are, however, strikingly similar to the ways the border of the EU has been performed along the Mediterranean Sea (Oduyayo, 2018).

The performative actions at the Polish-Belarusian border align with the discourse of governing migration through crime (Dowling & Inda, 2013). They draw inspiration from US migration governance practice spanning from the era of G.W. Bush to D. Trump; most importantly, they implement the EU’s practices already exercised at the Mediterranean Sea. The border with Belarus was governed through the employment of the over-securitisation of migration approach (Oduyayo, 2018: 120), emphasising the need to protect the border and framing migration as a criminal issue. By contrast, the border with Ukraine saw different border performances, resembling the more conventional practice of passport checking and being narrated beyond the criminalisation of migration discourse (Rumbaut et al., 2020). The newcomers were not seen as a threat and their claim for support was seen as legitimate. Overall, the crossing through the Polish-Ukrainian border was visually narrated through images of border guards smiling while conducting passport checks, conveying a sense of order and cooperation. The discrepancy between the two distinct approaches to border performance can be explained by the way people crossing subsequent borders were seen. In the two following sections, I discuss these approaches, suggesting that they may be explanatory of the discussed way Polish (and EU) borders were enacted.

### *The Patriarchal Myth of a Refugee*

Contrary to the view about the legitimate need to help the Ukrainians arriving in the EU, it is clear that the portrayal of the 2021 Polish-Belarusian border events closely resembles the narratives popularised in public and political discourses in Europe during the 2015 influx of people to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea.

As Nicolas De Genova (2017) excellently grasped, the portrayal of mobile individuals in 2015 by the mass media was dynamic and multifaceted. It included narratives of threat and portrayed those arriving on Europe's shores as undeserving of shelter. Following the shock experienced by European public opinion when the image of Aylan Kurdi's lifeless body circulated (Cambre 2019), narratives around "true refugees" began to emerge. However, these narratives quickly transformed in the wake of deadly terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, as well as alleged incidents of harassment in Cologne. They shifted back towards racialising people with migratory backgrounds and presenting them as an inevitable threat to European values, if not immediately, then in the future as they grow up (*ibid.*). Interestingly, even though Poland was not directly affected by the events transpiring at the EU's southern borders, Polish right-wing politicians actively participated in shaping these narratives (Legut & Pędziwiatr, 2018), mobilising anti-immigration sentiments during elections by creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear. While doing so, in line with their European colleagues and supported by certain media outlets, they constructed an image of the unwanted refugee (De Genova, 2017): male, arriving in large numbers, often without family and non-European. To reinforce this image, the rhetoric of the nation's defender, deeply ingrained in Polish national mythology, was introduced. Arguments rooted in the notion that a "true" male remains in the country during times of trouble to defend it, rather than fleeing and leaving women behind were put forth, insinuating the dishonourable intentions of the male newcomers. This narrative bolstered a patriarchal myth of the deserving refugee: vulnerable, female and associated with a child.

Since 2021, migrant people caught up in the Polish-Belarusian border events have been depicted by governmental units and right-wing media as a threat to Poland and the EU, bolstering the image of an unwanted refugee. At the very beginning of the pressure on the Polish border with Belarus, the echoes of the "proper males fighting for their country instead of leaving" were very tangible in the public discourse in Poland. Some months later, when Russia intensified its violence in Ukraine in February 2022, at Ukrainian-Polish border crossings white females with children queued seeking shelter. The myth of a deserving refugee, created by negation and in order to diminish non-European males arriving through both the Mediterranean and Belarus, materialised. Europe could not help but open the doors to them.

The interplay between the two discourses – that of dishonourable males leaving their women and countries in trouble and that of vulnerable females seeking shelter – was excellently summarised by Minister Mariusz Błaszczak during his address to the military stationed at the Polish-Belarusian border during Easter 2022:

*"We share the good of security with refugees from Ukraine. Over 2 million 700 thousand refugees have already found shelter in Poland. These are indeed refugees. These are women, these are children, these are people who are fleeing the tragedy of war, these are people who find shelter in Poland because Poland is safe"* (Mariusz Błaszczak, Minister of National Defence, 15 April 2022, Easter meeting with uniformed services working at the Polish-Belarusian border zone).

This sentiment resonated with local administrations and the general public.

As mentioned, the image of a deserving refugee, produced through negation in anti-immigration discourses (De Genova, 2017) and later consolidated in narrations about the influx of "deserving" Ukrainian females and minors (Sambaraju & Shrikant, 2023), materialised at the borders of the EU after Russian aggression in Ukraine in February 2022. Opening the doors (and borders) to these refugees constituted support for a patriarchal image of a male defender of the country, in line with the Ukrainian government's regulation prohibiting males from leaving Ukraine. In Poland, the months following February 2022 witnessed an unprecedented grassroots mobilisation to support Ukrainians fleeing the war, shocking both domestic and

international observers in light of the steadily rising anti-immigration attitudes in Poland over the previous eight years.

### *Racialised Bodies*<sup>5</sup>

As indicated, the patriarchal myth of the refugee was created by negation through contrasting vulnerable females with non-European males. This links to the racialisation of the people crossing the border. Indeed, the bodies at the border have been extensively discussed in the context of their racialisation (Parmar, 2020; Keskinen & Andreassen, 2017; Pacciardi, 2023; Korac, 2020; Balogun, 2023). These discussions regarded the depictions of people on the move, both as a threat and as vulnerable victims. The bodies of migrant people were presented as a potential threat bearing the risk of disease (Pacciardi, 2023). Moreover, researchers have made claims about the echoes of colonialism in humanitarian depictions of the suffering of brown and black bodies in relation to their cross-border movement (Franko, 2021). The “coloniality of power” was also recognised as standing behind the “racialised masculinity of the ‘Other’” discrediting males who migrate (Korec, 2020).

The crossings on the eastern EU border have not been an exception in this regard. Questions of the racialised body were quickly raised when the EU opened its borders to Ukrainians fleeing the war while closing them to non-Europeans. The issue of whiteness emerged as a recurring theme when comparing the reception of Ukrainians in Poland and the broader EU context to situations at other EU borders, particularly with Belarus and Russia, and through the Mediterranean Sea. Critics, activists, public opinion and academics have argued that white and culturally proximate people from Ukraine received a more open and favourable reception compared to those with darker skin arriving from more distant places (Balogun, 2023; Harper, 2022; Zaru, 2022). Some authors have contended that Ukrainians were afforded preferential treatment "based on their racialized privilege" (Näre et al., 2022: 256). Others pointed out that their whiteness was paired with sameness and Europeanness – an intersection that has brought a welcoming attitude from various EU Member States (Balogun, 2023). Interestingly, these arguments have been raised both as a criticism, voiced by activists, humanitarian organisations and scholars (Zaru, 2022; Balogun, 2023), and as a justification for the warm reception of Ukrainians by politicians (including right-wing politicians) and the general public (Szeptycki 2022). In one of the early analyses of media coverage of the reception of Ukrainians fleeing the war (Sambaraju & Shrikant, 2023), the authors explicitly stated that they do not make claims that white privilege played a role in shaping responses to the influx of people from Ukraine. Instead, they echo the narrative about the construction of a "good" and "deserving" refugee (De Genova, 2017), as pivotal in shaping the responses to the cross-border movement, both among the politicians and society at large, as I discussed earlier.

Nevertheless, the findings of the analyses presented here show that non-whites who fled Ukraine remained invisible in the images presented by governmental units. The image of a Ukrainian fleeing the war typically depicted a white, female or minor, dressed in European clothing and carrying luggage similar to what Europeans pack for holiday trips. This visual representation reinforced an aesthetic of cultural proximity against the stereotypical depiction of Europeans consistent with the hypothesis about the intersection of whiteness, sameness and

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<sup>5</sup> Following the reflexive turn in migration studies (Amelina 2021), I talk about racialised bodies rather than racialised refugees. The concepts of refugee and migrant reduce the positionality of those who migrate, making it unidimensional (Dahinden 2016). Moreover, the racialisation of the border-crossers is very often conducted on the very appearance of their body and the way it is interpreted. Other positionality indicators are rarely or to a limited extent taken into consideration when this is done. I wish to underline this reductionism based primarily on the bodily appearance by talking about racialised bodies.

Europeanness as a factor behind the warm reception of Ukrainians, both at a legislative and societal level. On the contrary, the image of a person trying to cross the Polish-Belarusian border was depicted as male and with darker hair and skin, operationalised in the captions as non-European, aligning closely with the concept of “racialised masculinity” (Korec, 2020). The intersectionality of race, gender and geographical origin therefore played a significant role in shaping the visual narrations of the two border events by the official governmental channels in Poland. They were shaped by the racialisation of the bodies at the border, as well as the patriarchal myth of a refugee, influencing the border performances of the Polish authorities.

## Conclusions

In this chapter, I have delineated two distinct approaches adopted by Polish governmental units in response to the events at two borders – the Polish-Ukrainian (2022) and the Polish-Belarusian (2021) borders. I have explained how these approaches differ in terms of visual narration, encompassing four key aspects: the role and type of uniformed services featured visually, the presentation of material objects, the depiction of people on the move, and the ambience and symbolism in the visuals. I have provided explanations for these differences, particularly by examining the performance of a border spectacle, assessing how the differences in these performances could have been influenced by the patriarchal myth of a deserving refugee and the racialisation of the bodies on the move.

It is evident that the approaches to the influx of people fleeing the war in Ukraine align with broader EU policies, with Poland positioned at the front line and reinforcing European humanitarian values. Interestingly, the situation at the Belarusian-Polish border also reflects a common EU approaches, albeit with more overt anti-immigration rhetoric from the Polish officials. The responses to the influx of people along the EU-Belarusian border appear rooted in the approaches commonly developed in the EU during the 2015 mass immigration to the EU, both through the Mediterranean Sea and the Balkan Route.

Despite often being perceived and presented, both by supporters and critics, as a unilateral action by the Polish conservative government aimed at preventing the EU from being "flooded" by undeserving bodies, this is essentially another manifestation of EU de-facto immigration policy, primarily focused on safeguarding the well-being of European citizens rather than prioritising the lives and safety of those stranded on land and at sea (see also Balogun, 2023: 11).

This analysis underscores the complexities and nuances surrounding border management within the EU and highlights the multifaceted nature of responses to border events framed as a “crisis”, which are shaped by political, cultural and historical factors. As the moral panic around Agnieszka Holland’s movie described in the introduction shows, the visual narrations around migration matter when governing migrations and shaping the responses to cross-border movement in civil society.

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