

Fortified Nationalism

Racializing Infrastructures and the Authoritarian Transformation of the Body Politic. A Field Trip to the Bifurcated Polish/EU Border Regime

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Abstract: In this paper, we take the shifting position of »Ukrainians« within the political and imaginary European space since the full Russian invasion and EU's activation of the »temporary protection directive« as an entry point to examine how the relation between the border, »race« and »Europeanness« is currently reaffirmed in the consolidation of a bifurcated European border regime. Against the backdrop of a research trip to the Polish-Belarusian border zone, we argue that the massive fortification of the EU external borders needs to be read not only as a »deterrence regime« directed outwards but in relation to its »internalizing effects« and in conjunction with the ongoing authoritarian transformation of European politics and societies. We examine the fortified border spectacle as racializing infrastructures and trace the emergence of a new spatio-moral regime we call »fortified nationalism« which is directed at reconstituting the body politic as a morally purified, white Christian nation.

Keywords: border fortification, racialization, authoritarian transformation, Poland, bifurcated border regime

THE BIFURCATED EUROPEAN ASYLUM AND PROTECTION SYSTEM

Only 10 days after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Council of Ministers of the European Union decided to activate the »mass influx directive« (Directive 2001/55/EC) for Ukrainians fleeing the war and to grant them temporary protection as well as direct access to employment, education, health care and other social services. However, while this mechanism has not been applied since its creation in 2001, even not at the height of the refugee movements in 2015, this time Central and Eastern European EU member states which in recent years have been rather known for their rigorous anti-asylum stance also supported this reception

policy. The activation of the directive, combined with the facilitation of comparably unbureaucratic border crossings, allowed for a relatively smooth arrival and direct integration into the host societies. The hopes, however, that this policy would prove that a liberal reception policy is also the more efficient one and therefore generalizable, were very quickly dashed in the light of a racializing media and political legitimization discourse that justified the readiness to accept Ukrainian refugees with their »cultural proximity« and »European roots« (see Br 24, 20.3. 2022; Der Spiegel, 3.3.2022) when, for example, the British »The Telegraph« wrote: »They seem so much like us«, while Bavarian Radio proclaimed »That's what makes it so upsetting. War is no longer something that touches only poor and remote areas. It can happen to anyone« (Br 24, 5.3.2022). And the »Los Angeles Times« of 2.3.2022 quoted the Bulgarian Prime Minister as follows: »These are not the refugees we are used to. They are Europeans, intelligent, educated people, some are even IT programmers. This is not the usual refugee wave of people with an unknown past.«

Against the background of Ukraine's disillusioning recent experiences with deferral, exclusion and unkept promises by the EU and its member states this sudden integration into narratives and imaginaries of »Europe« was anything but self-evident. Until lately the country's comprehensive Europeaness was routinely questioned by western media and policy makers. Ukraine's historical position in inter-imperial power relations with a long-ranging multi-culturalism and multi-religiosity, its asserted »cultural closeness« to Russia and the legacies of a state socialist past were cited as reasons to leave the country in a precarious geopolitical limbo and semi-European waiting room. These cultural and historical complexities are all at once erased in the new culturalist narrative,¹ which does not only characterize Ukraine as a henceforth undoubtedly »European country«, but rearticulates anew the racializing equation of Europe as a white², Christian continent (Goldberg 2006: 352).

1 | This misperception had its correlation in the frequently discriminatory treatment of people of color at border crossing points to EU countries or in reception facilities be it Ukrainian citizens as Roma, international students or labor migrants who had often lived in Ukraine for many years (see Babakova et al. 2022).

2 | We follow József Böröcz in his understanding of »Whiteness« as a »relational category« and a »moral-geopolitical superiority claim (...) for unconditional global privilege« (2021:1116). In this article, we will trace how »Whiteness« shifts in inner-European power relations, sometimes including and sometimes excluding Central, Eastern and South Eastern European regions and communities, perceiving and positioning them as »dirty white« to take up Böröcz's wording (ibid.).

In this paper, we take the shifting position of »Ukrainians«³ within the political and imaginary European space as an entry point to examine how the relation between »race« and »Europeanness« is currently reaffirmed in the establishment and consolidation of a bifurcated European border regime. Cultural and geographical proximity has again become a proxy for »race«⁴ in discourses and policies distinguishing sharply between racialized groups and their entitlement to move, to get access to the European Union and its infrastructures of support as well as to survive. Racializing discourses juxtapose displaced Ukrainians as »culturally close« and worthy of help and protection vis-à-vis migrants/refugees from the Global South and East, whose border crossings are routinely delegitimized, criminalized and framed as main threats for European societies' identity and cohesion. In this regard, the EU-asylum and protection system got further deeply bifurcated since March 2022 when the rigorous »deterrence regime« (Gammeltoft-Hansen/Tan 2017) towards people on the move from the Global South and East has been counterposed with a welcoming regime towards Ukrainians fleeing the war.

Critical scholars have shown that even though »race« was never absent as a central social category of hierarchization and allocating unequal life opportunities in post-war (western) Europe, an overt race vocabulary was tabooed by a »normative superstructure« and »epistemic practice« of »racial denial« (Alexopoulou 2011) claiming a »political racelessness« (Goldberg 2006: 336; see also Lentin 2008; El Tayeb 2016). Race formation in/of Europe worked hence through »proxies« such as the tropes of »foreigners« and »migrants« which were politically and discursively juxtaposed as »essential others« to a likewise essentialized notion of »Europeanness« (Alexopoulou 2011: 1; see as well De Genova 2017: 1769; Boatca 2015; Lewicki 2023; Böröcz 2021). What was lost here are the many internal hierarchies and ruptures which made »Europeanness« always an ambiguous relational entity: On the one side, designating a position of racialized exclusivity and collective privilege against

3 | We are referring here to »Ukrainians« as imagined and constructed in currently dominant European media and political discourses which tend to ignore the differentiations and ruptures within the population(s) of Ukraine.

4 | When we talk of »race«, we follow Nicolas De Genova's theoretical clarification, when he writes: »Regarding the subtlety of race, it should be clear but deserves to be explicitly and emphatically affirmed that this proposition in no way upholds any anachronistic notion of race as a »natural« (quasi-biological, pseudo-objective) fact of genealogy (...). But race is (...) a naturalized effect of a regime of domination. Thus race is not a fact of nature, so much as a fact of racism (...) reproduced on a global scale (...) through violent and oppressive regimes of (European/colonial) white supremacy.« (2017: 1770)

the »rest« (Hall) within a (post-) colonial world order; on the other side, riddled itself by violent histories of extractivist exploitation, subordination and inferiorization transforming especially the Eastern and Southern borderlands of the continent into dependent or disconnected peripheries. Theoretical debates on »Eastern Europeans« (Kalmar 2023; Lewicki 2023), »Dirty Whiteness« (Böröcz 2021), »European Slavery« (Bjelić 2022), or anti-Slavic racism (Tlostanova 2014) have contributed to map out the complexities of »race« and processes of racialization within these inner-European relational histories. Against the backdrop of this literature, we will argue that the border, concretely the current juncture of the EU-border regime, has to be placed in this matrix, as a locus and catalysator of racialization and above as an instrument and main device of the ongoing authoritarian transformation of European societies.

HOW DO RESTRICTIVE BORDER REGIMES AND (SOFT-)AUTHORITARIAN TRANSFORMATION INTERTWINE?

In hardly any other country the workings of this bifurcated border regime, its underlying racialized imaginaries and its interrelation with the establishment of authoritarian modes of governance can be studied in such an intensity as in Poland that shares a long borderline with Ukraine but as well with Belarus where since 2021 a growing number of irregular border crossings of migrants/refugees from the Global South have been registered (Adam et al., forthcoming). However, whereas the Polish right-wing nationalist government has been embracing the displaced Ukrainians with blue-and-yellow billboards in the public sphere, it was quick to denounce the movements from Belarus as a »hybrid attack«, pointing to the alleged instrumentalization of these migrants by the power holders in Minsk (ibd.). In a public statement Poland's prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki declared: »We are dealing with a new kind of war, a war in which migrants are a weapon« (Nova News, 21.11.2021) using hereby a discursive frame already established within EU-migration policy rhetoric: In 2020, when thousands of migrants tried to cross the Turkish land border to Greece, orchestrated to some extent by the Turkish state, the Greek government recoded these movements as »hybrid warfare« and suspended in an emergency act the submission of asylum applications for people arriving in the region for one month (see ECRE 2020). Now, it was EU-commission president Ursula von der Leyen who reset this frame with regard to the border crossings from Belarus by declaring already in September in front of the European Parliament: »Let's call it what it is: this is a hybrid attack to destabilize

Europe« (von der Leyen 2021a). This discursive framing was taken up and shared by politicians and media in Brussels as well as in many member states. In Poland, it gained a temporary omnipresence when government and allied media mobilized it in order to ›legitimize‹ the introduction of a state of emergency, restrictive and violent border policies as well as a massive fence construction causing a situation, the Polish sociologist Sylwia Urbańska referred to as »the border of humanity« (Gazeta Wyborcza 03.12.2022).⁵

Against this background, we, Jens Adam and Sabine Hess, decided to merge our two research interests and went together on a 10 days field research trip to the Polish-Belarusian border area in late September 2022 following the methodological approach of the ethnographic border regime analyses that calls for being in situ as best way to study the border in practice (Hess/Schmidt-Sembdner 2021; Transit Migration Forschungsgruppe 2007). Jens had examined authoritarian tendencies and political power struggles in Poland for some years already. As part of a research group on »soft authoritarianism«⁶ that studies comparable developments in countries like Turkey, Hungary or India, he has been tracing political and discursive strategies of the right-wing Polish government to gradually undermine the fundamentals of liberal democracy and to hereby change the rules of the political game to the steady disadvantage of the parliamentary and societal opposition. The term »soft« refers to the fact that this drift to authoritarian rule was not caused by a violent military take-over or a sudden regime change, but through a combination of legal, institutional and political changes introduced by a democratically legitimized government. The stepwise, but systematic, authoritarian transformation wears a ›garb of democracy‹ and is precisely for that reason even more difficult to discern and to oppose (Adam/Steinhauer/Randeria 2022; Adam et al. forthcoming). From his field research base in Warsaw, Jens observed from summer 2021 onwards how ›racialized others‹ became the target of state-induced violence along the Belarusian border and nationwide fear-mongering campaigns within public media, which the right-wing government had captured and transformed into one-sided propaganda channels right after its first electoral win in 2015. The blatant discrepancy with the positive reception given to Ukrainian war refugees just a few months later posed questions about the significance of »race« and

5 | In her regular reports published in the online magazine »Krytyka Polityczna«, Sylwia Urbańska has documented and analyzed the bifurcation of Polish border and migration regimes as well as the transformation of the border region through repressive, violent border policies (see for instance: Urbańska 2022; Sadura/Urbańska 2021; Sadura/Urbańska 2022).

6 | For further information on this research group based at the University of Bremen, please consult softauthoritarianisms.uni-bremen.de.

border regimes for the contemporary authoritarian transformations within Polish and other European democracies. Sabine was following the dynamics from Germany as part of her research interest in critical border regime studies and the recent dynamics of the EU-European border regime in its attempts to regain control over the movements of migration in response to the events in 2015/2016 (Hess/Kasperek 2017; Hess 2022). To trace the locally situated developments, we intended to speak with inhabitants of the Polish-Belarusian border region, with activists in smaller regionally and larger nationally operating NGOs, with colleagues from migration studies and legal scholars as well as with those trying to cross this border. This ethnographic mode of knowledge production by being at places of ›border work‹ – be it the kitchen of a supporter of people on the move incarcerated in two closed camps next to the German border, the headquarters of FRONTEX in Warsaw or a self-organized grassroots ›base camp‹ right at the Belarusian border from where activists start their search and rescue operations – is structuring as well this textual account.

What struck us immediately was the fact that while we had intense contact with activists, researchers, and even a high-ranking representative of Frontex, we did not succeed in talking to people on the move. They rather accompanied us as invisible others, in a kind of ghostly existence as we increasingly gained the impression while traveling through the country. We didn't meet migrants that had crossed the Belarusian border in station halls, at bus stops, in restaurants, shops or walking along the street. Contrary, for instance, to the situation along the Balkan route, refugee/migrants from the Global South are driven into public invisibility in contemporary Poland. But we have seen their traces in the Białowieża border region, and activists told us as well that they found 20 ways at least how people on the move managed to overcome the ›barrier‹, as the newly built border fence is called in public discourse.

This observation resonates well with the understanding of critical border studies of the strength of the movements of migration based on historically grown networks of people, knowledge, infrastructures and other resources enabling migration despite all states's efforts to channel and stop it. In this respect, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson speak of ›border struggles‹ (2013: 264) and their role for the constitution of borders as being ›marked by tensions between practices of border reinforcement and border crossing‹ (ibid.: 3). In a similar vein, ›ethnographic border regime analysis‹ (Transit Migration Forschungsgruppe 2007; Hess et al. 2014) conceives of border spaces as the product of conflicting forces, as the emergent result of the permanent struggle for escape on the one hand and enclosure on the other (Hess/Schmidt-Sembdner 2021). Statistical analyses of the effects of the US-Mexican border deterrence strategy starting already in the mid-1990s show as well that fortification mea-

asures undoubtedly may rise the social costs of crossing but don't stop the movements (Fan 2008; Kearney 1991).

Driving back from the highly militarized Polish-Belarusian border zone with the ghostly presence of migration, we started to ask ourselves again, what the fortification of border infrastructures is *really doing*. Nicholas De Genova's notion »border spectacle« (2015) points to the fact that border infrastructures are not just an apparatus of migration control, but should rather be studied in relation to their capacity to produce and demonstrate sovereign power and hence its internalizing political effects within the polities that construct it. In a similar manner, Gibney and Hansen define anti-migration infrastructures, measured against their own goals, as »both ineffectual and essential« and propose to study them in the light of performing sovereign power and citizenship (2003: 2, quoted by Lindberg/Khoshravi 2021: 357). With these conceptual perspectives in mind, we take the broadly stated return of material border infrastructures within critical border studies (Hänsel et al. 2022) as entry point to explore the emergence of a new spatio-moral regime that we call *fortified nationalism* and study it as one main ingredient of Poland's current (soft) authoritarian transformation. We argue that, besides the capturing of public media and state institutions, measures to bring the judiciary under control or the introduction of right-wing ideology in school curricula, the border seems to be an essential arena in which the »gradual fusion in both political rhetoric as well in practices of exercising power that blurs the line between democratic and authoritarian styles of governance« (Adam et al. forthcoming) currently takes place. As a localizable spectacle of the »nation under threat« and as a racializing machine producing pictures of dehumanized bodies and groups unworthy of entering the national territory, the border contributes to normalize a new brutality in public discourse and to recode state-induced violence as acts of self-defense (ibid.). We will show how the restrictive and spectacular performance of the border can be understood as an iconographic act of state sovereignty that pushes forward the fortification and racialization of the body politic. We outline how such border infrastructures are reaching far beyond the border region as such, and as well far beyond its claimed targets, namely unwanted migration, in a kind of internalizing effect by consolidating anti-liberal, authoritarian modes of governance within European societies (still) mostly constituted as liberal democracies.

Drawing on the insights about the historical ambivalences of »race« in Europe – as elaborated by critical race studies – we will show how, in the overlaps of repressive European border regimes and (soft) authoritarian transformations »race« is currently recentered and rearticulated as an essential structuring and hierarchizing category. Following De Genova we understand the »migration crisis« at the Polish-Belarusian border as a »racial crisis that derives fundamentally from the postcolonial condition

of ›Europe‹ (2017: 1765) and is at the same time exploited by right wing, nationalist governments – as the Polish one – to push forward imaginaries of Europe as a ›pure‹, white and Christian political formation (Goldberg 2006; Adam/Steinhauer/Randeria 2022: 32). In doing so we take up as well one of the oldest debates in border studies that is the question of the functionality and productivity of such material border infrastructures that are being constructed with billions of Euros despite the massive evidence of their ineffectiveness.⁷ Turning our focus on its internal dimension we want to suggest to conceptualize these fence regimes as *racializing infrastructures*.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF A REMOTE TOURIST AREA INTO A »SPECIAL LEGAL ZONE« – A FIELD ACCOUNT FROM THE BIAŁOWIEŻA FOREST

Białowieża is a small village in Eastern Poland, right at the border with Belarus. Its most characteristic feature is its location in an immense primeval forest that carries the same name. Stretching along both sides of the border the Białowieża Forest is best known for its extraordinary fauna and biosphere, which bring tourists, environmentalists as well as researchers into the remote area. In the past years, the village could live well from it.

In summer 2021 Białowieża and the entire region have fallen under the spotlight of international media coverage when border guards registered an increase in numbers of migrants/refugees from the Global South attempting to cross the border. The Polish authorities drew at once on the already established *weaponisation-of-migration discourse* and publicly denounced these movements as a ›hybrid attack‹ on Poland's borders and sovereignty arguing that the Belarusian regime had deliberately made access to visas easier and created new infrastructures to facilitate these mobilities. Ultimately, the entire region was transformed into a fortress: About 15,000 additional border guards, soldiers, police and members of the recently founded paramilitary volunteer group ›Territorial Defense Forces‹ were deployed to the sparsely populated area. When the Polish authorities declared a state of emergency in September 2021, Białowieża became part of a no-entry zone that stretched about three to twelve kilometers deep into Polish territory. Military checkpoints regulated and restricted access

7 | Despite the fortification of the European border regime the numbers of asylum applications in the EU increased by 63% in the first half of 2022 compared to the same period in 2021, and by 21% compared to the pre-Covid years (2019) (Eurostat 2023).

to the village. Journalists, doctors, lawyers, NGO-staff or activists were no longer allowed to enter the border zone and provide urgently needed emergency aid to lost and wandering around people (see Grupa Granica 2021; Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights 2022; Stowarzyszenie Interwencji Prawnej 2022). Even close family members were often refused permission to visit their relatives. Tourism, the main lifeline for the local economy, came to a complete standstill.

The state of emergency contributed to transform the border region from a remote tourist destination into a »special legal zone« (Hänsel forthcoming; Buckel/Wissel 2010): a territorially defined space, in which legal principles have been increasingly reduced and blurred – a paradigmatic effect of soft authoritarian modes of governance and, at the same time, a precondition for their further normalization. During our trip we met activists, researchers and lawyers that illustrated this process with many details. Pushbacks, still illegal according to international and European law, have become the standard administrative practice here. During the state of emergency, the legal procedures of the asylum system were generally closed down for those crossing this part of the border. Despite the fact that the Polish Supreme Court declared in a »landmark judgement« (Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights 2022: 5) this withholding of emergency aid illegal and the European Human Rights Court issued many interim measures »ordering that the migrants be provided with humanitarian help and the possibility of contacting an attorney« (Stowarzyszenie Interwencji Prawnej 2022: 8), the government stick to this harsh policy. Some of our research partners told us that border guards and soldiers got used to legitimize their action by referring to extraordinary »orders« they had received from their superiors – up to the president – and not to the written law. Witold Klaus, lawyer and professor for criminology in Warsaw, stated that »the law is not existent, the law does not apply« in the border region with Agamben's »state of exception« being an accurate description of what is going on there (see as well Grupa Granica 2021). According to critiques the government has above heavily bent the constitutional order by extending the extraordinary measures through a simple ministerial decree once the longest possible period set by the constitution was exhausted (Izdebski 2022).⁸ By blurring the lines between le-

⁸ | According to the Polish constitution, a state of emergency can initially be declared for 30 days and once be prolonged for further 60 days. When these 90 days were reached at the end of November 2021, the Polish government adopted an amendment to the »act on the protection of the state border« which authorized the minister of internal affairs to prolong the extraordinary measure of creating a no-entry zone by a simple administrative decree. Such a ministerial decree was issued on 30 November 2021 and extended several times until 1 July 2022 when the Polish government declared that the completion of the border fence had rendered

gality and illegality and watering down the basic constitutional distinction between a *state of emergency* and *non-exceptional states* of state functioning the new border regime contributed to hollow out the rule of law, to establish soft authoritarian modes of governance and to push forward the authoritarian transformation of Polish democracy (Adam et al. forthcoming).

The Białowieża Forest had a role to play in these restrictive policies, as along the Mexican-US border or the Mediterranean Sea natural conditions have been »weaponized« to interrupt migration routes from the Global South. In this case, swamps, forests and the bitter cold in autumn and winter have become instruments for the political and legal creation of another »hostile terrain« (de León 2015: 31), in which people on the move are exposed to life-threatening dangers. Inhabitants, activists, journalists and lawyers have counted 37 deaths in the Białowieża Forest (European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2023) until February 2023;⁹ 225 more people on the move were still reported missing then with many more having suffered injuries due to the temperature, lack of nutrition, not to forget the psychological traumas people get from being stuck in wet clothes and without orientation in a cold, swampy, animal-rich forest, often pushed back and forth many times by Polish and Belarusian border guards. The border monitoring network Grupa Granica reports the many different forms of violence against refugees/migrants culminating in the forest and resumes that »the prevalence of such practices makes it legitimate to call them ›torture‹« (2021: 15).¹⁰

ON BARBED WIRE AND STEEL FENCES OR: WHY DO YOU FORTIFY A BORDER?

The militarization and fortification of the border zone have come in stages: At the beginning huge piles of barbed wire were brought into the region to impede the ir-

the no-entry zone obsolete. (See for a more detailed analysis of these developments: Adam et al. forthcoming).

9 | These numbers are constantly rising. In May 2023 Polish colleagues speak about 43 people that have died along the border.

10 | The multi-layered violence that migrants/refugees face in the border area is also the main focus of the visual report »Zone of Hidden Violence«, produced and published in autumn 2022 by Polish researchers and activists organized as the Border Emergency Collective: https://vimeo.com/user182357215?embedded=true&source=owner_portrait&owner=182357215

regular crossings. Public TV showed pictures of the wire being rolled out along the border to emphasize the government's swift and decisive action. A few weeks later it broadcasted reports about migrants trying to cut through the barrier with pincers and scissors to illustrate the »storm on the border« Poland was ostensibly facing.¹¹

In the meantime, these temporary infrastructures have been replaced by permanent ones. Since autumn 2021, the Polish government has been planning the construction of a »barrier« along the border to Belarus. About 350 million euros were spent to build a 5,5-metre-high and 186-kilometre-long fence-construction with tight steel-rods and equipped with digital tracking technologies.¹² In the remaining areas rivers or swamps seemed good enough to prevent human mobility. When the barrier was completed in June 2022, Poland's Interior Minister declared the »problem« of irregular border crossings as solved. Public TV and government friendly print media supported him in mobilizing the narrative about the steadfastness of the Polish authorities that had successfully repelled the »hybrid attack« on the country's borders and sovereignty.

Nevertheless, all our interlocutors agreed on one point: The barrier has not stopped the border crossings. Migrants/refugees dig holes under the wall or climb trees and jump to the other side. They use ladders or wade through rivers. »There are many ways to cross this wall«, a restaurant owner in Białowieża told us. Just the injuries have changed. Doctors and humanitarian aid workers increasingly report broken bones and open flesh wounds as a result of such jumps from a few meters height and the barbed wire that had been put on top of the fence. In Warsaw, a high-ranking representative of Frontex shared this assessment with us:

»A bit of beating, a bit of stealing, a fence or a wall does not hold them back. If you have come this far, spent this much money, maybe a whole village is waiting for you to come through, then you try again until you get through. (...) Repressive border policies are simply not effective.«

In regard of the likewise ineffective but massively deployed detention and deportation infrastructures Sharam Khosravi and Annika Lindberg speak of the mighty »fantasy that states are able to control unwanted mobility« as essential driving force behind it (2021: 357). Several of our interlocutors have come to comparable conclusions. The restaurant owner in Białowieża, for instance, complained that the government would

11 | The wording »storm on the border« was constantly used during the news services of public media and by governmental politicians in autumn and winter 2021/22.

12 | On the dramatic environmental consequences of building this barrier/fence see Nowak (2022).

not care about the worries among the local population. All that mattered for them was to get the grand narrative through to their electorate: »We have protected the border. We have repelled the threat. Everything is ok again.« Two border activists put it like this: The restrictive policies may be ineffective in interrupting human mobility, but they are quite effective in mobilizing images and messages about staunch state action. From their point of view, the government has put much effort into pretending that militarization, closure and walls have resolved the ›problem‹, even though their regular rescue interventions to support stranded migrants prove this narrative wrong.

EPHEMERAL PRESENCE AND THE ERASURE OF TRACES: THREE MODES TO RENDER MIGRATION INVISIBLE

On our first morning in the border region, Kamila Fiałkowska, a border activist and member of the »Researchers on the Border«¹³ leads us to places, where people have recently camped, probably for a couple of days. Walking through the terrain, we find left behind shoes, jackets and sleeping bags, tooth brushes, children's socks and further personal belongings, food cans, plastic bottles and foils protecting against the humidity of the ground. People on the move are waiting at such places for family members or professional smugglers facilitating their clandestine journey through Poland towards Germany.¹⁴ Fence, barbed wire as well as the accompanying repressive and violent control practices are in so far politically effective as they make people disappear right after having crossed the border. They send out the message that there is no legitimate place for these groups of migrants/refugees within the Polish society. As these signs of a state enforced disappearance of migrants' bodies from public space were so impressive, we started to trace different modes and configurations of rendering migration invisible.

For those being caught by Polish security forces close to the border, immediate pushbacks towards Belarus were established as the standard procedure (Stowarzyszenie Interwencji Prawnej 2022: 7). Such collective expulsions and re-

13 | Information about this group of critical researchers who, among other things, maintain a research station in the border area, document developments along the border on a long-term basis and also organize regular seminars and workshops, can be found on the following webpage: bbng.org.

14 | Natalia Judzińska, co-founder of the »Researchers on the Border« network, documents these places as traces of the ephemeral presence of migrants in the region and repressive border policies (Judzińska/Sendyka 2022).

foulements – illegal according to international and European law – were even ›legalised‹ within the Polish legal order first by a ministerial decree in late August 2021 and a few weeks later by an amendment to the law on foreigners.¹⁵ Polish NGOs, lawyers, journalists and the Ombudsman for human rights collected much evidence that border guards and policemen systematically refuse to listen to verbal requests for international protection or to receive written papers with similar statements. Violating international conventions and European regulations, these migrants/refugees are forcefully expelled out of the country shortly after having entered. They don't appear as individual cases inside the Polish asylum system, at the most they are registered as numbers within the border guards' official statistics of ›successful‹ preventions of irregular crossings.

A second mode targets those that are apprehended further away from the border. With a high probability these persons are brought to one of the closed detention centres the Polish government has established all over the country, some of them reaching back to the 1990s. As the Forschungsgesellschaft Flucht und Migration (1995) had documented, the German government was heavily engaged at that time in equipping and supporting Poland with expertise, technical devices and money to set up a migration and border regime compatible with that one of the EU as ›bulwark‹ against the East and to serve as ›safe third country‹. Some of these facilities were operational ever since, others could easily be reactivated or were newly added to this widespread detention and deportation infrastructure.¹⁶ People on the move who get intercepted today are forced to stay in these prison-like facilities often situated in remote areas and on former military bases while their asylum procedure is negotiated or until their deportation proceeds. This practice to issue administrative detention from the first day onwards – which according to Polish law should be an exception and not the rule – excludes migrants/refugees from public life, deprives them of their most fundamental rights and tunnels them into what geographers call ›carceral circuits‹ (Gill et al. 2018). In Zielona Góra, not far away from the German border, activists shared one observation with us they themselves were struggling to make sense of. After having been forced to spend months shut away in the closed detention centres, inmates are regularly suddenly released – without preceding notice, without being informed about the reasons or the exact moment when this release will happen. Border guards bring the detainees to a provincial train station, where they abandon them without

15 | Ustawa z dnia 14 października 2021 r. o zmianie ustawy o cudzoziemcach oraz niektórych innych ustaw, 14 October 2021 (Prezydent Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej).

16 | On the issue of the difference between ›open‹ and ›closed centers‹ as part of this infrastructure, please see Garbolińska (2022).

train ticket, food or money, only providing them with the information that trains to Berlin are running in the one direction, trains to Warsaw in the opposite one. It is a strange combination of state-organized kidnapping with sudden abandonment, which our research partners interpret as a tacit call to leave the country rapidly and thus as an informal administrative way to erase traces of migration and refuge in Poland.

A third mode consists of the actors, sites, technical devices and informal networks that facilitate the transfer of border crossers from eastern Poland towards western European states, without getting in direct contact with Polish state agents or leaving traces in the country's registration files. As these infrastructures of mobility have to work silently and in clandestine due to the massive presence of police and military forces and the threat of criminalization, mostly avoiding public attention, we began thinking of them as »underground pathway«, similar to Maurice Stierl's notion of »underground seaway« (2020) for the Mediterranean escape in analogy of the historical »underground railroad« in the US (Whitehead 2016). Grassroots humanitarian rescue bases along the border are one decisive element of these infrastructures. We spent some time in one of the about five bases along the border, in which activists sleep and store the things they need for their emergency operations. While we were sitting and talking our interlocutors got the message about a group of four Arabic speaking males in need of support. Already in summer 2021 an alarm phone had been established. Until today this hot line coordinates aid operations by informing the closest base about number, sex, age, nationality, actual location and concrete needs. The volunteers compile backpacks with materials that enable the migrants/refugees to survive and to continue their journey: Dry, warm and dark clothes, shoes, hot soup and sweet tea, sleeping bags, medical and technical devices. However due to risks of being criminalized as smugglers or human traffickers, the activists confine themselves to bring these things, sometimes leaving them close by to the people on the move without direct contact. They avoid offering further help as transportation or accommodation as this could give rise to more serious legal measures of Polish authorities. Inevitably the repressive state practices differentiating between worthy and illegitimate groups of migrants are inscribed even in these practices of subversive solidarity. With this support the migrants/refugees are nonetheless in a much better situation to wait for the next link within the clandestine infrastructures: family members, taxi drivers or professional smugglers which bring them westwards, »tunnelling« them through Poland.

EXUBERANT VISIBILITY: PERFORMING SOLIDARITY AND RELATEDNESS TOWARDS UKRAINIAN REFUGEES

These modes of rendering certain people on the move invisible become even more apparent through a comparison with the diametrically opposed reception that displaced Ukrainians experienced after Russia's full-scale invasion. Until then, each Ukrainian citizen had a story to tell about time-consuming, bureaucratic and often humiliating border crossing procedures even after the visa requirement for entering the Schengen area were lifted in 2017. Since February 2022, Polish border guards showed a great willingness to simplify and accelerate immigration formalities for Ukrainian citizens, whereas people that could be read as ›non-white‹ were frequently confronted with discriminatory practices by guards on both sides of the Ukrainian-Polish border. Infrastructures of support were established practically overnight at border crossings, train stations, in city centres and along motorways. Ukrainian passport holders could use trains and urban transportation for free and, more importantly, instantly apply for a Polish social security number giving immediate access to the labour market and the public health system. They were entitled to move on towards other European countries as well as to return again to Poland after a while. In cities like Warsaw sign posts and message boards in Ukrainian language as well as displays of Ukrainian flags in shops, restaurants, on billboards and public buildings produced a blue-and-yellow, emotionally exuberant welcoming spectacle and with it came a high degree of visibility of this migration. These measures and infrastructures did not only make everyday life for Ukrainian citizens arriving in Poland after Russia's full invasion much easier compared to those migrants/refugees from the Global South trying to enter Poland via Belarus, but on top of that contained and conveyed strongly differentiating messages about which people on the move are welcome in the country and which bodies and lives are valued and protected by state authorities. Whereas Ukrainian citizens were granted an – even though still marginal (Krivonos 2022) – position within Poland's state biopolitics, migrants/refugees from the Global South were repelled, pushed out of the country and left to suffer or to die. Critical border studies have pointed to this bio-political differentiating power of border regimes as one of its central effects (Walters 2002; Transit Migration Forschungsgruppe 2007). Buckel and Wissel speak of the production of a »bio-political schism; an illegitimate partition, fragmentation« that is brought into the population by the border which – as they go on – »can only be based upon racism« (2010: 38). It is racism, Mbembe (2003) reminds us, likewise quoting Foucault, that provides the legitimacy »to expose certain populations to danger of death, to increase the risk of death, political death, expulsion, deportation etc. for certain people« (Foucault 1999: 297). The EU border regime increasingly

produces such constellations of exclusion and deprivation outside of the »political and legal society« (Buckel/Wissel 2010: 39) and co-creates hereby the conditions for a purifying, authoritarian transformation of the body politic.

During our trip, some of our Polish colleagues spoke consequently of a new »colour line« denoting that racializing practices and categories were increasingly used to legitimate this highly unequal treatment of flight/migration movements. The position of Ukrainians towards the national collective of Poles has gradually shifted over the last months. Before the full-fledged war the already numerous Ukrainian labour migrants (Duszczuk/Kaczmarczyk 2022) were mostly perceived as cheap seasonal workers in agriculture, food industries, construction and domestic care and often denied formalized contracts or full legal protection (Krivonos 2022). What matters here is that the bodies of Ukrainian labour migrants were categorized as »tougher«, »less vulnerable« or »capable of suffering« within this mode of perception and hereby in a sense racialized as »others«. Activists and researchers told us about the often precarious, exploitative working conditions as well as about the many administrative obstacles Ukrainian citizens were facing when they had tried to obtain a permanent residence and working permit. Migrants' self-organisations and independent trade unionists were supporting efforts for piecemeal improvements when Russia's invasion upset these parameters completely. Since then, dominant public discourses have positioned Ukrainians as »culturally close kins«, being »of us« and deserving »our« solidarity in their fight against a mutual enemy. A steady stream of media coverage has circulated images emphasizing commonalities in language, food, values or the historic fate of nations having had time and again to struggle with the imperial ambitions of their neighbours. During a protest rally at the evening of Russia's full-scale attack taking place in front of the Russian embassy in Warsaw the centrist opposition politician Szymon Hołownia spoke about »the same blood, the same DNA« that Poles and Ukrainians would share. He went on mentioning the similarities between the Polish and the Ukrainian national anthems as another aspect of this close relatedness: These were not the anthems of happy peoples, he stated, but of peoples who constantly had to fight for their freedom and their right to exist.¹⁷ A few days later, pupils chanted »Poles and Ukrainians – one family« at a protest demonstration through Warsaw's city centre. Many restaurants and milk bars changed the

17 | The two national anthems indeed begin with a similar motive. The Polish one opens with the sentence »Poland has not yet perished« or »Poland is not yet lost«; the Ukrainian one starts with: »Ukraine's freedom has not yet perished, nor has her glory«. The gathering on the evening of 24 February 2022 had begun with the playing of the Ukrainian national anthem, to which the politician referred here.

name of the traditional vegetarian dish »Russian Pierogi« into »Ukrainian Pierogi«. ¹⁸ Public space and media were full of such statements and symbolic acts, in which similarities between Poles and Ukrainians were discovered and displayed as well as relations of kinship were constructed and celebrated.

Ukrainians have thus lately undergone a quite radical shift of their moral and social position within Polish society from temporary, rather tolerated labour migrants and racialized ›others‹ to appreciated family members whose presence is unquestioned, for the time being, and who deserve solidarity and affection – a dynamic we designate as a gradual »whitening« of Ukrainians with regard to the Polish as well as the European political community. Drawing on recently increasing debates on »racialisation« and »racial orders« within Europe, we follow here a constructivist understanding of »whiteness« as not simply a matter of the colour or pigmentation of the skin, but rather a socio-political process producing some populations and regions as »white«. Likewise, »Blackness must be conceived as more capacious than a mere synonym for African origin«, as Nicolas De Genova reminds us (2017: 1170). József Böröcz speaks of »whiteness« as a »relational category« and a »moral-geopolitical superiority claim (...) for unconditional global privilege« (2021: 1116). He, as well as Manuela Boatcă (2015) and Aleksandra Lewicki (2023) among others point to the internal European ambivalences and hierarchies with a view of the history of the violent peripheralization of some European regions and populations such as the »Balkans«, consistently imagined as space of backwardness, and to the histories of antisemitism, anti-Roma or anti-Slavic racisms including slavery (Bjelić 2022), serfdom or the exploitation of forced labour as during the Nazi regime. In so far Aleksandra Lewicki describes the racial order within Europe as one that didn't evolve »in a binary logic«, rather one that has operated »along multiple axes« having »produced complex modes of racialisation« whereas the »East« has occupied an ambiguous position (...). While ›Eastern Whiteness‹ tended to be recognised as global marker of superiority [in a global context], it also signalled inferiority within hierarchies of Europeanness« (2023: 1484-85). In this sense Iva Kalmar describes this liminal, in-between-place of Eastern Europeans as »white, but not quite« (2022) and József Böröcz conceptualizes it as »dirty whiteness« that is created in relation to the privileged core of »eurowhiteness« (2021: 1129), covered by Western European powers and used as a marker of modernity and progress, many Eastern European elites

18 | The original name »Pierogi Ruskie« means in fact »Ruthenian Pierogi« – referring to »Ruthenia« as a central eastern European border region or to »Ruthenians« as an east Slavic ethnic group –, but in popular understanding »ruski(e)« is mostly and increasingly seen as referring to Russia. See: Tilles (2022).

have lived up for, but hardly ever fully reached (Hess 2007; Boatcă 2006). It is against this backdrop that we argue that Ukrainians,¹⁹ with Russia's full-scale invasion, have shifted within the moral-geopolitical matrix, in which »whiteness« is produced, as they have moved closer towards its core, the realms of »eurowhiteness«. Their »whiteness« has become less »dirty« – to take up Böröcz' wording – as their western neighbours and above the real »occupants of the »eurowhite« subject position« (2021: 1129) in Brussels and western European capitals showed their willingness to accept them as worthy, related subjects. It remains to be seen how sustainable this shift of position will be, but the differences to the modes of rendering migration from the Global South invisible as racialized disposable bodies, are in any case striking.

RACIALIZING INFRASTRUCTURES

What these radically disparate migration regimes first and foremost do is to reinforce *race* as a sorting category that differentiates morally between legitimate and illegitimate people on the move and to induce hereby racializing effects far into the everyday worlds of European societies. As we have shown the two so differently assembled border infrastructures – fortified and repellent towards Belarus; open and permeable towards Ukraine – continue in and produce diametrically opposed conditions for mobility. The distress of displaced Ukrainians was somewhat abated by arrangements and networks that supported their movement through Poland and beyond. Welcoming infrastructures did not only make traveling easier, but created visibility and thousands of everyday encounters with Poles. The hardship of people on the move from the Global South, by contrast, was actively magnified by politically created conditions that made border crossings dangerous, even lethal and movements westwards troublesome. Their mobility is interrupted, criminalized and forced into clandestineness.

What matters here are the racializing effects that these border infrastructures and configurations of mobility provoke. Critical border studies have always conceptualized the border not so much as a barrier but with regard to its governing, filtering and transformative dimension in view of its capacity to a »differential inclusion« in the labour markets of the Global North countries, how Mezzadra and Neilson put it (2013; see also Hess/Schmidt-Sembdner 2012). Michael Kearney has pointed to this

19 | Here again we refer to »Ukrainians« as imagined and constructed in currently dominant European media and political discourses; some Ukrainians, read as racialized others, are in fact excluded from this shift of position.

dimension already in the 1990s under the impression of the massive fortification of the US-Mexican border when he wrote:

»Rhetoric aside, [...] the de facto immigration policy of the unitedstate-sian government is not to make the US-Mexican border impermeable to the passage of ›illegal‹ entrants, but rather to regulate their flow, while at the same time maintaining the official distinctions between [...] kinds of people, that is to constitute classes of peoples« (Kearney 1991: 58).

Whereas Kearney and Mezzadra/Neilson were focusing in their analyses on the political economical aspects of the border regime we want to argue against the background of our Polish case study that the border regime not only produces classes but rearticulates as well »race« (Hess forthcoming). The newly enforced bifurcated Polish border regime turns out to be an »ontological apparatus« (Mbembe 2020: 67) that produces different categories of people. On the one hand, already racialized people from the Global South undergo a renewed and intensified racializing process by being denied access, and the exercise of their most fundamental rights. On the other hand, the gradual »whitening« of Ukrainians is pushed forward by a political and societal welcoming spectacle.

The legal scholar E. Tendayi Achiume argues that the border and immigration control regime of the postcolonial world order has to be characterized as »inherently racial« (2022: 445) as it builds on racial differentiations whereas whiteness emerges as privileged signifier. She defines »racial borders« as those that »disparately curtail movement (mobility) and political incorporation (membership) based on race and sustain international migration and mobility as racial privileges« (ibid.: 449). In her historical analyses with view on the emergence of the border and migration control regime of the earlier settler colonies such as the US and Australia she shows how as an openly racist agenda increasingly lost its legitimacy a »race-neutral migration apparatus« (ibid.: 455) was set up that rather worked through »racial proxies« such as nationality, culture or religion via such instruments as language test, carrier sanctions and especially the visa regime. As we already have shown, the European genealogy of race-formation is certainly more ambiguous, especially in relation to »whiteness« as central signifier. Additionally, also the history of migration in Europe, a different genesis of immigration control policies and their relation with the border forbids a simple transfer of Achiume's analyses to the European context (see Hess forthcoming).

Nevertheless, Böröcz argues that also in the European context »whiteness« still functions as a globally valuable »superiority claim« (2021) and is still performed as a membership card to the club. With the European Union this membership card has

found a powerful materialized equivalent with a bipartite mobility regime redrawing colonial boundaries: internally with freedom of movement and externally, with the construction of an EU external border (Kasperek 2021) and a visa regime for so called third country nationals (Adam/Hänsel 2021: 113; Hess forthcoming).

The discourse-production witnessed in the wake of the war against Ukraine, reanimates the equation between »Europe« and »whiteness«, and significantly deepens the racialization of migration from the Global South. Leslie Gross-Wyrzten's studies on North Africa point in a similar direction: In Morocco, the EU border regime and its differentiating racializing logic also intervenes into the highly sensitive racial orders in so far as it produces an »out-of-space blackness« by linking blackness most closely with illegitimate, illegal migration from sub-Saharan Africa (2020), and, one could follow, helps to »whiten« Moroccan citizens. However, Gross-Wyrzten demonstrates as well that this recalibration of race in the context of the multi-racial north African societies has far reaching effects also for those Moroccan citizens read as »black« that now find themselves being deported and expelled in the wake of raids by the police and newly objects of racial attacks on the streets.

In this sense, we conceptualize the recent construction of fences and the remilitarization of border spaces as *racializing infrastructures*, which not only differentiate and separate outwardly, but are also intended to organize a specific – namely racialized – communitization inwardly by invoking the national imaginary, which numerous European governments orchestrate very explicitly through racist campaigns.

FORTIFYING AND PURIFYING THE BODY POLITIC

These dynamics can be traced within Polish society as the two diverging border regimes have become effective in current struggles around citizenship, belonging and the composition of the body politic. Two public campaigns accompanying the repressive policies at the Polish-Belarusian border aimed at solidifying and possibly enlarging the electorate of the right-wing government by transforming the body politic into an imagined, rather restricted community of ›morally pure‹ and ›politically entitled‹ Poles.

In summer 2021, right-wing politicians, public TV and allied print media began flooding public discourse with images constructing ›racialized others‹ as carriers of various dangers and threats. Partly reinforcing already established tropes, they mobilized a chain of associations linking migrants from the Global South with violence, Islamic terrorism, criminality, disintegration and, to top it all, sexual perversion (Adam et al. forthcoming). Through the circulation of such narratives of threat and fear, the

fortification and militarization of the border area as well as such measures as the legalization of push-backs in Polish law were framed as the only reasonable political reaction pushed forward by a responsible government in order to protect Poles against the dangers looming at the eastern border.

But this fearmongering canvass normalizing racist positions towards migrants from the Global South and East was not enough. In late autumn 2021 right-wing politicians and activists together with pro-government media initiated a nationwide solidarity campaign – not for people on the move wandering around, suffering and dying in the Białowieża Forest, but for border guards, soldiers and policemen. For some weeks there was hardly any escape in public discourse and space from the campaign's central slogan: »As a wall behind the Polish uniform«. ²⁰ Polish public television channel TVP Info displayed an icon with this phrase around the clock and broadcasted reports, for instance, from Christmas markets in eastern Poland, where »food like grandma's« was prepared for the »boys and men« doing their service at the border. Municipalities put up posters and billboards with this slogan at their town halls. In Warsaw ministries and the head office of the National Bank were decorated with similar banners. In December 2021 TVP and the Polish armed forces jointly organized a flamboyant solidarity concert in an aircraft hangar, broadcasted on a Saturday evening at prime time. A wave of positive moral sentiments flowed through public discourse when TVP aired a report about pupils writing and drawing letters in which they thanked border guards and soldiers for protecting the country's border especially for them, the younger generation. In the next sequence soldiers, for their part, expressed their gratefulness after receiving such letters and highlighted that such writings from pupils gave them a real treat.

Hence, the establishment of a restrictive border regime was combined with the production and circulation of moral sentiments and affects – hatred and fear towards migrants and refugees whose legitimacy to cross the Polish-Belarusian border was fundamentally denied; recognition, gratefulness and commitment towards all Poles who showed their willingness to support the tough stance against the alleged »hybrid attack« (Adam/Steinhauer/Randeria 2022: 7). What matters here is that in both cases the right-wing government used self-evidently public and state institutions it had gradually taken over since its electoral victory in 2015 for this purpose: Leading positions in public media, courts, educational and cultural institutions or state-owned companies have quite systematically been filled with militant partisans, open supporters or benevolent followers. Consequently, such entities can by now easily be

20 | In Polish »Murem za Polskim Mundurem«, which could be translated as well as »in full support behind Polish soldiers«.

integrated into political infrastructures to mobilize ideologized narratives, one-sided messages and moral sentiments through the public sphere. In other words, as part of a soft authoritarian transformation of Polish democracy, the government has transformed these institutions into elements of a *socio-political fortress* that brings the right-wing camp into an even better position in its struggle for lasting cultural hegemony. These effects of seven years of soft authoritarian governance turn out to be the precondition for another technique to consolidate the government's grip on power: Reconstructing the body politic into a rather exclusive »moral community« (Fassin 2013: 211) of mutually committed Poles that recognize each other in reciprocal expressions of compliance and gratefulness (Adam/Steinhauer/Randeria 2022: 31). It is a *fortified version* of the body politic that emerges here through the violent exposure of ›racialized others‹ and the rejection of other forms of divergence from the ›purified nation‹, on the one hand, and the imagination of kin-like relations within a morally enclosed community that does not know any internal difference, on the other.

FORTIFIED NATIONALISM – RACIALIZED EUROPE

The new fence cutting through one of Europe's most precious nature reserves has not accomplished its officially stated purpose to bring irregular border crossings to a standstill or to close down the migration route via Belarus into the EU. It has still proven to be effective in symbolical and political ways. The fence has become a key element in assembling another European »border spectacle« (de Genova 2015), in which a national state performs its, in fact porous, sovereignty. Against this background we have concentrated in this article on tracing intersections between the fortification of borders and (soft) authoritarian shifts currently undermining Polish democracy. We have outlined the emergence of *fortified nationalism* as a new spatio-moral regime interlinking the symbolical and material enclosure of the national territory with restrictive border policies and political technologies to re-imagine and re-constitute the body politic as a *morally and racially pure community*. Drawing on already hijacked public and state institutions as well as on alliances with conservative, church-associated organizations and media to circulate political narratives and affects, *fortified nationalism* aims at moving the frontlines in present struggles for cultural hegemony. The fortification of the border, the steady production of scenarios of threat and fear as well as the mobilization of moral sentiments sharply differentiating between legitimate and illegitimate migration rearticulates *race* as a hierarchizing category and pushes forward the normalization of right-wing positions in public discourse.

Within this spatio-moral regime *race* is not only produced through border mechanisms that categorize human beings with regard to their entitlement or denial to move, to become visible and to get access to societal resources and infrastructures. Re-composing the body politic as a moral community can be read as a process of *self-racialization* of the Polish nation as a ›pure‹, white and Christian collective, well-fortified to fight off each ›perilous difference‹. Besides racialized ›external others‹, over the last years sexual(ized) minorities, activists and NGOs supporting migrants/refugees crossing the Belarusian border, feminists protesting against the almost complete abortion ban or more widely critiques of the *fortified and purified nation* have become targets of comparable campaigns questioning their position within the legitimate political collective. The pureness that is promoted here is not just racial in a narrow sense; it has far reaching moral connotations and political contours. For people on the move this newly racialized border regime can be understood as a fortified »deterrence regime« (Gammeltoft-Hansen/Tan 2017), that increasingly produces spaces reminiscent of Achille Mbembe's notion of »death worlds« (2003: 40) in which racialized lives are increasingly made disposable, deprived of even the basic human rights to move and to live.

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