

Lost in Securitization: Migration, Race, and Death at Europe's Eastern Border



Sleeping bag in Białowieża forest, 2026. Photo: Kasia Narkowicz

This year marks the fifth anniversary of the start of the ‘border crisis’ in Poland’s eastern borderlands and, consequently, the eastern border of the European Union. Kasia Narkowicz examines this crisis within the broader context of the political economy of migration and traces its roots to various forms of intersecting racialized violence.

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It is still cold in the early morning hours when we leave our accommodations in Gruszki, a village in eastern Poland, to search for bison. We are in the Białowieża Forest, about ten kilometers from the border wall that Poland’s government built in 2021 at a cost of over 350 million euros. The wall was constructed to prevent people from traveling into the EU from Belarus via Europe’s last primeval forest along the border. I am here as part of an international academic seminar with colleagues and comrades who work on borders globally. No bison or migrants were spotted in the borderlands this time.

Until recently, people crossing into Poland from Belarus would send location pins daily to [Grupa Granica](#) (Border Group), a conglomerate of organizations and activists supporting migrants. In the forest, they would be met by activists who would provide them with hot soup, a change of clothes, a power bank, and a shared sense of despair over the ever-growing securitization of the border.

The forest seems deserted right now, which may be because it’s still too cold. People who are on the move often get stuck here, sometimes for months. In the winter, the temperatures plummet to double-digits below zero making conditions for survival challenging. This is worsened by the frequency and scale of [pushbacks](#) taking place at

the borders and the fact that a year ago Poland's government suspended the right for asylum.

It is more likely, however, that the absence of people on the move today is a consequence of the deadly border wall. They have most likely rerouted their journeys. Once a much safer route into Europe than crossing the Mediterranean by boat, the Belarus-Poland border has become a poster child for border imperialism.

According to Researchers on the Border, most people on the move could have been assisted into Poland through asylum integration with the money spent on building the border wall. Instead, the number of pushbacks is much higher than anticipated. Many people are literally thrown back and forth between Poland and Belarus as if they were beach balls.

The 5.5-meter-high steel wall is topped with concertina wire, which is responsible for the most common injuries to people on the move. The borderland is made up of difficult terrain with swamps, rivers, and fallen-down trees. One wrong step, and someone unfamiliar with the area could get stuck in a swamp.



Swamp in Białowieża forest, 2026. Photo: Kasia Narkowicz

Some people die in this way, with their bodies being pulled out of swamps and rivers months or years later. They are often unrecognizable and sometimes unidentifiable. Of the more than 100 documented migrants who have died en route in the forest while

attempting to reach Poland, some died from injuries caused directly by the border wall. One of them was Mohammad from Syria.

April 2023, Poland-Belarus border

One night in April 2023, Mohammad fell from a wall along the border between Poland and Belarus, which stands five and a half meters tall. He had traveled from Lebanon, where he had been displaced by the Syrian war. Mohammad was a 58-year-old Syrian from Daraa, a key location for the civil uprising that preceded the war, as well as an area devastated by drought.

He most likely flew to Minsk and was then subjected to what is consistently referred to as the '[hybrid war](#)' waged by Alexander Lukashenko's regime against Europe. Mohammed climbed up the wall while attempting to cross the border between Poland and Belarus, but he got stuck in the barbed wire. He then fell off very close to the village of Stare Masiewo. He had internal injuries from the fall, a broken leg, and a shredded leg from the concertina.

His case is not extraordinary. Like many millions before him, he left his region in search of a more bearable life and perhaps to reunite with his daughter, who was studying abroad. They reunited when she came to the hospital in Poland where he was already in a coma, dying shortly after. He became the 43rd victim of the border, joining the sad ranks of over [100 known migrants](#) who have died trying to cross into Poland. Several hundred more are still missing.

Few migrants die like Mohammed, in a hospital while receiving care. Most die alone in the forest. This was the case for 28-year-old Ethiopian woman Mahlet Kassa, whose body was found by [Piotr Czaban](#), a journalist who relentlessly documents the violence on the Poland-Belarus border. Mahlet's body was found in the forest in February 2023. While she was still alive, her travel companions shared her exact GPS location with the border guards in hopes that they would come to her aid. Instead of receiving help, the group got pushed back into Belarus.

Many, like Mahlet, are young people. There are also [children crossing the border](#), several hundred every year, most of them unaccompanied. The youngest victim of the Poland-Belarus border was Halikari Dhaker, a 24-week-old Kurdish baby who died stillborn alongside his mother. Halikari is buried in the Muslim cemetery in the nearby village of Bohoniki.



Border wall in Stare Masiewo, 2026. Photo: Kasia Narkowicz

Mikołaj Grynberg's book titled "[Jezus umarł w Polsce](#)" ("Jesus died in Poland") captures the early days of the most recent and, for Poland, unprecedented inflow of migrants traveling from outside Europe seeking entry into the EU through the Poland-Belarus border. Similar to Agnieszka Holland's black-and-white film "[Green Border](#)," Grynberg reads the current 'migrant crisis' on the eastern border through the lens of history.

More specifically, he references the anti-Semitic violence that occurred in these very borderlands some eight decades earlier, when Jewish communities made up the majority of the inhabitants in several villages. Grynberg and Holland, alongside numerous scholars, connect the violence of today's migration politics on the Poland-Belarus border to its dark history.

Shifting migration routes in Central and Eastern Europe

Over the past two decades, Central and Eastern Europe has become a region of emigration, with its citizens predominantly filling low-paying and insecure positions across Western Europe, e.g. as care workers in Germany or fruit pickers in the UK. These mobile workers [kept Europe running](#), even during the global pandemic when their work posed additional risks alongside already fragile working conditions.

Many work in exploitative conditions that, as scholar Polina Manolova argues, make a "[dignified life impossible](#)" in a neoliberal system that feeds on their degradation. This

deepens the East-West divide rather than collapsing it, as the entrenched idea persists that “someone has to pick German strawberries” – and that someone is Eastern European. This lays bare the continuity of Eastern European Othering.

Alongside these outward migration processes, Central and Eastern Europe is now receiving migrants from outside Europe on an unprecedented scale. Thus, the region is becoming one of both emigration and immigration, and in both contexts, migration is racialized. This shift has unfolded amid a growing nod towards authoritarian populist politics. After losing the 2023 elections, the far-right Law and Justice Party (PiS), which ran on an anti-immigrant agenda, was replaced by a new center-right government led by Donald Tusk. This new government has ramped up racist anti-immigrant rhetoric, openly warning of a ‘Muslim invasion’ through the Belarus border.



Białowieża forest, 2026. Photo: Kasia Narkowicz

From 2021 until recently, the EU’s eastern land border experienced unprecedented movement, with an increase in irregular border crossings exceeding tenfold compared to 2020. This is the same border that people fleeing Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine used. Yet, their refugee status was not questioned, and their journeys were not criminalized when they were perceived as ‘white Eastern Europeans.’

The idea that Central and Eastern Europe is somehow exempt from scrutiny regarding its role in global racial regimes because it never colonized other regions has long been challenged. The region’s involvement in colonialism and global racial hierarchies has been a key topic in postcolonial and decolonial Eastern European scholarship.

This year marks the fifth anniversary of the beginning of the ‘border crisis’ in Poland’s eastern borderlands, and, by extension, the eastern border of the European Union. Although people have stopped crossing the Poland-Belarus border for now, the border wall and drones continue to hover loudly through the Białowieża Forest.

This is indeed a crisis, but not one of people on the move. Rather, it is a crisis of overlapping and intersecting issues – white supremacy, border imperialism, and climate change – that entangle all species, human and nonhuman alike, in a web that makes it difficult to understand how to be human.

Note from the editors: This piece is based on an international seminar that the author recently attended. The seminar was held in April 2026 at the Poland-Belarus border and organized by Researchers on the Border ([Badacze i Badaczki na Granicy](#)). The organization collaborates closely with the We Are Monitoring Association and the Border Death Monitoring Group to document border deaths.

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