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Understanding the performance of discretion at the Polish-German border through the lens of emotional labour

Klajn, M.E.; Woude, M.A.H. van der

Citation

Klajn, M. E., & Woude, M. A. H. van der. (2025). Understanding the performance of discretion at the Polish-German border through the lens of emotional labour. *European Journal Of Criminology*, 1-22.
doi:10.1177/14773708251348326

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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European Journal of Criminology

1–22

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DOI: 10.1177/14773708251348326

journals.sagepub.com/home/euc**Maryla Klajn**

Leiden Law School, the Netherlands

Maartje van der Woude 

Leiden Law School, the Netherlands

Abstract

This study investigates the role of emotional labour in the discretionary practices of Polish Border Guards operating along the Polish-German border – an interface where global migration regimes intersect with national ideologies. Amid Poland's increasingly nationalist stance on migration, Border Guards face complex social and institutional pressures, continually navigating personal biases, professional norms, and societal expectations. Drawing on ethnographic methods, including participant observation, field notes, and semi-structured interviews, the research explores how officers manage emotions such as empathy, detachment, and authority, and how these affect their discretionary decision-making during encounters with migrants. The findings reveal that both discretion and emotional labour in border policing are profoundly shaped by cultural and institutional contexts. Polish officers often perform discretion through assertive or emotionally detached behaviours, moulded by organizational norms and dominant narratives around 'Polishness'. This alignment between individual predispositions and institutional ideology enables officers to rationalize aggressive or exclusionary practices, which are frequently reinforced by informal reward structures privileging assertiveness over procedural impartiality. The study argues that Polish Border Guards engage in a form of 'emotional governance', wherein emotional regulation becomes a tool for enacting nationalist agendas. This fusion of emotional labour and discretionary authority reflects broader dynamics at the EU's external borders, where local ideologies may conflict with EU principles of free movement and humane treatment. Ultimately, the research

Corresponding author:

Maartje van der Woude, Van Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance & Society, Leiden Law School, PO BOX 9520, Room B 1.22, Leiden, the Netherlands.

Email: m.a.h.vanderwoude@law.leidenuniv.nl

calls for further comparative analysis of emotional labour and discretion in border control across diverse cultural contexts, highlighting implications for policy harmonization within the Schengen framework.

Keywords

Border policing, discretion, emotional labour, organizational dynamics, Polishness

Introduction

In recent decades, border and migration scholarship has increasingly scrutinized global discourses on mobility securitization, leading to the development of theoretical frameworks such as deportability (De Genova, 2010), crimmigration (Stumpf, 2006), and the ‘crimmigrant other’ (Franko, 2019). While these theories acknowledge the impact of globalization, research has revealed significant local variations in their application, shaped by distinct cultural and legislative contexts (Gundhus, 2017; Vrăbiescu, 2021). Such glocalised analyses have provided valuable insight into the complex, multiscale dynamics of migration control (Wonders, 2017), emphasizing the interaction between dominant (supra)national agendas and the crucial role of local implementation contexts (Van der Woude, 2025). Research on Europe’s intra-Schengen borderlands (Casella Colombeau, 2017, 2020; Klajn, 2020; Van der Woude, 2025) demonstrates that despite a shared EU framework on asylum and migration – of which the Schengen Borders Code (SBC) forms a key part – member states exhibit divergent policing practices within their internal borders (EMN, 2018). The SBC is the European regulatory framework that governs the movement of persons across national borders. These discrepancies can be attributed to discretionary powers at both national and street-level implementation (Lipsky, 2010; Thym and Bornemann, 2021; Stiller, 2004). While the concept of street-level bureaucrats as *de facto* policymakers has been extensively theorized (Hupe and Hill, 2007; Lipsky, 2010; Zacka, 2017), less attention has been paid to the interplay between organizational dynamics and frontline discretion.

This observation aligns with the findings of Borrelli et al. (2023), who, in their review of discretion in migration control, highlight that the influence of organizational structures on the discretionary actions of street-level border agents remains underexplored. Focusing on the Polish-German border – a comparatively under-researched intra-Schengen region – this article examines the discretionary practices of Polish Border Guards through the lens of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). Recognizing these agents as ‘interpretative actors’ (Côté-Boucher et al., 2014: 199), the research investigates how shifts in state rationalities, organizational imperatives, and migrant interactions shape their decision-making. Viewing discretion through the prism of emotional labour provides new insights into how agents navigate the tension between professional codes, societal narratives around immigration, and personal moral judgements. In this context, the emotional regulation required to meet organizational expectations – whether formal or informal – functions as a mechanism of control, shaping how discretion is exercised in everyday practice.

Poland, with its unique position straddling both intra-Schengen and external EU borders and its recent nationalist political turn, presents a compelling case study. Historically known for its welcoming approach to migration – partly due to a legacy

of being subjected to restrictive regimes itself – Poland had, for decades, embraced an open asylum policy (Okólski, 1999). This stance shifted significantly in the early 2000s during Poland's accession to the EU and Schengen, and even more drastically after the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party came to power in 2015 (Nowak, 2019). Today, even among Poland's more progressive political factions, migration is increasingly framed through lenses of fear, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and racialized stereotypes. A stark illustration of this trend is the current political discourse advocating for the suspension of migrants' right to asylum (Business Insider, 2024). Citing so-called 'hybrid warfare', the Polish government has claimed that Russia and Belarus are weaponizing Middle Eastern migrants to destabilize the Polish-EU border (Chochowski, 2021; Gavin, 2024). Concurrently, rumours of undercover *Komitet gosoodarstvennoj bezopasnosti* (KGB, Russian secret service) or other foreign agents posing as refugees have gained traction in the public discourse – despite a complete lack of evidence (Polskie Radio, 2024).

Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that Poland also conducts checks within its intra-Schengen borderlands. These checks – legally grounded in Article 23 of the SBC – permit member states to conduct police and migration controls on traffic entering through internal borders. Notably, these checks do not require reasonable suspicion and serve as a compensatory mechanism following the removal of border controls, in line with the Schengen principle of free movement of goods, services, and people (Van der Woude, 2025). Unlike countries such as Germany, France, and the Netherlands – which have geographically demarcated areas for such Article 23 checks – Poland has not imposed such spatial limitations. Instead, Polish authorities interpret the entire national territory as constituting a 'borderland', citing Poland's dual status as both an internal and external EU border state (Sudul, 2019). This expansive interpretation grants Border Guards the authority to conduct checks anywhere in the country, at any time. Though formally distinct from border checks, these controls closely resemble them in practice, with the main difference being that not all travellers are stopped. Officially, officers rely on 'risk analysis profiles' to guide these decisions. In practice, however, many rely on intuition or personal conceptions of who poses a threat to national and Schengen security.

Employing a comprehensive qualitative methodology – including field notes, observations, and interviews – this study explores how emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983: 59) informs the discretionary decisions of Polish Border Guards. It examines how notions of masculinity, 'Polishness', and other sociocultural influences permeate discretionary border policing. Additionally, it underscores the importance of local context in shaping how emotional labour manifests in different areas of the Polish-German borderland. The article concludes by situating its empirical insights within broader debates on discretionary border policing in the EU, highlighting the challenges posed by variable local enforcement within an ostensibly unified migration regime.

Theoretical framework: Discretion, bordering and emotional labour

The workings of migration and border control apparatuses rely heavily on discretionary decisions taken by various actors within these systems (Feldman, 2011). Discretion, in

the context of this article, is conceptualized primarily through a socio-legal lens, combining both bottom-up and top-down perspectives. The bottom-up approach understands discretion and legal practices as endogenous – emerging from and interacting with the social realities they seek to regulate (Edelman, 2004). The top-down perspective, meanwhile, emphasizes how high-level political decisions delegate substantial policymaking authority to bureaucratic actors (Huber and Shipan, 2002; see also Schneider, 1992). Discretion, therefore, is not merely an implementation tool but a generative force in policymaking – distributed across legislative bodies, administrative agencies, levels of governance, and jurisdictional domains (Grattet and Jenness, 2005). Seeking a more encompassing understanding of discretion across disciplines, Evans and Hupe (2019: 1) observe:

Discretion presumes some form of hierarchical relationship. A body or person grants a degree of circumscribed freedom to another body or person, to be exercised in a particular setting according to particular standards. As such, the phenomenon of discretion is generic and ubiquitous – although its occurrence is pluriform and dynamic.

This definition acknowledges the hierarchical premise of discretion while also questioning it, inviting scholars to explore its operation beyond formal authority structures. Furthermore, it emphasizes that discretion is inherently tied to ‘particular standards’, broadly understood as legal, organizational, and cultural norms. This underscores the importance of contextualizing discretionary decisions in terms of both legal–rational and informal social frameworks. From a socio-legal standpoint, understanding discretion requires examining the interpretive practices, frames, and social contexts that shape decision-making (Hawkins, 1992; Manning and Hawkins, 1990). This view moves beyond mapping the formal limits of discretionary space and instead positions discretion as an act of power embedded within societal, legal, political, and cultural settings.

Although street-level decisions are the most visible acts of discretion, understanding their nature requires looking beyond the individual level. In the growing fields of border criminology and the criminology of mobility, there is increasing – but still insufficient – attention to the everyday discretionary practices of border officials (see Aliverti, 2021; Armenta and Alvarez, 2017; Côté-Boucher, 2018; Vega, 2018). Loftus (2015: 118) asserts:

Understanding border policing is not only a matter of exploring the broader social, political and legal context. It also invites examination of the culture and practices of those involved in the daily upkeep of border priorities. To date, little attention has been paid to the practices and occupational consciousness of social control professionals responsible for policing the border.

In response, Achermann (2021) combines structuration theory, street-level bureaucracy, and organizational theory to analyse the rationalities structuring the discretionary practices of Swiss Border Guards. She concludes: ‘Conceptualising border guards as street-level bureaucrats acting within a state organisation revealed rationalities rarely mentioned in the border-control literature but that are crucial to an understanding of how they act’ (2021:16).

The importance of focusing more on culture and on organizational dynamics in really understanding often highly discretionary border police practices is also echoed by Vega (2019: 2019). Entering the study of bordering practices and border control from a more sociological perspective, she calls for researchers to delve deeper into the work lives and occupational context of contemporary immigration agents (Vega, 2019: 1173). While focusing on the Canadian context, in her 2018 book *Côté-Boucher* also notes that ‘despite a wide literature concerned with border control, the everyday work of border officers is poorly understood and little theorized’ (2018: 149–168). Both scholars recognize the valuable insights provided by street-level bureaucracy theory (e.g., Lipsky, 2010), particularly regarding how immigration officials shape policy through their discretionary decisions. However, they also highlight the need for closer empirical analysis of how these decisions are shaped by organizational norms, public expectations, and interactions with clients. This is where emotional labour scholarship offers a useful conceptual lens to enrich the understanding of discretionary decision-making on the ground.

The concept of emotional labour, first introduced by Hochschild (1983), primarily examines the ways in which individuals manage their emotions to align with organizational expectations, especially in service-oriented roles. Building on this foundation, subsequent literature has largely focused on actors in customer-facing professions – such as nurses, teachers, flight attendants, and retail workers – who frequently encounter emotionally charged situations and are required to regulate their feelings to provide a consistent, ‘authentic’ experience for clients or patients (e.g., Diefendorff et al., 2005; Grandey, 2003). Studies show that this emotional regulation, often manifested as surface acting or deep acting, can significantly impact workers’ well-being and job satisfaction (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). Surface acting and deep acting are strategies used to meet organizational display rules, which (implicitly) prescribe the types of emotions that employees should visibly express to align with professional standards. Surface acting involves adjusting only outward expressions to conform to these display rules without altering underlying feelings, while deep acting requires modifying internal emotions to authentically align with expected displays, thus achieving a more genuine compliance with organizational norms.

Three types of display rules are identified in the literature: societal, organizational, and occupational norms (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987). Whereas societal display rules indicate how the expression of emotion in organizational roles is influenced by the more general norms of the culture in which an organization is based (Mann, 1997: 5; see also Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993), organizational display rules are guidelines intended to achieve the aims and objectives laid down by the organization (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). Occupational display rules emerge in ‘occupational communities’ of individuals engaged in the same type of work; who identify (positively) with their work; and who share with one another a set of values, norms, and perspectives (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984: 287). These occupational cultures establish norms based on codes of practice, which dictate proper and improper behaviours and develop task rituals and work codes for certain routine practices (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984).

Focusing on display rules provides insight into how street-level agents, such as social workers, police officers, and other public service employees, navigate their roles with individual discretion while still aligning with organizational expectations. Zacka

(2017) emphasizes that these agents must constantly balance empathy with authority, making interpretive decisions that are deeply emotional and ethical. Display rules, in this context, shape the emotional expressions that agents are expected to convey in various situations, influencing how they exercise their discretion. By adhering to or deviating from these emotional norms, agents can negotiate the tension between the impersonal demands of their roles and the personal moral judgements they make in real time, thus using emotional labour as a tool to mediate between state authority and human compassion.

Recent scholarship has further expanded the scope of emotional labour beyond traditional service roles to include positions involving interpersonal management, such as social work and caregiving, as well as the realm of criminal justice, where emotional expression is tightly intertwined with professional effectiveness and organizational outcomes (Humphrey et al., 2015; Philips et al., 2021). As part of this expansion, scholars have also begun to scrutinize the actions of border agents through the lens of emotional labour. Yet, only a handful of studies connect the regulation of emotions to the wielding of discretionary power by border police officers. In *Emotional Taint* (2015), Rivera explores the emotional and ethical complexities of U.S. Border Patrol agents' work and the discretion they must employ in emotionally charged situations. Rivera finds that discretion is a key part of how agents manage the tensions between their personal beliefs, public perceptions, and the expectations of their role. By performing emotional labour, agents selectively express or suppress emotions to navigate encounters where they must balance enforcement duties with personal empathy or sympathy. For example, agents often employ discretion when deciding how aggressively to confront individuals or whether to adopt a more compassionate approach, recognizing that their emotional displays can influence both individual interactions and public perceptions of the Border Patrol. Rivera's work suggests that this discretionary use of emotional labour helps agents manage the stigma of 'dirty work' and negotiate their identities within a complex, often criticized role. In *Policing the Borders Within* (2020), Aliverti illustrates how border agents in the UK manage the conflicting pressures of enforcing immigration laws while often sympathizing with the individuals affected by these policies. Aliverti argues that this work requires agents to perform emotional labour by managing their own and others' emotions, often navigating between detachment and empathy, which shapes the way they exercise discretion in their roles. Similarly, Borrelli's (2021) work on the Swedish Border Police sheds light on the tensions that Swedish border agents face when deciding whom to apprehend or release. The study reveals how agents are bound by display rules that necessitate emotional neutrality, yet they must regularly manage personal moral dilemmas when interacting with migrants. Borrelli's findings indicate that border agents rely on surface acting – suppressing personal emotions to appear impartial – to align with the impersonal enforcement ideals of the border police. By managing their own emotions and aligning with institutional expectations, Swedish border officers exercise discretion in ways that can reinforce or challenge broader discourses on migration and crime.

Whereas the previous studies found a tension between officers' personal feelings of empathy and sympathy and organizational policies, Griffiths (2024) paints a slightly different picture. In *The Emotional Governance of Immigration Controls*, she examines how

emotions like anger, disgust, suspicion, and fear drive both policy and individual behaviours in immigration enforcement, often shaping officers' (discretionary) interactions with migrants. She finds that immigration practitioners commonly employ emotional detachment to maintain authority, yet this detachment creates a disinterest in the emotional experiences of migrants themselves. Griffiths highlights how these emotion-driven practices and detachment strategies influence not only enforcement dynamics but also serve to reinforce broader societal biases within immigration governance. After explaining the methodological approach underpinning this article, the results section will illustrate where the Polish case fits into this emerging scholarship on border policing, discretion, and emotional labour.

Methodology

This research employed an ethnographic multi-site case study approach to investigate discretionary practices at the intra-Schengen Poland–Germany border. The first author conducted fieldwork across four locations, including the Regional Command and three outposts, for a total of over 900 hours during the latter half of 2018. Data was primarily gathered through participant observation during ride-alongs with different Polish Border Guard units, with time evenly distributed across the four sites (see Figure 1).

Enacting an ethnographic multi-site case study design

The combination of ethnography and case study methodologies is particularly effective for systematic, comparative data collection across multiple sites. Ethnography aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of a specific group, community, or institution through diverse primary and secondary methods. In contrast, a case study – defined as an ‘empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context’ (Yin, 2009), or ‘an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units’ (Gerring, 2004) – emphasizes the relationship between a phenomenon and its context. This combined approach enabled an analysis that integrates both micro-level (street-level/patrol unit/local) and meso-level (institutional/organizational/occupational) perspectives, with each outpost serving as a distinct unit of analysis.

Qualitative research on emotional labour through the lens of oral narratives

The advantages of using qualitative methods for data collection and analysis are well established in academic literature, particularly in socio-legal or socio-anthropological research that seeks to understand the nuances of the daily lived realities of a studied group, community, institution, or society (Lune and Berg, 2017; Rubin, 2021). This kind of research, grounded in qualitative and ethnographic traditions, is not intended to meet the standards of quantitative methodologies such as generalizability, standardization, or repeatability. As Rubin writes, ‘when people pester us about how generalizable our studies are, their question kind of misses the point of the research’ (Rubin, 2021: 22).

# outpost	Location/setting	Traffic/migration routes	Staff – Commander in Chief	Staff – size and demographics
Outpost 1	the outpost was located in a large city, split between Poland and Germany,	one of the major traffic and migration routes from the South-East towards Western Europe	representing the 'old generation' (before PL was in EU/Schengen), vain, arrogant, about to retire; more focused on recognizing his accomplishments from the past than necessarily pressure the outpost for current results	no women on street level / in the patrol teams; Majority of older officers, with 15+ years served; Very few new recruits
Outpost 2	the outpost was located on a side of a small village in a forested area; smallest in the size of the structure, the number of staff, and the intensity of the traffic	Very low intensity of the traffic; not a known or popular border crossing place except for the more local populations	promoted just a couple of days before commencement of my fieldwork; young, ambitious, very involved in the patrol team's results on daily basis; wanting to 'prove himself', strong pressure on 'results' (detentions, deportations etc.)	very small number of staff, mostly 'older generation', a couple new recruits and two women on the street level patrol team
Outpost 3	the outpost was located directly in a large structure on the border	the crossing of some of the busiest East-West traffic routes between Poland and Germany	very accomplished and recognized as the Commander-in-Chief of the busiest and 'most successful' outpost; pretty close to retirement, but so far not interested in retiring; even though not often directly involved or present when it came to patrol team, he always seemed extremely well informed about everything happening on street level	large number of staff, with a constant flow of new recruits, which consisted of a significant number of females (about half of the patrol team) + the 'old generation' group, all males, mostly with 15+ years served

Figure 1. Characteristics of the different fieldwork sites.

Source: Data collected by Klajn.

Undoubtedly, collecting large-scale, systematic, and replicable qualitative data is not the objective in a study that aims to understand the subjective and nuanced realities of everyday routines as lived and interpreted by respondents – in this case, Polish Border

Guards. Given this study’s aim of understanding the routine functioning and reasoning of officers working within the Polish Border Guard – a security agency linked to a highly politicized and controversial issue in recent years – the research design and data collection methods were chosen with particular care. After obtaining all necessary institutional permissions, the study was designed as a multi-case ethnography of the daily functioning of street-level border agents along the Polish-German border. This resulted in significant field time, during which participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and informal focus groups with street-level officers were conducted (see Figure 2). These diverse methods enabled access to the oral narratives (French, 2019; Olrik, 1992) that inform and shape the daily practices of the Border Guards. In what follows, several narratives are presented that are drawn directly from fieldwork notes. These include quotes from conversations that were either held with participants or overheard during participant observation. As such, they do not originate from formal interviews but rather from ethnographic immersion in the daily practices of the Border Guards, capturing spontaneous and situated interactions in context.

Oral narratives are understood as the product of ‘ordinary experience’ (Wagenaar, 2020: 268), supplemented by the concept of sensefulness, defined as ‘the communicative function of a spoken text’ in which ‘meaningfulness is inextricably bound to the situation at hand’ (Wagenaar, 2020). For the purposes of this paper, oral narratives refer to the spoken communications, verbal traditions, and linguistic expectations that permeate the functioning of a given group – in this case, street-level patrol officers within the Polish Border Guard. Focusing on the documentation of these narratives is intrinsically tied to the creation of an immersive field experience, in which the researcher aims to both internalize group norms and practices while remaining as unobtrusive as possible (Lune and Berg, 2017; Madden, 2022). This immersion facilitates a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of the institutional, organizational, and occupational discourses at play.

Confidentiality and ethical considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the research context – a security agency operating in the politically charged field of migration enforcement – and the classified materials to which the first author was occasionally exposed, confidentiality and anonymity were paramount for all parties involved: researchers, respondents, and institutions. To

	Participant Observation #	Observation Form #	Ride-along #	Training #	BG Officers #
Regional Command	156	0	0	16	12
Outpost 1	262	99	176	0	16
Outpost 2	214	116	160	0	19
Outpost 3	256	221	226	0	22
Other	17	0	17	10	7
Total	905	426	579	26	76

Figure 2. Overview of the collected data.
Source: Data collected by Maryla Klajn.

ensure participant protection, identifying details were altered when necessary, and all personal names were replaced with randomly assigned pseudonyms to guarantee anonymity.

Results and analysis

Following the distinction made in the literature on emotional labour between the different types of display rules – all of which can influence discretionary decision-making at the frontline of state bureaucracies – the Results section is structured accordingly. Firstly, we present and discuss societal display rules: the normative attitudes embedded in the current sociocultural and national discourse surrounding migration, borders, patriotism, religion, race/ethnicity, and gender. Next, we examine organizational display rules, highlighting the institution's internal norms and expectations that guide procedural implementation and serve as frameworks for justifying the discretionary decisions made by street-level officers. Finally, we turn to occupational display rules, illustrating how specific discretionary choices are shaped by the nature of the job as performed by a particular group in a specific locality. This section addresses the impact of the local geographic environment and its implications for cross-border policing activities.

Societal display rules

As mentioned earlier, societal display rules indicate how the expression of emotion in organizational roles is influenced by the broader norms of the culture in which an organization is embedded. In the case of this study, this refers to the larger context of Polish culture and indicative markers of 'Polishness'. Based on a discourse analysis of presidential addresses and political speeches, Klajn (2020) illustrates how the notion of 'Polishness' is closely – and has become even more closely under the rule of the Eurosceptic, national-populist PiS party since 2015 – tied to specific conceptions of Polish national identity. These conceptions are deeply interwoven with religion (Catholicism), race (Whiteness), gender roles, and historically rooted notions of enemy nations. While many of these markers of what is considered to constitute 'Polishness' also appear to shape organizational and occupational display rules, and thus inform emotional labour, the following vignette illustrates how the idea of defending Poland against the perceived threat of Islamic migrants – viewed as endangering both national values and Polish security – was a key influence on the decisions made by border guards at several outposts.

I was on patrol with two Polish Border Guard officers and one German Federal Police officer, conducting so-called 'mobile rounds' aimed at detecting potential migratory infractions. Near a service station, the officers noticed a brand-new white BMW pulling into the parking lot, from which two young men exited. Their slightly darker complexion led the officers to assume a Middle Eastern or North African background, immediately drawing their attention. Commenting loudly and emotionally about 'terrorists being let into Europe under the guise of refugees', and that such individuals 'have more money than any decent Polish citizen, to buy expensive phones and cars,' the officers were visibly convinced that the two young men matched the 'dangerous Muslim' profile. They speculated whether the car would have

German or French plates, assuming the men were likely refugees from a Muslim-majority country.

They expressed visible surprise upon seeing Estonian license plates as they pulled in behind the BMW. Nevertheless, they appeared fixated on finding a reason to search the car and question both the driver and the passenger. The officers exited their vehicle and began to closely ‘visually inspect’ the inside of the BMW while shouting at the men to show their documents. Even though both men turned out to be Estonian nationals returning home from Germany – not at all fitting the risk profile initially created by the officers – the border guards remained determined to search the vehicle. Initially doubting the authenticity of the documents, and still apparently suspecting the men to be potential terrorists or ‘enemies of the state,’ they proceeded to call in and authenticate the identification.

Eventually, upon noticing a baseball bat under some luggage in the back seat, one of the officers alerted the others, describing it as a potential ‘illegal dangerous weapon.’ The three officers then conducted a detailed search of the car and its occupants in an excessively aggressive and intimidating manner. This included yelling, pushing the travellers to the ground, tossing and kicking their belongings, and slamming them against the hood of the car. At this stage, it was unclear whether the officers were searching for drugs, alcohol, weapons, or any indication of irregular border crossing. In the end, nothing illegal was found: all documents were verified, and the men’s accounts confirmed. The officers, visibly unhappy and resentful, left the scene, telling the men to ‘clean up this mess’ themselves. As they drove off, they immediately resumed making comments about the dangers of Islamization in Europe, the threat of ‘terrorist refugees,’ and how both Muslims and the EU threaten ‘real Polish values.’

This wielding of discretion by Polish Border Guards reflects how emotional labour extends beyond regulatory enforcement to reinforce culturally specific norms and biases. Border agents manage their emotional displays, often expressing assertiveness or hostility based on entrenched notions of ‘Polishness’, which are linked to religious, racial, and ideological markers. Against this backdrop, fear of Islam is frequently perceived as a direct threat to the Catholic foundations and beliefs of the country (Balicki, 2021; Górak-Sosnowska, 2016; Klaus 2017; Górak-Sosnowska and Pachocka, 2019).

This form of emotional labour highlights an intersection between organizational display rules and national identity. Following Griffiths’ (2023) discussion of emotion-driven enforcement in immigration, Polish Border Guards exhibit detachment towards perceived threats to ‘real Polish values’, often intensifying expressions of anger or suspicion during interactions with such individuals. These displays are culturally specific and reinforce the pervasive fear of ‘Islamization’ and Western decadence – views that many agents openly endorse. At the same time, the first vignette also demonstrates a form of selective neutrality, akin to Borrelli’s (2021) findings on Swedish officers, wherein emotional labour is used to mask personal biases beneath a façade of professionalism. By identifying and manipulating pretexts – such as the discovery of a baseball bat to justify extended searches – officers navigate a discretionary space that legitimizes aggressive behaviour under the guise of procedural rule-following. Selective suppression of neutrality refers to the intentional choice by individuals in professional roles – such as Border Guards – to set aside impartiality or objective detachment in particular situations,

instead displaying emotions aligned with personal biases or organizational expectations. Rather than consistently maintaining a neutral stance, these individuals selectively permit certain culturally conditioned emotions – such as suspicion or disdain – to shape their behaviour towards specific groups. This selectivity is applied only in cases that align with pre-existing biases or cultural norms, rather than constituting a universal aspect of their professional role. In this way, emotional labour becomes a tool for reinforcing cultural boundaries and aligning professional conduct with nationalist ideology.

Organizational display rules

Organizational display rules – both formal and informal – are shown to significantly influence the actions and decisions of street-level agents within the Polish Border Guard (Collins, 2016; Hupe and Hill, 2007, 2019). These rules and guidelines, in conjunction with the legal framework, construct a system of expected behaviours and accountabilities for individual officers. Among the overarching organizational norms present across outposts, commands, and institutional levels of the Polish Border Guard, a key finding is the influential role of the Commander-in-Chief at each outpost in shaping many of these informal rules and setting operational priorities. While general machismo, xenophobia, Catholicism, and racism were universally present, the functioning of each unit was highly contingent on the personal experiences, ambitions, and motivations of its commanding officer. Street-level officers were acutely aware of their commanders' preferences, often using this awareness strategically to gain favour or achieve 'star' status within the unit. 'Stars' or 'celebrities' were officers recognized for high performance metrics, such as detaining the most foreigners or intercepting illegal goods. Their elevated status often afforded them privileges, including monetary bonuses, favourable shift assignments, and tacit support from superiors – even in cases of procedural infractions. A case in point is Officer Nick at Outpost 3, a highly accomplished officer widely known for his explicit racism and sexism. Despite exhibiting offensive behaviour towards women, foreigners, and marginalized groups, Nick received numerous accolades and promotions for his operational success. He openly boasted about his perceived 'immunity' due to his star status, and frequently engaged in reckless and illegal activities – such as dangerously speeding on highways – to demonstrate that point. This case highlights the problematic institutional dynamics of special treatment and procedural double standards, raising significant concerns about the influence of these organizational cultures on officer behaviour and the integrity of law enforcement practices. During one patrol, Nick and his colleague, Border Guard Mona, apprehended four individuals: a Polish driver and three migrants whose nationality was initially unknown. The following vignette describes the events that unfolded in the holding cell area, where the apprehended individuals were processed.

Mona was interrogating the individuals and asked me to assist in speaking with the travellers to establish their nationality and age – particularly urgent, as two of the three appeared to be minors, likely under 18. This was a task I was occasionally asked to perform when travellers used English, since most street-level officers spoke only Polish, and sometimes only very basic Russian and/or German. Using simple questions, we established that the travellers were

Vietnamese, and two of them claimed to be under 18 – one saying he was 16 and the other 17. This information immediately triggered the requirement to initiate special procedures under international human rights law, which mandates different legal treatment for minors in migration contexts. However, in the absence of documents, it was impossible to verify their exact dates of birth. When Mona approached Nick to begin filing the appropriate paperwork and arrange a medical age assessment, his reaction was unexpected and openly dismissive. He gasped loudly, rolled his eyes, and exclaimed: ‘Are you kidding? Why would you believe anything they say? It’s clear they’re lying [about their age]! Dumb chicks, it’s just like women to be so naïve. Good thing I’m in charge, so we ain’t gonna do s**t.’

Nick then conducted a detailed luggage and body search on the three foreigners, after which he placed all of them in a single small cell. They were not provided beds, food, a translator, a doctor, or any other essential support. In contrast, the Polish citizen – the driver, who by law qualified as a migrant smuggler – was held in a separate cell. Nick even allowed him to make a phone call to his mother using Nick’s personal mobile phone. He later commented to Mona, ‘They’ll just let him go, most likely just with a ticket or something.’ When asked what would happen to the three detained individuals, Nick smirked and walked away, refusing to answer. After approximately 488 hours, a medical examiner – not summoned by Nick, but by another officer – arrived and determined that one of the detainees was indeed a minor (estimated age 16–17), while the other’s age could not be clearly assessed but was estimated to be ‘around 18.’ These assessments immediately prompted the initiation of the appropriate legal procedures. However, until that point, all three individuals – including at least one minor, and possibly two – had been held without formal charges, in problematic conditions, and without access to the basic rights and protections guaranteed under multiple international human rights conventions.

Despite these circumstances, Nick was publicly commended for his ‘brave action’ in ‘detaining three illegal migrants who were trying to reach Germany through Poland’ by both the Outpost Commander-in-Chief and the Regional Commander. This commendation only further elevated his ‘star’ status within the unit.

Within the institutional culture of the Polish Border Guard, an informal system rewards officers with elevated status for successfully apprehending irregular migrants or intercepting illegal activities. This system operates alongside a formal ‘point system’, instituted by the organization’s leadership, which allocates resources based on the number of points earned for specific tasks (e.g., detentions, deportations). The point system incentivizes certain behaviours over others, potentially leading to discriminatory practices and disproportionate punishment. Officers – motivated by the belief that their career progression and pension security depend on point accumulation – may prioritize meeting these targets over upholding fair and lawful conduct.

This system parallels what the literature describes as a ‘cult of personality’ within organizations. The term, often used interchangeably with ‘cult of the leader’, refers to the practice of leaders using their position to construct a mythologized narrative around their origins, beliefs, and accomplishments (Reyes, 2020; Strong and Killingsworth, 2011; Żyromski, 2019). These leaders often leverage personal charisma to obscure shortcomings or lack of qualifications, discredit critics, and garner widespread support. In the context of the Polish Border Guard, however, this phenomenon manifests not only at the leadership level but also at the street level, where officers perceived as

especially effective or productive are elevated to 'star' status in the eyes of their superiors. This version of the cult of personality appears to be gendered, as such status was observed to be conferred exclusively on male officers during fieldwork. The existence of this performance-based heroism fosters a toxic work environment, encouraging envy, competitiveness, and ego-driven dynamics. It affects not only interpersonal relations within the organization but also officers' interactions with the public. For instance, officers like Nick, who enjoy 'star' status, may deprioritize legal rights or procedural safeguards in favour of actions that reinforce their elite reputation. His use of discretion – shaped by both personal and institutional biases – demonstrates a selective deployment of emotional labour, wherein empathy and procedural neutrality are suppressed in favour of assertiveness, control, and punitive behaviour towards detainees perceived as outsiders.

By prioritizing his own status within the informal power structure, Nick manages his emotional expressions to project unyielding authority, thereby aligning with organizational expectations that reward aggressive enforcement over adherence to ethical or human rights standards. His selective expressions – ranging from dismissive remarks about the detainees' ages to overt favouritism towards the Polish driver – reveal how emotional labour reinforces his standing and operational style. This behaviour typifies surface acting, in which professional obligations to neutrality or compassion are masked by a visible disdain for those deemed unworthy of such treatment. Nick's discretionary use of emotional labour, driven by an institutional culture that equates enforcement outcomes with merit, exemplifies how discretion and emotion management can align to advance personal and organizational agendas at the expense of legal and ethical norms. Moreover, this vignette reveals the interconnectedness of organizational, societal, and occupational display rules. Among Border Guard officers, there were widespread anti-Asian sentiments, as perceived 'Asianness' was often associated with non-heteronormativity, and thus seen as incompatible with Polishness. This rejection of perceived deviations from traditional gender roles and sexual identities was deeply intertwined with dominant nationalist ideologies. Similarly, the visible disdain for complying with human rights standards reflects a broader Polish political discourse characterized by Euroscepticism and scepticism towards liberal democratic institutions. In this context, emotional labour becomes a tool not only for individual self-promotion but also for reproducing institutional cultures rooted in exclusionary and illiberal value systems.

Occupational display rules

Occupational display rules emerge within 'occupational communities' – groups of individuals engaged in the same type of work, who identify positively with their roles and share a common set of values, norms, and perspectives (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984: 287). These occupational cultures establish codes of practice that delineate proper and improper behaviours, while also developing rituals and standardized work routines for specific tasks (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984). They are shaped not only by the people who work closely together – often from similar backgrounds – but also by environmental conditions, such as the local infrastructure and the nature of the traffic and migration routes encountered in day-to-day operations.

When reflecting on the occupational culture of the Polish Border Guard, several themes stand out. As an organization that is approximately 99% white and heavily male-dominated, the performance of masculinity in daily practices and procedures was consistently visible. Beyond sexist remarks and the objectification of the few female officers, this toxic masculinity also shaped how guards interacted with people they stopped – particularly migrants perceived as ‘risky’ or ‘undeserving’. These interactions were often marked by verbal aggression, abusive language, and physical intimidation. The following example illustrates how local context – specifically, the outpost where the interaction occurs – can shape occupational display rules. As described in the methodology section of this article, the outposts included in the study varied significantly in terms of geographic location (rural versus urban), traffic volume, available staffing, and the leadership style of the Commander-in-Chief. These differences had a marked influence not only on how rules were interpreted and enforced but also on how officers engaged with those they stopped.

Outpost 2 was the smallest of the three sites included in this study. The building itself was tucked away in a wooded area on the edge of a small village, and staffing levels were the lowest within the entire Regional Command. Traffic was also minimal, as there were – at the time – no major migration routes crossing or nearby. Compared to other locations, the street-level officers at Outpost 2 appeared to be making a concerted effort to stay busy, often by stopping, searching, and detaining as many individuals as possible during their shifts. Whereas officers at Outpost 1 – located near several busy roads – might stop only a few vehicles or travellers per shift, those at Outpost 2 frequently stopped 15–20, or even more. The following vignette illustrates how this peripheral location and limited workload may have contributed to problematic enforcement behaviours among street-level officers at Outpost 2.

After pulling over a large white van transporting multiple passengers, Doug and Chuck – two Border Guards who had worked together for over 20 years – began questioning the individuals inside, while allowing the Polish driver to step out and have a smoke. It soon became clear that three of the passengers held temporary Schengen visas based on invitations from Polish seasonal employers. Chuck immediately began interrogating the three – two men and one woman – in an increasingly aggressive manner, questioning whether they had, in fact, gone to their designated seasonal employers in Poland, or whether they had instead used the invitation merely as a pretext to enter the Schengen Zone and travel further to Western Europe in search of better economic opportunities.

Chuck yelled at the men, switching between Russian and Polish, and repeatedly accused them of lying. ‘Ты врешь! (You’re lying!)’, he shouted over and over. Then, he reached for his phone. Doug winked at me and said, ‘Well, now we’re going to get them,’ adding with a quiet laugh, ‘Chuck is really good with that stuff.’ He continued: ‘Chuck makes them think he’s calling to verify if they ever actually worked there!’ I then realized that Chuck was not actually speaking to anyone – he was pretending to make a verification call, speaking into his phone to intimidate the passengers. He returned to the van and shouted: ‘I knew it! You are lying! You never went there, did you?!’ He waved the paperwork in the men’s faces while continuing to escalate the confrontation.

The two male passengers continued to deny any wrongdoing. However, under sustained verbal and physical pressure, the third passenger – a woman in her early 30s – conceded. She admitted

that she had left the job named in her visa invitation because it 'wasn't what she thought' and that she wanted to visit her family in Germany. When asked how she planned to support herself in Germany and whether she intended to work, she mentioned she might look for a job as a babysitter. This admission was immediately seized upon by Doug and Chuck, who charged her with 'invitation fraud', or entering Poland under false pretences (a violation they referred to colloquially as 'visa extortion'). She was detained and subjected to standard procedures: transported to the Outpost in a special vehicle, personally searched, stripped of all belongings, and held overnight in a cell. Her visa was cancelled, and she received a Schengen re-entry ban of at least six months.

During the ride back to the Outpost, Chuck made several gendered and objectifying remarks about the woman, including sexist slurs and comments suggesting that she was inherently untrustworthy because of her gender: 'Another lying whore,' he said.

Although Doug later expressed disagreement with these remarks in private, he remained silent at the time and did not challenge Chuck's behaviour in the moment.

As I found out later, this *modus operandi* – pretending to verify employment by phone in order to pressure individuals into admitting to 'invitation fraud' – was not officially sanctioned. Yet, it was repeatedly observed at this specific outpost. When asked about the practice, one officer at Outpost 3 – a high-traffic post located near several international highways – responded with amusement: 'The invitation stuff? We don't do that anymore; we're not supposed to'. He added, 'I guess they try to get whatever and however they can in the middle of the woods!' While the remote location of Outpost 2 may have played a role in fostering the use of the invitation fraud scheme, the behaviour cannot be explained by geography alone. The pressure created by the organizational ranking system – discussed earlier as part of the organizational display rules – must also be considered. Despite its location and lower traffic volume compared to other outposts, Outpost 2 was still expected to 'deliver results'. However, expectations were not adjusted to account for the outpost's limited size or geographic constraints, meaning that officers there faced heightened pressure to 'get creative' in applying their discretionary authority (see also Van der Woude and Brouwer, 2017).

These findings illustrate how occupational display rules within the Polish Border Guard contribute to a workplace culture that normalizes aggressive and manipulative enforcement tactics, reflecting a tightly knit 'occupational community' (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984). The collective identity shared by the guards – predominantly white and male – establishes a culture in which behaviours such as verbal aggression, deceptive interrogation tactics, and physical intimidation are not only tolerated but often implicitly rewarded. For instance, at Outpost 2, Doug and Chuck relied on informal strategies to intimidate and coerce travellers, including pretending to verify employment information via fake phone calls. These behaviours align with informally condoned norms within their occupational community, where achieving measurable enforcement outcomes takes precedence over procedural fairness or legal integrity. The rural and isolated setting of Outpost 2 further exacerbates these behaviours. Lower traffic volume increases pressure on officers to maintain high levels of activity, leading to an over-reliance on discretionary stops and searches. This pressure encourages the use of manipulative strategies that stray

from formal protocols in order to meet performance metrics established by the ranking system. In this context, occupational display rules – reinforced by local conditions and institutional expectations – cultivate a culture of coercion and gender-based prejudice, as illustrated by Chuck's objectifying and misogynistic comments towards female travelers. The occupational culture not only enables but also rationalizes the discretionary use of power in ways that reflect toxic masculinity and anti-migrant bias. Ultimately, this vignette underscores how local and cultural dynamics shape discretionary decision-making in ways that systematically disadvantage certain groups, particularly racialized migrants and women, within a high-pressure, status-oriented institutional framework.

Conclusion and discussion

This study advances the theoretical understanding of discretion and emotional labour in border policing by revealing how these concepts intersect to shape the daily practices of Polish Border Guards. Drawing from Lipsky's (2010) theory of street-level bureaucracy and Hochschild's (1983) framework on emotional labour, the findings illustrate how Polish border agents navigate their roles not only by interpreting and enforcing laws but also by enacting a form of emotional governance shaped by cultural and institutional biases (Hawkins, 1992). Discretion, in this context, functions as both a legal tool and a mechanism for reinforcing national and ideological boundaries (Edelman, 2004). For instance, border officers often interpret 'risk' through culturally charged lenses, casting non-Polish or 'Westernized' Polish citizens as inherently suspicious (Vega, 2019). Such discretionary actions reproduce exclusionary practices aligned with broader nationalist ideologies, supporting recent scholarship that frames discretion as a mediating space between personal beliefs and organizational expectations (Aliverti, 2021; Rivera, 2015).

The concept of 'glocalized' border practices further contextualizes this intersection of discretion and emotional labour, illustrating how Polish Border Guard practices are shaped by both local and supranational influences (Gundhus, 2017; Vrabiescu, 2021). Although Poland operates under the EU's Schengen framework, the study shows that local conditions – such as nationalist sentiment, societal norms, and values associated with 'Polishness' – significantly shape discretionary decision-making. This glocalized dynamic underscores the extent to which Polish Border Guard practices diverge from EU norms, embedding national ideologies within a broader supranational regulatory framework (Thym and Bornemann, 2021). By adapting Schengen guidelines to reflect local priorities, officers effectively blend EU standards with cultural narratives, reinforcing the view of discretion as a tool of ideological boundary-setting (Wonders, 2017).

This study extends theoretical frameworks of discretion by demonstrating how, in the Polish case, emotional labour deeply informs discretionary decision-making. Officers' managed displays of authority, detachment, or hostility serve as expressions of discretion, reinforcing institutional narratives of national security and cultural purity (Griffiths, 2023). Emotional labour, as performed by Polish officers, transcends role compliance, becoming a legitimizing mechanism for discretionary actions grounded in cultural norms. By selectively displaying emotions such as anger, suspicion, or detachment, officers align themselves with informal display rules that value assertiveness – especially towards perceived outsiders (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). This form of emotional

labour strengthens discretionary practices, enabling officers to simultaneously meet institutional expectations and embody a cultural script of 'Polishness', often by distancing themselves from empathy or neutrality. Moreover, societal, organizational, and occupational display rules collectively shape Polish Border Guards' actions, forming a layered yet interconnected framework. Though often analysed separately, these display rules reinforce each other in practice. Societal discourses on national identity merge with institutional policies that incentivize assertive enforcement, while occupational cultures – especially in rural or lower-traffic outposts – emphasize visibility, diligence, and activity levels.

At these localized levels, enforcement practices become tailored responses to overlapping pressures, blending cultural anxieties, institutional goals, and on-the-ground occupational norms. This interwoven structure moulds the expression of emotional labour and the enactment of discretion, allowing officers to fulfil both supranational mandates and local ideological expectations. Ethnographic fieldwork also reveals a notable dynamic in officers' emotional labour, which often blurs the boundary between surface and deep acting (Hochschild, 1983). For most officers observed, surface acting was minimal; instead, emotional expressions were closely aligned with internal beliefs and professional expectations. The role requirements – such as detachment or suspicion – were internalized rather than merely performed, leading to little psychological tension between the personal and the professional. This seamless alignment creates an environment in which emotional detachment and hostility towards migrants are not only sanctioned but willingly embraced, as reflected in officers like Mark and Mona's expressed discomfort with showing compassion (Borrelli, 2021).

These findings carry broader implications for EU border policy, especially within the Schengen area. The practices of the Polish Border Guard demonstrate how discretion and emotional labour adapt to local socio-political conditions, revealing the limitations of standardized EU protocols (Achermann, 2021). While the Schengen framework promotes free movement and procedural uniformity, Poland's enforcement reflects nationalist ideologies, cultural scripts, and localized institutional pressures – in some cases, diverging significantly from EU norms of equal treatment and neutrality (Aliverti, 2021). This divergence underscores the need for EU policymakers to consider how local ideologies and enforcement cultures shape border practices, potentially undermining Schengen's principles of fairness and cohesion. The study also points to valuable directions for future research. Comparative ethnographies across EU border agencies could reveal the extent to which discretion and emotional labour are glocalized, shaped by local culture and institutional variation. Such research would offer a more nuanced understanding of how national cultures and organizational dynamics influence the emotional and discretionary dimensions of border work, ultimately informing policy adjustments that better account for the realities of local enforcement. By doing so, the EU might more effectively reconcile its supranational ambitions with the embedded practices and ideologies shaping daily border control across member states.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the constructive and valuable feedback provided by the anonymous reviewers, which really pushed them to sharpen their analysis and conclusions. Furthermore, the

authors would like to thank the respondents for their openness and willingness to participate in the larger research project underpinning this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This publication is part of the project *Getting to the Core of Crimmigration* of the research programme VIDI and also of the project *Emotional Labour in the Borderlands: A Deeper Understanding of Ethno-Racial Profiling through Academic and Artistic Research* of the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) Medium Scheme, which are both financed by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) under grant numbers 452-16-003 and 406.22.RB.007.

ORCID iD

Maartje van der Woude  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1165-9233>

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