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Agents of change? (Hi)stories, perspectives, and everyday practices of Polish border guards

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Citation

Klajn, M. E. (2026, March 25). *Agents of change?: (Hi)stories, perspectives, and everyday practices of Polish border guards*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4299140>

Version: Publisher's Version

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

CONCLUSION TO THE DOCTORAL THESIS

1. Re-engaging the Central Research Problem and Questions

This dissertation set out to examine a core paradox at the heart of contemporary European mobility regimes: how and why bordering practices persist, and even intensify, within the ostensibly borderless Schengen Zone. Focusing on the Polish–German frontier, the project investigated the discretionary practices of Polish Border Guard officers as they navigate the tensions between supranational commitments to free movement and national imperatives for control, security, and identity. In doing so, it aimed to understand how discretion is exercised in the enforcement of intra-Schengen border controls, and how those discretionary decisions are shaped by, and contribute to, broader legal, political, and cultural dynamics in a post-socialist EU member state.

Revisiting the central research problem in light of the empirical findings, it becomes clear that discretion is not merely a functional necessity in conditions of legal ambiguity: it is a politically charged site of meaning-making. Discretion, in the Polish case, emerges as a space where institutional memory, national identity, and historical trauma converge. Rather than operating in a bureaucratic vacuum, Polish border officers make decisions through a moral and affective lens -navigating conflicting expectations from EU law, national policy, organizational culture, and their own professional ethos. This transforms discretionary enforcement into a mechanism for reproducing both institutionalized suspicion and symbolic exclusion, especially in response to perceived threats to sovereignty or cultural cohesion.

The dissertation has returned, throughout its chapters, to two central questions:

- 1. How is discretion exercised by Polish Border Guard officials in the enforcement and management of intra-Schengen border control and mobility?*
- 2. How do their discretionary decisions and daily operations relate to the personal, organizational, and broader historical and societal contexts within which they operate?*

The findings across the dissertation's articles show that discretion is not simply about interpreting rules, it is about interpreting belonging. Officers' judgments about who is questioned, warned, or ignored reflect not only institutional guidelines but also cultural narratives of Polishness, geopolitical fears, and nationalist imaginaries. Thus, what appears at first to be low-level bureaucratic decision-making is, in fact, deeply implicated in the ongoing construction of internal EU borders and national identity.

By anchoring its inquiry in the daily practices of frontline actors rather than in abstract policy declarations this dissertation offers a grounded account of how borders are continuously made and remade through discretion. It reframes the Schengen border regime not as a linear movement toward liberalization, but as a contested field in which sovereignty is selectively reclaimed and reproduced, often by those furthest from the centers of political power.

2. Thematic Synthesis of Key Findings

This dissertation has shown that discretionary enforcement within the Schengen Zone is far from an administrative footnote; it is a constitutive mechanism through which borders are

enacted, norms are negotiated, and social hierarchies are reproduced. Rather than offering a chapter-by-chapter summary, this section synthesizes the empirical insights from the five articles around four central themes: (1) discretion as situated practice; (2) affective and moral labor in border policing; (3) institutional memory and post-socialist bordering; and (4) internal borders and the production of belonging. Each theme traverses micro, meso, and macro levels, demonstrating how discretion is shaped by, and shapes, legal ambiguities, organizational routines, and broader historical imaginaries.

2.1 Discretion as Situated Practice

Throughout the dissertation, discretion emerges not as a bureaucratic anomaly, but as a structured and patterned mode of governance. While formally authorized under flexible legal frameworks like Article 23 of the Schengen Borders Code - which permits internal checks so long as they are not equivalent to systematic border controls - officers interpret these legal ambiguities in context-dependent ways (Szulecka, 2019; Van der Woude, 2025). As Article III of the dissertation reveals, Polish Border Guard officers draw on informal “risk indicators” such as skin color, accent, vehicle type, and perceived demeanor when deciding whom to stop or question. These discretionary cues are rarely documented but are crucial in shaping enforcement patterns.

Rather than suggesting arbitrariness, these findings show that discretion is routinized and operationalized through shared heuristics, professional training, and embedded stereotypes. Eule et al. (2019) argue that street-level actors draw on informal practices and shared understandings when navigating migration control in practice, an observation confirmed in the Polish context by officers who repeatedly emphasized intuition, “gut feeling,” and embodied experience. In doing so, they transform discretionary judgment into a mode of bordering that reflects institutional logics more than legal principles.

Moreover, discretion in Poland is also shaped by institutional mandates and political signals at the meso and macro levels. As shown in Article V, middle-ranking commanders routinely emphasize the importance of “visibility” and “readiness” in officer patrols - directives that blur the line between administrative presence and proactive control. These findings align with Klaus and Szulecka (2023), who show that Polish migration control is marked by politically structured discretion and a tension between humanitarian and deterrent logics - patterns also visible in Straż Graniczna operations. In short, discretion in this context is structured from above and interpreted from below, a layered process that reveals much about how intra-Schengen borders are maintained.

2.2 Affective and Moral Labor in Border Policing

A second theme that cuts across the articles is the emotional and moral labor underpinning discretionary enforcement. Officers are not simply legal agents; they are moral actors who constantly navigate tensions between their own moral blueprint, perceptions of duty, and institutional expectations. These findings are consistent with recent scholarship highlighting how discretion is entangled with emotional labor (Vega, 2017; 2018; 2025). Vega’s work on affective governance and the moral ambiguity of border control resonates strongly with Polish officers’ narratives of duty, compassion, and moral burden. Article II further expands this by

showing how discretion is used not only to relax enforcement, but to justify harsher treatment. These findings echo the work of Aliverti (2013) and Borrelli (2021), who show that border work is emotionally scripted in ways that produce a moral distinction between the “deserving” and “undeserving” mobile subject.

Importantly, these affective decisions are not outside the law -they are constitutive of how law is lived and enacted. Discretion becomes the vehicle through which moral judgment is applied to legal categories, often shaping whether and how migrants experience the state. This emotional labor reinforces the legitimacy of state power by naturalizing exclusion as both necessary and humane (Vega 2025). The Polish case contributes to this literature by highlighting how such affective discretion is mediated through post-socialist narratives of vulnerability and national duty.

2.3 Institutional Memory and Post-Socialist Bordering

A third key finding is the role of institutional memory in shaping discretionary practices. Unlike many Western European enforcement regimes, the Polish Border Guard operates in a landscape shaped by authoritarian legacies, fluctuating sovereignty, and deeply embedded suspicion of the “outside.” Article I and Article V both show how officers draw on historical narratives (particularly Soviet surveillance, Nazi occupation, and the Cold War buffer zone) to rationalize strict enforcement. These memories are not abstract: they inform officers’ sense of duty and shape how they interpret current threats.

As Szulecka (2022) shows, Poland’s migration enforcement apparatus is marked by significant administrative discretion and weak judicial oversight, enabling authorities to stretch legal provisions in response to shifting political pressures. Such practices often draw legitimacy from broader narratives of crisis and national protection, echoing the invocation of “hybrid threats” in governmental discourse rather than in codified law. This research confirms that these justifications resonate at the street level, where officers frame their vigilance as part of a historically grounded duty to safeguard the border.

These findings build on Klaus and Szulecka (2021), who demonstrate how institutional habits and professional cultures inherited from earlier regimes continue to shape discretionary practices within the migration control field. They also echo Ładykowski’s (2011) observations on the enduring symbolic and cultural significance of the Polish borderland, a site where historical memory and geopolitical anxieties converge. The result is a form of discretion that is not merely reactive but anticipatory, motivated by a historically embedded ethos of border stewardship that blends bureaucratic continuity with deeply rooted narratives of territorial vigilance.

2.4 Internal Borders and the Production of Belonging

Finally, the research demonstrates that discretionary enforcement practices actively produce internal borders within the EU, borders that are not only territorial but also symbolic. While the Schengen framework formally guarantees freedom of movement, this dissertation shows that internal frontiers persist through the selective application of law. Articles II and III reveal how Polish officers apply differentiated standards of scrutiny based on perceived race,

nationality, or language, for example, distinguishing between German passport holders of Polish descent and those racialised as non-European.

This form of symbolic bordering echoes Guiraudon's (2000) notion of venue shopping, where migration control shifts across institutional arenas and levels of governance to circumvent formal constraints. In the Polish context, such shifts extend discretion downward to street-level actors, transforming frontline encounters into sites where migration control is effectively re-made. It also resonates with Žuk and Žuk's (2024) analysis of borderphobia—a cultural logic through which national identity is reproduced by sustaining symbolic boundaries between an imagined European self and a racialised or foreign other. As shown in Article V, discretionary decisions about whom to stop, question, or ignore are not merely practical: they are expressive acts that define belonging and difference within a supposedly borderless Europe.

Crucially, these symbolic borders are made durable through repetition. Officers described their discretion as habitual, even automatic “you just know,” one explained. These practices collectively reconstitute the intra-Schengen space as a fragmented enforcement zone, where discretion becomes the infrastructure through which liberal ideals of openness are quietly suspended. The findings thus support and extend the argument made by Van der Woude and Van der Leun (2017) that Schengen enforcement is not uniform but locally contingent and institutionally variable.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Contributions

This dissertation contributes to a growing body of critical socio-legal and border criminology scholarship by rethinking how discretion functions at the intersection of law, sovereignty, and identity. It not only empirically illuminates the discretionary practices of Polish Border Guard officials, but also engages in a broader conceptual project: it demonstrates how discretion operates as a politically loaded, historically inflected, and emotionally charged practice that reconfigures existing theoretical models of crimmigration, street-level bureaucracy, securitization, and affective governance.

3.1 Rethinking Crimmigration at the Intra-Schengen Margins

Building on the conceptual discussion in the previous section, this part turns to the Polish–German border to examine how crimmigration operates within rather than outside the Schengen regime. In doing so, it responds to a wider critique of Eurocentrism and epistemic asymmetry within border criminology, where dominant frameworks have been shaped by Northern or Western perspectives and often overlook insights from peripheral or post-socialist contexts (Brandariz, 2021; Brandariz et al., 2025; Dimou, 2021; Mehta, 2023). These frameworks often universalize the experience of states with hardened external borders and consolidated deportation regimes, leaving the distinctive logics of post-socialist and intra-Schengen enforcement under-examined.

While the concept of crimmigration has generated a robust body of scholarship (Stumpf, 2006; Aas 2011), it has largely developed through case studies situated in Anglo-American or Western European contexts. This dissertation contributes to the growing effort to Easternize crimmigration, a term developed in the introduction to signal the need for closer empirical and

theoretical attention to the unique configurations of border enforcement in Eastern and Central Europe. These are regions where historical legacies of occupation, post-socialist transformation, and nation-building shape discretionary power in ways not accounted for by Western-centric models.

Focusing on the Polish–German intra-Schengen border, this dissertation demonstrates how crimmigration dynamics are reproduced within the Schengen Area. Border Guard officials operate under Article 23 of the Schengen Borders Code, which allows for non-systematic checks within the territory. Yet, as shown throughout the dissertation (especially in Articles II and III), these checks are systematically racialized, gendered, and often religiously coded, with officers drawing on informal cues to identify and classify “suspect” individuals. Blackness, Muslim identity, non-European accents, or gender nonconformity often function as unspoken proxies for risk.

The Polish case shows that crimmigration extends far beyond questions of deportation or legal status. It operates as a pre-emptive and deeply embodied mode of governance, in which discretion becomes a means not only of identifying legal violations but of enacting social hierarchies rooted in narratives of ethnonational purity, Catholic identity, and external threat. Through everyday acts such as document checks, questioning, or selective leniency, officers participate in a broader process of identity-making, delineating who is legible as European, as Polish, or as belonging. These findings resonate with recent scholarship that rethinks crimmigration as a constitutive and anticipatory form of border governance, rather than a reactive response to irregularity (Gundhus & Jansen, 2020; van der Woude & van der Leun, 2017). They also build on analyses that challenge the reduction of crimmigration to deportation or legal-status regulation, showing how it encompasses a wider range of administrative, technological, and symbolic practices that reproduce exclusion within and beyond Europe’s borders (Cornelisse, 2022; Broeders, 2007).

This analysis furthermore contributes to recent critiques that call for a more intersectional and feminist engagement with crimmigration (Abji, 2020; Bhatia, 2012; Mehta, 2023). As this research shows, discretionary enforcement is rarely neutral: it is filtered through affective and embodied perceptions of race, gender, and religion, often in ways officers themselves may not articulate. These perceptions are further shaped by Poland’s own postcolonial anxieties and geopolitical position, caught between Western legal harmonisation and Eastern notions of civilisational threat, where border officials selectively adopt enforcement techniques that signal both compliance and national distinctiveness. By extending crimmigration theory into this Easternized terrain, the dissertation shows that internal borders in Europe are not eroding but mutating. They are becoming symbolic and affective terrains where discretion is used to reassert sovereignty, not only in legal terms, but through moral geographies of inclusion and exclusion. Crimmigration, then, must be understood not only as a merger of legal systems, but as a cultural and emotional project, enacted through bodies, borders, and bureaucratic judgment.

More broadly, the dissertation demonstrates that discretion in the Polish border regime is not organized along a single axis - legal, affective, or ideological - but is best understood as a structurally embedded practice through which religion, nationalism, secrecy, and post-socialist

institutional memory are enacted and reinforced. These forces do not merely intersect: they are co-constitutive, shaping how officers perceive legitimacy, threat, and moral obligation. Discretion becomes the mechanism through which symbolic boundaries are redrawn: each deportation, ID check, or ignored infraction performs a vision of national identity, reaffirming who belongs and who does not. In this sense, discretionary enforcement does not simply reflect state ideology, it reproduces it at the micro level, embedding ethno-religious hierarchies and nationalist moral frameworks into everyday bureaucratic routines. This entanglement sets the stage for the next section's exploration of how such discretion is taught, transmitted, and institutionalized within the frontline organization.

These dynamics illustrate that discretion is not merely a space of legal indeterminacy. It is a symbolic and moral performance through which officers translate visual and social cues into punitive outcomes. What appears as operational flexibility is, in fact, a racialized and gendered infrastructure of decision-making, shaped by officers' embodied perceptions of difference, legitimacy, and threat. In this context, discretion operates not as a neutral mechanism, but as a state-sanctioned form of symbolic violence and a way of enacting exclusion while maintaining the illusion of procedural fairness. By foregrounding how discretion functions as a performative extension of national identity, the Polish case complicates legalist understandings of enforcement and underscores the deeply cultural nature of crimmigration governance.

3.2 Expanding the Lens of Street-Level Bureaucracy

The dissertation contributes to and extends the tradition of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980; Zacka, 2017) by demonstrating how discretionary power is shaped not only by immediate resource constraints or legal ambiguity, but by deeper institutional, ideological, and historical structures. While Lipsky famously argued that street-level officials "make policy" through their implementation choices, this research shows that in Poland, these choices are shaped by specific organizational cultures and nationalist political currents, rooted in post-socialist statecraft and geopolitical anxieties.

Officers of the Polish Border Guard do not interpret rules in a vacuum. As demonstrated in Articles I, III, and V, their discretion is embedded in a professional culture forged through decades of authoritarian legacy, military discipline, and Cold War-era vigilance. This includes an inherited emphasis on order, suspicion, and "securing the homeland", a normative framework that continues to influence how discretion is framed and justified in the present. The research shows how officers rationalize discretionary decisions not only through reference to law or policy but via historical narratives, such as Poland's vulnerability to invasion, betrayal, or occupation. These stories, often passed down informally in organizational culture, shape how officers understand their role and legitimize enforcement choices that go beyond legal necessity.

This institutional memory is closely entangled with the political climate of contemporary Poland, especially during the PiS era, where nationalism, border anxiety, and cultural homogeneity were explicitly politicized. Officers' discretionary actions reflect this climate: from the emphasis on "watching the line" to selective enforcement at bus stops or train stations targeting non-Polish or non-white bodies. Their discretion aligns with, and amplifies,

nationalist discourses that frame migration as a threat to sovereignty, tradition, and social cohesion.

These findings resonate with Bernardo Zacka's (2017) argument that street-level bureaucrats operate under conditions of chronic moral tension, developing distinct moral dispositions such as detachment, rigidity, or paternalism to cope with institutional contradictions. Yet this dissertation extends Zacka's framework by situating moral agency within a post-socialist, ideologically saturated enforcement context. In the Polish Border Guard, discretion is not only shaped by professional pressures, but also by historically rooted nationalist scripts and religious moral frameworks that frame migration as a civilizational threat. Officers' moral reasoning is thus not just a response to institutional ambiguity, but a mechanism through which the state's ethno-cultural identity is actively affirmed. In this way, the Polish case demonstrates how discretionary coping styles can evolve into ideologically performative practices, where bureaucratic decisions serve to reproduce cultural homogeneity and historical grievance rather than balance abstract liberal values.

This dissertation thus argues that street-level discretion in Poland is not ideologically neutral, instead, it is performed in the service of an implicitly nationalist moral order, reinforced by hierarchical institutional norms and animated by historical trauma. This adds an essential dimension to the street-level bureaucracy literature by showing how discretion can serve as a vehicle for reproducing ethnonational statehood, especially in post-socialist contexts where liberal bureaucratic values are not deeply entrenched.

3.3 Discretion as a Tool of Securitization

This dissertation contributes to securitization scholarship by showing how discretionary enforcement practices among Polish Border Guard officers do not simply implement state security policy but actively perform security and reproduce symbolic borders. Classic securitization theory (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998; Huysmans, 2006) conceptualizes securitization as a process through which political elites frame migration and mobility as existential threats, thereby legitimating exceptional measures. Later work in critical security and border studies expands this lens to the everyday level, examining how security is enacted through mundane bureaucratic routines, organizational discourse, and frontline interactions (Bigo, 2002; Amoore & de Goede, 2008).

Building on that shift, this research demonstrates that discretion is not merely a managerial workaround or a by-product of legal ambiguity, it is a technology of securitization. Ethnographic observations of Border Guard practice in the context of intra-Schengen forced returns (the "Forced Returns" article) show that officers interpret and respond to risk through embodied, situational, and often symbolically charged judgments. Decisions about whom to stop, how to handle documents, or when to act leniently or harshly are filtered through perceived markers of danger such as ethnicity, language, skin colour, gender expression, or demeanour.

These actions are not simply administrative: They are performances of vigilance, surveillance and control that reinforce broader narratives of national and civilisational security (Balzacq, 2011; Nyman, 2021; Vaughan-Williams, 2009). In line with the analysis developed in the

“Polishness” article, such performances materialize state power and belonging through visibility and presence rather than through explicit coercion. Officers’ visible patrols and identity checks in bus and train stations near the German border were less about responding to measurable threat than about signaling control, order, and patriotic duty, making the border visibly and affectively real (Walters, 2011; Huysmans, 2000).

This dynamic echoes what Huysmans (2000) calls the “little security nothings” - mundane acts that collectively produce an atmosphere of insecurity. In the Polish context, these acts are amplified through historical memory, Catholic moral discourse, and nationalist ideology (Barker, 2018; Mehta, 2023), turning securitization into a deeply cultural and emotional project. Officers’ discretionary decisions thus reflect not only institutional priorities but also a moralized sense of defending the nation (Fassin, 2013; Aas, 2011). In so doing, discretion becomes a medium through which risk is rendered visible and governable, and through which sovereignty is publicly performed. Furthermore, through discretionary encounters that categorize individuals as more or less suspicious, more or less “out of place,” or more or less (core) European (van der Woude, 2023; Vaughan-Williams, 2009; Walters, 2011). Polish officers enact what can be described as a form of quiet exceptionality: a condition in which exceptional vigilance and control are gradually normalized and routinized through everyday legal and administrative practices (Neal, 2012; Huysmans, 2008; Aradau & Van Munster, 2007).

Yet discretionary securitization does more than exclude: it also stabilizes the national self. Each encounter that identifies someone as not-belonging simultaneously reaffirms who does belong. Othering here functions as a constitutive practice, reaffirming collective identity in the face of demographic anxiety and geopolitical uncertainty (Gundhus, 2020; Fassin, 2013). In Poland, these acts often draw on moralized narratives of protection, religious purity, and civilizational vulnerability. Discretion thus not only manages mobility but reproduces the affective boundaries of the nation, one stop, stare, or document check at a time. By embedding securitization within discretionary routines, the dissertation challenges assumptions about where and how security is produced. It shows that frontline actors do not merely execute securitized policies. They co-produce them, leveraging legal ambiguity, institutional culture, and emotional cues to redraw the lines of belonging and exclusion in everyday life.

3.4 Conceptualizing Affective Discretion

In addition to institutional pressures and ideological scripts, this dissertation foregrounds the role of emotion, morality, and embodiment in how discretion is enacted at the border. This theme draws on and contributes to emerging scholarship on affective governance and the moral psychology of enforcement (Vega, 2017; Aliverti, 2013; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012), by showing how Polish Border Guard officials make decisions not only based on law or policy, but also based on how they feel -about themselves, their duties, and the people they encounter.

Officers’ accounts reveal that discretion is not a neutral administrative function but a deeply emotional practice. Rather than compassion or empathy, emotions such as suspicion, irritation, pride, and fatigue dominate the moral landscape of their work. As the ethnographic vignettes demonstrate, affect is mobilized to sustain authority and align with institutional and cultural

expectations of assertiveness and control. Officers manage their emotional expressions to convey detachment and legitimacy, often suppressing empathy as incompatible with professionalism or “Polishness.” This emotional discipline not only legitimizes their discretionary choices but also reproduces broader nationalist and masculinized ideals within the organization. In this sense, affect is not incidental to discretion, it is one of its key mechanisms, shaping how legitimacy is performed and boundaries are enforced.

Emotions among Border Guard officers are not private impulses but collectively produced dispositions. They are shaped by the institution’s cultural scripts of masculinity, discipline, and vigilance. Scripts that define what it means to “feel right” as a professional. In practice, officers learn that detachment signals competence, suspicion signals control, and emotional distance affirms loyalty to the organization’s moral order. As the *Emotional Labour and Border Policing* article shows, recruits quickly internalize these affective norms: leniency or hesitation may be mocked, while displays of toughness and self-control are rewarded. Emotional conformity thus becomes a key marker of belonging. In this sense, affect is governed and not only managed internally, but policed and reproduced through everyday peer interactions. Discretion is therefore never only cognitive or moral; it is affective, performed within an emotional regime that privileges vigilance over empathy and composure over care.

What emerges is a concept of affective discretion: the discretionary judgment exercised by state actors through a lens of emotional and moral evaluation, often in the absence of clear legal criteria. This has significant implications for the study of discretion and state power more broadly. In the Polish case, affective discretion plays a central role in reproducing racialized, gendered, and religious hierarchies -mobilizing fear, disgust, pity, or duty to justify interventions that disproportionately target those coded as “non-European,” “undeserving,” or “out of place.”

Beyond these institutional and emotional dynamics, the moral logics that underpin affective discretion are not ideologically neutral. In the Polish context, Catholicism functions as a silent moral compass, shaping how officers evaluate the legitimacy or worthiness of those they encounter. Migrants are often filtered, consciously or not, through religious-cultural scripts that privilege Christian values, heteronormativity, and national purity. This moral background provides officers with soft justification for punitive actions (e.g., detentions or removals) as acts of duty or moral hygiene rather than violence. In this way, religion operates as a form of soft power, naturalizing discretionary exclusion while reinforcing a vision of Poland as culturally homogeneous and morally righteous.

These moral filters are not explicitly codified, yet they permeate how officers narrate their decisions and interpret emotional responses. Catholic notions of charity, suffering, and sacrifice often inflect officers’ stories, especially when they express pity, paternalism, or moral fatigue. Affective discretion, then, does not arise from individual sentiment alone, it is culturally scripted, socially legitimated, and institutionally sustained. Among these emotional logics, fear occupies a central but often unspoken role. Fear operates both structurally and situationally: officers internalize broader societal anxieties about demographic change, cultural threat, and political instability, while also responding to immediate affective cues (language, appearance, body posture) as potential signs of risk. Discretion is thus exercised within an emotional

atmosphere of threat, where the mere presence of difference can justify heightened suspicion or punitive action. In this sense, crimmigration is a fear-driven regime: one that frames foreignness as danger and control as moral necessity. Fear not only mobilizes enforcement, it also legitimates exclusion as protection, reinforcing the moral and symbolic coherence of the nation.

By integrating the emotional and moral labor of border policing into its conceptual account of discretion, this dissertation advances a more holistic theory of enforcement, one that recognizes the state not only as a rational-bureaucratic apparatus, but as an affective formation, enacted through bodies, gestures, and feelings. In the Polish context, this emotional labor is foundational. Officers must manage feelings of pity, guilt, or doubt in order to sustain the moral coherence of their role. In this way, emotion itself becomes a technology of governance: it renders discretionary violence not only tolerable but justifiable, cloaked in narratives of duty, fatigue, or reluctant necessity. Crimmigration enforcement, as shown throughout this dissertation, depends on the management of emotion to suppress ethical contradictions and make exclusion palatable. Affective discretion, then, is not only how the state is enacted, but how its legitimacy is felt and sustained.

4. Future Research and Final Reflections

The findings of this dissertation open several promising avenues for future research, both empirically and conceptually. As bordering practices continue to evolve under conditions of geopolitical instability, climate displacement, and democratic backsliding, understanding how discretion functions across contexts remains urgent. This study's focus on the Polish–German border illustrates how discretionary enforcement is not simply a matter of legal pragmatism, but a site where history, ideology, and affect coalesce to produce complex and often invisible frontiers. Further research is needed to examine how these dynamics unfold in other national contexts, across different temporal moments, and among other categories of frontline actors.

One important direction for future inquiry lies in comparative research on intra-EU discretion. While this dissertation has focused on Poland, its findings resonate with emerging trends across the European Union, particularly in states grappling with right-wing populism, migration politicization, and a more flexible understanding of the absoluteness of the freedom of movement in the Schengen space (see Van der Woude 2025). Comparative ethnographic or socio-legal work across countries such as Hungary, Italy, France, or Sweden could yield insights into how institutional culture, racial politics, and state ideology shape discretionary bordering differently across Europe's interior. Similarly, attention to how officers in Western European states perceive and narrate their Eastern or Southern counterparts could shed light on intra-EU hierarchies of enforcement and legitimacy.

A second line of research concerns methodological innovation in studying discretion and emotion. This dissertation has demonstrated the importance of engaging with officers not just as institutional agents, but as moral and affective subjects. Future work could further develop emotion-focused ethnographic approaches, including (but not limited to) reflexive fieldwork, narrative interviewing, and participatory observation of training environments, to deepen our understanding of how affect circulates within and beyond enforcement institutions. This is

particularly crucial for capturing how discretion is learned, disciplined, and rationalized in different national and organizational settings.

Theoretically, the dissertation invites further work on the racial, gendered, and religious logics of internal border control and crimmigration, especially in countries like Poland where explicit racial discourse may be absent from public policy but deeply embedded in practice. Future studies could explore how whiteness, Catholicism, or heteronormativity function as invisible benchmarks of belonging, and how these axes of identity intersect with broader security narratives. This includes not only the racialization of mobile populations, but also the implicit norms that structure who is seen as a “legitimate” officer, decision-maker, or moral authority in the discretionary space.

Finally, this project calls for sustained engagement with the idea of “Easternizing” crimmigration studies. Much of the literature in this field remains anchored in Western liberal democracies, often underestimating the ways in which post-socialist legal cultures, authoritarian pasts, and ethnonational narratives shape enforcement regimes. Poland offers a vantage point not of exception, but of structural variation -a reminder that the dynamics of discretion, securitization, and symbolic bordering cannot be fully understood without situating them in place-specific historical and cultural grammars. Future scholarship should resist the pull toward EU-wide generalizations and instead cultivate a more regionalized and historically sensitive understanding of enforcement landscapes.

In closing, this dissertation has shown that discretion is not simply a functional response to legal ambiguity or institutional constraint. It is a political and affective practice through which borders are enacted, identities are policed, and state legitimacy is performed. By examining the discretionary practices of Polish Border Guard officials within the intra-Schengen space, the project has illuminated how bordering persists and transforms in times of supposed openness. In doing so, it offers both an empirical account of how border control operates on the ground, and a conceptual intervention into how we theorize sovereignty, nationalism, and statehood in contemporary Europe.

Ultimately, crimmigration in Poland is not simply about legality or security, but about the emotional, moral, and symbolic infrastructures that determine who belongs and who is disposable. From the affective performances of frontline officers to the silent operations of religious-cultural filtering and secrecy, the Polish case compels a rethinking of crimmigration as an ideological project -rooted in nationalism, structured by fear, and maintained through emotional and symbolic labor. These findings return us to the central question posed in this dissertation’s title: Are these officers truly “*Agents of Change*”? In fact, this part of the title of the dissertation is deliberately ironic. While frontline officers of the Polish Border Guard might appear to be pivotal figures in the governance of migration, wielding significant discretionary power and performing daily acts of enforcement, they are, in reality, constrained by institutional hierarchies, political agendas, and deeply embedded cultural scripts. Rather than instigating change, these officers often reproduce existing power structures and nationalist ideologies through routine practices. Their discretion, far from being emancipatory, frequently reinforces exclusionary norms. Thus, the so-called “agents of change” are revealed to be more accurately “agents of continuity”, operating within, and upholding, a system that leaves little room for

transformation. What emerges is a portrait of state agents who do not merely implement rules, but actively reproduce the nation's moral and symbolic borders. This reframes their discretion not as neutral problem-solving, but as historically contingent statecraft from below. In this light, the Polish case not only challenges Western-centric assumptions but calls for an Easternized lens attentive to post-socialist histories, religious moralities, and identity politics as core engines of migration control.