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

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EPILOGUE:

Contemporary Politics of Sanitized Exclusion

As most of the data for this dissertation was collected by early 2019, one may reasonably ask: how relevant are these findings today? Given the significant geopolitical and political developments since then, such as the war in Ukraine, shifting EU migration governance, and the 2023 electoral victory of the centrist Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska, KO), it is essential to briefly reflect on the current discourse and evolving practices of migration governance and bordering in Poland.

Since the Civic Coalition took power in late 2023 under Prime Minister Donald Tusk, there has been a visible recalibration of migration policy and rhetoric. Although KO positioned itself in opposition to the nationalist populism of the Law and Justice (PiS) party, its actual approach to border control has been more continuity than rupture. The early promises of a more rights-based, pro-European migration stance have gradually given way to increasingly securitized and restrictive measures. This transformation reflects a broader European trend: authoritarian populism may be electorally dethroned, but its core logics often persist, albeit under new branding.

In October 2024, Tusk's government announced a temporary suspension of the right to asylum at the Belarusian border, citing "hybrid warfare" by Belarus and Russia. Though framed as a security necessity, the measure mirrors earlier PiS-style exclusionary tactics, only now repackaged in technocratic language. The shift drew sharp criticism from human rights advocates and even internal coalition voices, particularly from more progressive factions within the KO-led alliance. Nevertheless, the move was popular among centrist and right-leaning voters, demonstrating how the "migration threat" continues to be politically instrumentalized.

By early 2025, the government proposed restricting social support for Ukrainian refugees to those who are formally employed and contribute to the tax system. This policy – presented as a step toward integration – effectively reinforced public narratives of deservingness and conditional hospitality, while signaling a retreat from the unconditional solidarity Poland showed during the early months of the war in Ukraine. Meanwhile, KO has continued to oppose aspects of the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum, particularly the mandatory relocation of asylum seekers. This reflects a broader skepticism of shared European responsibility when it comes to managing migration, despite KO's pro-European branding.

What emerges from these developments is a *sanitized exclusion*: migration is increasingly framed not through civilizational or religious panic (as under PiS), but through the language of risk management, labor market efficiency, and geopolitical defense. The affective and ideological frameworks of exclusion, racialized, gendered, and classed, have not disappeared; they have become normalized. The border is no longer rhetorically about "defending Christianity," but about "managing irregular flows." The figures of "invaders" and "traitors" have been replaced by "non-integrating foreigners" or "security liabilities."

In recent weeks, self-styled “citizens' patrols” have emerged along the Polish side of the German border, often identifiable by neon vests and nationalistic banners. These groups, some numbering in the hundreds, claim to monitor migrant movements and prevent the return of individuals pushed back by German police. Unlike state agents checked through formal protocols and training, these civilian patrols operate outside legal frameworks. They have reportedly carried out “citizen’s arrests,” filmed Border Guard activity, and even reversed German migrants’ drop-offs – all without formal oversight. Their activities have fueled a broader political dispute. While centrist authorities have condemned the groups and deployed military and police units to reinforce official borders, far-right figures, including President-elect Nawrocki, have praised the vigilantes, further politicizing the border environment. In effect, these civilian patrols blur the line between state authority and popular vigilantism, challenging the Border Guard’s institutional control. Their appearance complicates security dynamics at the Polish–German border and raises profound questions about who has legitimate power to enforce state sovereignty in times of migration tensions.

In the end, the symbolic function of the border remains intact: it performs sovereignty, reaffirms moral boundaries, and continues to separate “us” from “them,” albeit with less inflammatory tone. Officers on the ground continue to exercise broad discretionary power, and institutional secrecy remains intact. The emotional and ideological labor of border control has not lessened; it has simply adapted to a more centrist, technocratic political climate.

In sum, while the KO government represents a formal departure from PiS-era nationalism, its approach to migration reflects a strategic blend of policy pragmatism and political expedience. Migration is no longer demonized, but it is still securitized. Exclusion is no longer shouted – it is now systematized. The borders of Poland, and indeed Europe, remain spaces of selective permeability, where belonging is filtered through race, labor, crime and security logics. Thus, the findings of this dissertation remain not only relevant but urgent: they speak to an enduring structure of sanitized exclusion, now dressed in the language of reason and restraint.

*The epilogue was written based on analysis of various media sources published between October 2024 and July 2025; all sources are included in the bibliography.

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