



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Klajn, M.E.

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

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4299140>

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

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.

Bibliography

- Aas, K. F. (2011). ‘Crimmigrant’ bodies and bona fide travelers: Surveillance, citizenship and global governance. *Theoretical Criminology*, 15(3), 331–346.
- Abji, S. (2020). Punishing survivors and criminalizing survivorship: A feminist intersectional approach to migrant justice in the crimmigration system. *Studies in Social Justice*, 14(2), 1–23.
- Aliverti, A. (2013). *Crimes of mobility: Criminal law and the regulation of immigration*. Routledge
- Amoore, L., & de Goede, M. (2008). *Risk and the war on terror*. Routledge.
- Aradau, C., & Van Munster, R. (2007). Governing terrorism through risk: Taking precautions,(un) knowing the future. *European journal of international relations*, 13(1), 89–115.

- Balzacq, T. (2011). *Securitization theory: How security problems emerge and dissolve*. Routledge.
- Barker, V. (2018). *Nordic nationalism and penal order: Walling the welfare state*. Routledge.
- Bhatia, M., Rosina, M., & Vuolajarvi, N. (2024). Critical Criminology, Special Issue Introduction: Critical Engagements with Gender, Race and Class in Crimmigration Controls. *Critical Criminology*, 32(2), 333-337.
- Bigo, D. (2002). Security and immigration: Toward a critique of the governmentality of unease. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 27(1 Suppl.), 63–92.
- Brandariz, J. Á. (2021). An expanded analytical gaze on penal power: Border criminology and punitiveness. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 10(4), 21–37. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.1659>
- Brandariz, J. Á., Fabini, G., Fernández-Bessa, C., & Ferraris, V. (Eds.). (2025). *Border criminologies from the periphery: Cross-national conversations on bordered penalty*. Routledge.
- Broeders, D. (2007). The new digital borders of Europe: EU databases and the surveillance of irregular migrants. *International sociology*, 22(1), 71-92.
- Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & de Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A new framework for analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Cornelisse, G. (2022). Criminalisation, Containment and Courts: a call for cross-fertilisation between the social sciences and legal-doctrinal research into immigration detention in Europe. In L. Tsourdi, & P. De Bruycker (Eds.), *Research handbook on EU Migration and Asylum Law* (pp. 455-470).
- Dimou, E. (2021). Decolonizing Southern criminology: What can the ‘Southern’ turn do for criminology? *Critical Criminology*, 29(1), 37–53. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-021-09579-9>
- Eule, T. G., Loher, D., & Wissel, J. (2019). *Inside immigration law: Migration management and policy application in Germany*. Routledge.
- Fassin, D. (2013). *Enforcing order: An ethnography of urban policing*. Polity Press.
- Franko, K. (2019). *The crimmigrant other: Migration and penal power*. Routledge.
- Guiraudon, V. (2000). European integration and migration policy: Vertical policy-making as venue shopping. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 38(2), 251–271
- Guiraudon, V., & Lahav, G. (2000). A reappraisal of the state sovereignty debate: The case of migration control. *Comparative Political Studies*, 33(2), 163–195.
- Gundhus, H. O., & Jansen, P. T. (2020). Pre-crime and policing of migrants: Anticipatory action meets management of concerns. *Theoretical criminology*, 24(1), 90-109.

- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1st ed.). University of California Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pn9bk>
- Huysmans, J. (2000). The European Union and the securitization of migration. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 38(5), 751–777.
- Huysmans, J. (2006). *The politics of insecurity: Fear, migration and asylum in the EU*. Routledge.
- Huysmans, J. (2008). The jargon of exception—On Schmitt, Agamben and the absence of political society. *International Political Sociology*, 2(2), 165–183.
- Klajn M.E. (2019) Fear and loathing on the border. Mid-fieldwork impressions of a budding border ethnographer. Available at: <http://europeanbordercommunities.eu/blog/fear-and-loathing-on-the-border-mid-fieldwork-impressions-of-a-budding-border-ethnographer> (Accessed 01.06.2025).
- Klajn, M., & van der Woude, M. (2025). Understanding the performance of discretion at the Polish-German border through the lens of emotional labour. *European Journal of Criminology*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/14773708251348326>
- Klajn, M. (2018) Polskość: The Legacy of Polish Past in its Present Identity Struggles. <https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2018/02/polskosc-legacy>
- Klajn, M. (2020). Political meanings of national belonging: tracing the evolution of 'Polishness' in the Third Republic of Poland. *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies*, 6(4), 259-279.
- Klajn, M. (2021). The Forced Returns of Polish Citizens: Cross-Border Transfers on the Polish-German Border in the Context of the Discretionary Powers of the Border Guards. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review*, 10(1), 119-142.
- Klajn, M. (under review, 2025). The interactions between gender and research data: ethnographic case study of Crimmigration on the Polish-German border. *Sage Research Methods: Inclusive Methodologies*.
- Klajn, M. (submitted, under review). Multi-scalar applicability of 'secrecy' in border security: an ethnographic case study of the Polish Border Guard. *Critical Studies on Security*.
- Klaus, W., & Szulecka, M. (2021). The judiciary power of discretion in sanctioning the facilitation of unauthorized stay in Poland. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 10(3), 72-86.
- Klaus, W., & Szulecka, M. (2023). Departing or being deported? Poland's approach towards humanitarian migrants. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 36(3), 467-488.
- Ładykowski, P. (2011). The emerging Polish-German borderland: The past and the present. *Baltic Journal of European Studies*, 1(2), 117–136. <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10251-011-0009-5>

- Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Maynard-Moody, S., & Musheno, M. (2012). Social equities and inequities in practice: Street-level workers as agents and pragmatists. *Public Administration Review*, 72(s1), S16–S23.
- Mehta, R. (2023). A Southern feminist approach to the criminology of mobility. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 12(3), 1–12.
- Neal, A. W. (2012). Normalization and legislative exceptionalism: Counterterrorist lawmaking and the changing times of security emergencies. *International Political Sociology*, 6(3), 260–276.
- Nyman, J. (2021). The everyday life of security: Capturing space, practice, and affect. *International Political Sociology*, 15(3), 313–337.
- Stumpf, J. (2006). The crimmigration crisis: Immigrants, crime, and sovereign power. *American University Law Review*, 56(2), 367–419.
- Szulecka, M. (2022). The undermined role of (domestic) case law in shaping the practice of admitting asylum seekers in Poland. *European Journal of Legal Studies*, 13(1 Special Issue), 171–201.
- Vega, I. I. (2017). *Legitimacy, Morality, and Criminality: The Occupational Culture of US Border Patrol Agents* (Doctoral dissertation, UCLA).
- Vega, I. I. (2018). Empathy, morality, and criminality: The legitimization narratives of US border patrol agents. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(15), 2544–2561.
- Vega, I. I. (2025). *Bordering on Indifference: Immigration Agents Negotiating Race and Morality*. Princeton University Press.
- Van der Woude, M., Van der Leun, J., & Nijland, J. A. (2013). Crimmigration in the Netherlands. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 42(3), 560–582.
- Van der Woude, M., & van der Leun, J. (2017). Crimmigration checks in the internal border areas of the EU: Finding the discretion that matters. *European journal of criminology*, 14(1), 27–45.
- Van der Woude, M. (2023). Securitizing mobility: Profiling ‘non-core’Europeans. *Security Dialogue*, 54(6), 620–638.
- van der Woude, M. (2025). *The Mobility Control Apparatus: Getting to the Core of Crimmigration in the Schengen Area*. Taylor & Francis.
- Vaughan-Williams, N. (2009). *Border politics: The limits of sovereign power*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Walters, W. (2010). Foucault and frontiers: Notes on the birth of the humanitarian border. In *Governmentality* (pp. 146–172). Routledge.

Zacka, B. (2017). *When the state meets the street: Public service and moral agency*. Harvard University Press.

Žuk, P., & Žuk, P. (2024). Wall-building policy: nationalist space management and borderphobia as right-wing populists' tools for doing authoritarian politics. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6, 1288787.

News sources used for Epilogue:

AP News. (2025, July 7). Poland reinstates border controls with Germany and Lithuania to address concerns over illegal migration. <https://apnews.com>

Associated Press. (2025, May 22). 9 EU countries want a new interpretation of European rights to ease deportations. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/f23ca5225016535c24d567dd18d971cd>

Brzeziński, B. (2025, March 21). Poland shuts asylum door at Belarus border with EU backing. Politico. <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-belarus-border-asylum-law-europe/>

Daily Sabah. (2025, February 24). Ukrainian refugees alarmed as Poland mulls limiting benefits. <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/ukrainian-refugees-alarmed-as-poland-mulls-limiting-benefits>

Deutsche Welle. (2025, July 10). German-Polish border checks: 'They make our life difficult'. <https://dw.com>

DW News. (2024, June 14). What will be the human cost of Poland's new border defenses? <https://dw.com>

ETIAS. (2025, July 15). Poland reinstates borders amid migration row. <https://etias.com>

Euractiv. (2025, February 24). Poland on track to cut benefits for Ukrainian refugees. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/poland-on-track-to-cut-benefits-for-ukrainian-refugees/>

Euronews. (2025, February 7). Poland will not implement Migration Pact, Tusk tells von der Leyen. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/02/07/poland-will-not-implement-migration-pact-donald-tusk-tells-ursula-von-der-leyen>

Euronews. (2025, July 23). Germany supports Poland's measures to curb migration from Belarus. <https://euronews.com>

Euronews. (2025, March 10). Poland will face legal action if it breaches Migration Pact, Brussels now confirms. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/03/10/poland-will-face-legal-action-if-it-breaches-migration-pact-brussels-now-confirms>

Le Monde. (2024, October 14). Embarras et critiques après l'annonce par la Pologne d'une possible suspension partielle du droit d'asile. <https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2024/10/14/embarras-et-critiques-apres-l->

[annonce-par-la-pologne-d-une-possible-suspension-partielle-du-droit-d-asile_6351663_3210.html](https://www.les-echos.com/actualites/annonce-par-la-pologne-d-une-possible-suspension-partielle-du-droit-d-asile_6351663_3210.html)

Notes from Poland. (2025). Polish government criticizes 'citizen patrols' blocking migrant returns.

Notes from Poland. (2025, June 29). Polish 'citizen patrols' formed on German border to prevent migrant returns.

Politico. (2025, July 4). Poland's Tusk tells far-right vigilantes on German border to go home.

Reddit. (2025, June 29). Polish 'citizen patrols' formed on German border to prevent migrant returns.

Reuters. (2024, October 12). Poland to temporarily suspend right to asylum after Belarus border tensions, Tusk says. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-temporarily-suspend-right-asylum-after-belarus-border-tensions-tusk-says-2024-10-12/>

Reuters. (2024, October 14). Poland's Tusk takes coalition partners by surprise with asylum suspension plan.

Reuters. (2025, July 7). Poland imposes checks on German and Lithuanian borders amid migration concerns. <https://reuters.com>

Telegraph. (2025, July 21). On patrol with Poland's ultra-nationalist border vigilantes. <https://telegraph.co.uk>

The Express. (2025, July 8). Poland sends 5000 soldiers to German border in dramatic move.
<https://the-express.com>

The Guardian. (2025, May 19). Donald Tusk: next two weeks will 'decide future of Poland'.

The Times. (2025, July 22). The Polish Tommy Robinson leading anti-migrant vigilantes.
<https://thetimes.co.uk>

TVP World. (2025, July 4). Polish patrol group reverse German police's Afghan migrant drop-off. <https://tvpworld.com>

Washington Post. (2025, July 5). Escalating German-Polish border dispute hampers Europe's free movement. <https://washingtonpost.com>

Wikipedia contributors. (n.d.). 15 October Coalition. Wikipedia. Retrieved May 21, 2025, from

Yahoo News. (2025, July 21). On patrol with Poland's ultra-nationalist border vigilantes.
<https://yahoo.com>

YouTube. (2025, July 3). Why is Poland introducing controls on its border with Germany?
<https://youtube.com>

YouTube. (2025, July 7). Poland starts border controls at border with Germany | DW News.
<https://youtube.com>

YouTube. (2025, June 30). PD NEWS 29.06.25 - Polish-German Border Crisis.
<https://youtube.com>