

Everything Old is New Again

Borders, Ritual, and the Return of History in Europe

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Abstract

This paper argues that *Green Border* (2023), directed by Agnieszka Holland, transforms the Polish-Belarusian border into a site of moral ritual, where sacred violence replaces humanitarian law. Using Durkheim's theories, Eastern European memory studies, and analyses of populism and asylum policy, the paper interprets the film as a historical recurrence rather than a modern crisis. Drawing on scholars like Törnquist-Plewa, Exeler, and Krastev, the analysis reveals how Europe's border politics ritualize exclusion and revive authoritarian patterns under democratic guise. Methods include close film analysis and engagement with secondary literature on EU identity, populism, and the symbolic politics of migration.

In the autumn of 2021, a strip of dense forest between Poland and Belarus—long peripheral in the European imagination—abruptly became the epicenter of a manufactured humanitarian crisis. The Belarusian regime, seeking to retaliate against EU sanctions, engineered a migrant corridor by issuing visas to Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans, and Congolese and transporting them to the edge of Europe.¹ Poland responded with a state of emergency, the construction of an exclusion zone, and the legalization of summary pushbacks. Journalists and aid workers were barred; asylum procedures were suspended; and hundreds of people were trapped in a militarized limbo between two states intent on denying responsibility. What unfolded was not a border malfunction, but the deliberate creation of a political theater in which human bodies became instruments of geopolitical signaling.²

To see this frontier only as a site of strategic confrontation, however, is to miss the deeper historical structure that gives it meaning. Borders in Europe have long been stages upon which states perform belonging, exclusion, and sovereignty. Migration specialists—from Hein de Haas to Michelle Lynn Kahn—remind us that mobility is not an aberration of later modernity but a constitutive feature of European history: cyclical, patterned, and profoundly ordinary. Yet the political class continues to describe migration as an existential rupture, a crisis to be managed rather than an ongoing human condition.³ In this discursive alchemy, migrants become impurities threatening the moral coherence of the nation, and the border becomes a sacred line whose defense justifies exceptional measures.

It is within this longer historical and sociological frame that Agnieszka Holland's *Green Border* (2023) functions not as the center of analysis, but as a revealing fictionalized primary source—a cinematic document of a border transformed into ritual terrain. Shot in black and white, the film intentionally disorients temporality, echoing what Asli Yakali and Zahide Erdoğan describe as a “cinematic history of the present.”⁴ Its aesthetic choices evoke earlier European catastrophes: zones of filtration, exclusion, and bureaucratic cruelty that

¹ European Commission, *Statement by President von der Leyen on the Instrumentalisation of Migrants by the Belarus Regime*, November 8, 2021; Amnesty International, *Poland/Belarus: Caught in a Political Game* (London: Amnesty International, 2021).

² Human Rights Watch, *“Die Here or Go to Poland”: Belarus and Poland’s Shared Responsibility for Border Abuses* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021); Republic of Poland, Decree of the President No. 171/2021 Declaring a State of Emergency in Parts of Podlaskie and Lubelskie Voivodeships, September 2, 2021; Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, *The Lawless Zone: Human Rights Violations in the Area of the State of Emergency* (Warsaw: HFHR, 2021); AIDA (Asylum Information Database), *Country Report: Poland—2021 Update* (Brussels: European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2022); Grupa Granica, *Report on the Situation of People at the Poland-Belarus Border*, October-December 2021.

³ Hein de Haas, *How Migration Really Works: The Facts About the Most Divisive Issue in Politics* (London: Penguin Press, 2023), which argues that migration is structural, cyclical, and a normal feature of human societies; Michelle Lynn Kahn, *Foreign in Two Homelands: Racism, Return Migration, and Turkish-German History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), which demonstrates the centrality of circular and return migration to European history via Turkish guest-workers in the Federal Republic of Germany.

⁴ Asli Yakali and Zahide Erdoğan, “Green Border: Cinematic Storytelling as History of the Present,” *CINEJ Cinema Journal* 12, no.2 (2024): 247.

recur whenever states construct an “impure” category to be expelled. The soldiers and guards in the film do not behave spontaneously; they perform rehearsed gestures of exclusion that closely reflect the documented practices of Poland’s border services and the testimonies collected by Grupa Granica, Human Rights Watch, and the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights.

Durkheim’s theory of ritual offers a powerful lens through which to understand this convergence between cinematic representation and documented practice. For Durkheim, rituals reaffirm the moral community by distinguishing the sacred from the profane and by expelling the impure.⁵ At the Poland-Belarus border, the migrant is rendered not merely as an administrative problem but as a symbolic pollutant whose presence destabilizes national order. The violence that follows—pushbacks, exposure, abandonment—functions less as a security policy than as a purification rite. Once the border is sacralized in this way, its maintenance becomes a moral obligation immune to legal constraints, humanitarian norms, or empirical evidence about migration’s ordinariness.

This essay argues that the Poland-Belarus frontier should be understood as precisely such a Durkheimian ritual site: a space where violence is performed to reaffirm the imagined integrity of the European community. By reading *Green Border* alongside legal documents, NGO reports, and contemporary scholarship on migration, populism, and memory politics, I show that Europe’s so-called postwar humanitarian order has not collapsed but has reverted to older patterns of sacralized exclusion. The border has become an altar on which liberal ideals are sacrificed, populist narratives sanctified, and human beings rendered symbolic offerings in a ritual of sovereignty. Though grounded in the specificities of Belarus and Poland, this paper speaks to Europe as a whole, for the dynamics that converge in the forests of Podlasie—ritualized security, selective compassion, and the moralization of borders—echo throughout the continent.

Methodologically, this analysis does not rely on personal testimony or oral history; rather it draws on legal texts, policy decisions, civil-society documentation, and established historiography to illuminate how structures of power express themselves through language, bureaucracy, and space. In synthesizing these sources, I offer not a partisan argument but an applied historical commentary—one that seeks to interpret, rather than indict, and situate the present within a larger continuum of European political and moral practice. Ultimately, this is a study of how history moves through us: how what is old becomes new again, how inherited patterns reassert themselves in moments of crisis, and how the border, far from being a peripheral line, becomes a site where Europe’s deepest anxieties—and aspirations—are revealed.

Sacred Boundaries: EU Memory Politics and the Making of a Ritualized Frontier

The sacralization of the EU’s eastern frontier is not a rupture in Europe’s postwar trajectory but a revealing continuation of its unresolved moral architecture. As Ian Kershaw

⁵ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), pp. 38-39.

argues in *The Global Age*, the postwar European project emerged from a dual inheritance: a cosmopolitan ideal grounded in the memory of catastrophe, and a persistent pattern of selective remembrance that allowed national mythologies to endure beneath the veneer of integration.⁶ This duality deepened after the 2004 enlargement, when the European Union absorbed states whose memory culture diverged sharply from Western norms. As Barbara Törnquist-Plewa demonstrates, Western Europe had cultivated a “negative founding myth” centered on Holocaust remembrance and self-critique, whereas many Eastern European states retained narratives of national martyrdom that resisted cosmopolitanizing pressures.⁷ This mnemonic divide is not merely symbolic; it has real policy consequences. Poland’s conduct at the Belarus border—framed as the defense of “European civilization” yet executed through illegal pushbacks, emergency decrees, and obstruction of asylum procedures—embodies the tension between human rights as Europe’s universalist promise and sovereignty as its practiced theology.

This contradiction becomes most visible in the legal and bureaucratic structures that govern Europe’s periphery. Maciej Grześkowiak’s analysis of the 2021 crisis shows that the European Commission, long styled as the “guardian of the treaties,” failed to enforce EU asylum standards when confronted with member states operating under the logic of exception.⁸ On paper, the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) guarantees access to procedure, non-refoulement, and individual assessment. But as documented in AIDA’s 2021-22 *Country Report: Poland*, these rights evaporated at the border zone, where Poland’s October 2021 amendment to the Act on Foreigners enabled summary expulsions and effectively neutralized asylum claims.⁹ Grupa Granica’s field reports corroborate this legal landscape, describing a cycle in which migrants were repeatedly pushed back and forth between Polish and Belarusian forces—“ping-pong” expulsions that left families stranded for days in freezing forests without food, shelter, or medical care.¹⁰ The “paper rights” of CEAS thus reveal their fragility; bureaucratic humanitarianism becomes a ritual of self-legitimation rather than a functional system of protection.

The performative power of border enforcement is not uniquely European, but part of a broader pattern in which contemporary states use borders as stages for projecting sovereignty. Comparative migration historians such as Leo Lucassen and Tara Zahra remind us that public narratives of crisis often diverge sharply from empirical realities of mobility. Migration, they argue, has always been a normal and recurring feature of modern societies, yet governments repeatedly transform it into a symbolic battleground on which national identity is defended.¹¹ This helps explain why states across ideological contexts—European,

⁶ Ian Kershaw, *The Global Age: Europe, 1950-2017* (New York: Viking, 2020).

⁷ Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, “After All These Years, Still Divided by Memories? The European Union and Eastern Europe,” *East European Politics and Societies* 38, no. 4 (2024): 1080.

⁸ Maciej Grześkowiak, “The ‘Guardian of the Treaties’ Is No More? The European Commission and the 2021 Humanitarian Crisis on the Poland–Belarus Border,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2023): 83-84.

⁹ AIDA (Asylum Information Database), *Country Report: Poland—2021 Update* (Brussels: European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2022).

¹⁰ Grupa Granica, *Report on the Situation of People at the Poland–Belarus Border, October–December 2021* (Warsaw: Grupa Granica, 2021), 30.

¹¹ Leo Lucassen, “Peeling an Onion: The ‘Refugee Crisis’ from a Historical Perspective,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 3 (2018): 383-410; Tara Zahra, *Against the World: Anti-Globalism and Mass Politics Between the World Wars* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2023).

American, or otherwise—invest borders with outsized political meaning. When the United States expanded detention facilities at its southern frontier or debated offshore processing arrangements, these were less policies of material necessity than gestures aimed at reassuring an anxious nation that the border still “holds.” The point is not that the American and Polish contexts are equivalent—each is historically distinct—but that both reflect a broader logic in which states ritualize control by transforming vulnerable migrants into embodiments of disorder.

Recognizing this pattern requires acknowledging the explanatory limits of both anti-migrant populism and uncritical pro-migrant idealism. As Hein de Haas argues, migration is neither the solution to all socioeconomic problems nor the existential threat portrayed by its opponents; it is a structural feature of human societies shaped by development, demographic change, and global inequality.¹² Michelle Kahn’s work on Turkish guest-workers and their return migration similarly disrupts simplified narratives by showing how migration flows are often circular, reversible, and deeply intertwined with national histories.¹³ Migrants are not invading forces nor passive victims but actors embedded in long-standing global patterns. By situating the Poland-Belarus crisis within this broader scholarly landscape, the historical question becomes not whether migration is “good” or “bad,” but how and why states transform ordinary mobility into a site of moral panic and ritualized violence.

Seen through this wider lens, the Poland-Belarus border emerges as a microcosm of Europe’s unresolved struggle to reconcile universal rights with national belonging. The exclusionary practices documented by Human Rights Watch and the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights—pushbacks, denial of aid, and obstruction of asylum access—are not aberrations but logical outcomes of a system that sacralizes territorial integrity while delegating humanitarian responsibility outward.¹⁴ *Green Border* captures this with eerie accuracy: its monochrome palette mirrors the stark moral binaries imposed by the state, while its depiction of border guards performing routine expulsions aligns with both legal records and NGO testimonies. The ritualization of violence at the frontier thus reflects not only Poland’s illiberal turn but a deeper European ambivalence about the very foundations of its postwar identity—an identity suspended between cosmopolitan aspiration and the enduring power of the border as a sacred line.

Filtration, Frontiers, and the Return of History

The bureaucratized violence unfolding on the Poland-Belarus border resonates with a much older repertoire of governance in Eastern Europe: the selective sorting, disciplining, and abandonment of human beings under the guise of security. As Stephen Kotkin observes

¹² Hein de Haas, *How Migration Really Works: The Facts About the Most Divisive Issue in Politics* (London: Penguin Press, 2023).

¹³ Michelle Lynn Kahn, *Foreign in Two Homelands: Racism, Return Migration, and Turkish-German History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2024).

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, “*Die Here or Go to Poland*”: *Belarus and Poland’s Shared Responsibility for Border Abuses* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021); Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, *The Lawless Zone: Human Rights Violations in the Area of the State of Emergency* (Warsaw: HFHR, 2021).

of Stalinist rule, citizens “were compelled to endure enervating bureaucratic indifference and arbitrary repression” despite the state’s frequent rationalizations for their policies and practices.¹⁵ This paradox continues to echo in contemporary border regimes. Franziska Exeler’s recent study of Russian filtration camps during the invasion of Ukraine reveals a chilling continuity with their Soviet predecessors. The camps, she writes, are used “to register, screen, and detain Ukrainian civilians in areas that have come under Russian occupation.” Moreover, she notes that “structural similarities exist between the different filtration camp systems (Soviet and Russian), above all in terms of the administrative design of the filtration process.”¹⁶ Taken together, these continuities show that filtration is not merely a neutral procedure of screening, but an administrative technology that decides whose lives are to be monitored, constrained, or removed.

The same logic—innocuous administrative language masking state violence—structures the Poland-Belarus frontier today. Poland’s 2021 emergency zone decree invoked “public order” and “state security,” while its October 2021 pushback amendment legalized summary expulsions of migrants deemed to lack “legitimate grounds” for entry.¹⁷ Bureaucratic euphemism once again enables human disposability.

The forested borderlands between Belarus, Poland, and Ukraine have borne these experiments in statecraft for more than a century, making the present crisis not an anomaly but a reactivation of an older logic. Kate Brown’s *A Biography of No Place* demonstrates how these lands were repeatedly transformed by imperial projects that sought to refashion diverse populations into idealized national subjects; in these efforts, states reorganized people with the same zeal with which they reorganized territory. Crucially, Brown insists that in borderlands, ideology always lands hardest on the bodies of ordinary people, who become the medium through which states assert control.¹⁸ This insight illuminates the human cost of the Poland-Belarus standoff. Belarusian officials funnelling migrants to the EU frontier as instruments of geopolitical leverage; Polish authorities responding with pushbacks, exclusion zones, and legal fictions of “non-entry”; and caught between these competing sovereignties were the stateless, the undocumented, and the unprotected—those upon whose bodies the border’s power is enacted.

The geography itself retains the memory of these violences. Timothy Snyder’s account of the borderlands captures the region’s long history of state interventions that reorder populations by identifying and eliminating categories of unwanted people.¹⁹ *Green Border’s* monochrome cinematography captures this moral geography: the forest appears as a space where law, sovereignty, and abandonment overlap. Granica documented cases in

¹⁵ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 389.

¹⁶ Franziska Exeler, “Filtration Camps, Past and Present, and Russia’s War Against Ukraine,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 25, nos. 2-3 (2023): 426, 444.

¹⁷ Republic of Poland, Decree of the President No. 171/2021 Declaring a State of Emergency in Parts of Podlaskie and Lubelskie Voivodeships, September 2, 2021; Act of 14 October 2021 Amending the Act on Foreigners, *Journal of Laws* 2021, item 1918.

¹⁸ Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1-17.

¹⁹ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), vii-xix.

which migrants were forced back and forth for days, left between the border lines without food or shelter, trapped in a no-man's land where both states denied responsibility.²⁰ The forest becomes an archive of unacknowledged lives—a place where Europe's humanitarian vocabulary dissolves into the logistical management of suffering.

The Russo-Ukrainian War intensified this moral geography by revealing striking asymmetries in Europe's politics of compassion. In 2022, while Russian forces resurrected filtration tactics designed to intimidate, monitor, and detain Ukrainian civilians, the European Union activated the Temporary Protection Directive and opened its borders to millions of Ukrainians. As Exeler notes, Russian filtration operated as tools for surveillance and intimidation, not merely processing.²¹ Yet at the Poland-Belarus frontier, Syrians, Afghans, Yemenis, and Congolese were denied the very protections extended to Ukrainians. This divergence exposes what Didier Fassin calls the "moral economy, centered on humanitarianism," where compassion is selectively allocated according to geopolitical narrative rather than universal principles.²² A 35-year-old Congolese man, interviewed by Human Rights Watch, distilled this double standard succinctly:

[They said], "There's no asylum, there's nothing [here], go back to where you came from!" They [took us by vans] and made us go back to Belarus, to the neutral zone.²³

Green Border echoes this sentiment powerfully as its characters confront the silence surrounding non-European refugees—a silence that speaks louder than any declaration of values.

Yet this asymmetry cannot be explained solely through compassion; it is rooted in competing visions of belonging that divide Europe internally. As Paul Kubicek has argued, the rise of illiberal nationalism in Poland and Hungary reflects a backlash against cosmopolitan liberalism, which is framed by populist leaders as elitist, foreign, and corrosive to national cohesion.²⁴ Ivan Krastev similarly observes that the 2015 refugee crisis produced the return of the East-West divide, as Eastern European governments rejected Brussels' universalism in favor of narratives of cultural defense.²⁵ Holland displays this dynamic on screen through the suspicion directed at those who aid migrants—activists, psychologists, even border guards who show empathy. They become transgressors of the moral order, punished not for illegality but for violating the ritual boundaries of national solidarity.

²⁰ Grupa Granica, *Report on the Situation of People at the Poland–Belarus Border, October–December 2021* (Warsaw: Grupa Granica, 2021), 8.

²¹ Exeler, "Filtration Camps," 429.

²² Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 7.

²³ Human Rights Watch, "*Die Here or Go to Poland*": *Belarus and Poland's Shared Responsibility for Border Abuses* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021).

²⁴ Paul Kubicek, "Illiberal Nationalism and the Backlash Against Liberal Cosmopolitanism in Post-Communist Europe," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 28, no. 3 (2022): 331–49.

²⁵ Ivan Krastev, "The Refugee Crisis and the Return of the East-West Divide in Europe," *Slavic Review* 76, no. 2 (2017): 292.

Green Border also indicts Western Europe, refusing a simplistic binary in which East equals cruelty and West equals universalism. Törnquist-Plewa notes that while Western Europe foregrounds Holocaust memory as its negative founding myth, it often deploys that memory selectively, instrumentalizing it to avoid confronting other historical traumas, especially those concerning colonial violence or the expulsions and displacements that reshaped Eastern Europe after 1945.²⁶ Refugees at the Poland-Belarus border thus experience a double erasure: they are unwanted within Eastern nationalist mythologies and inconvenient to Western humanitarian self-presentation. The film's searing line—"No one is coming"—captures this structural abandonment. It is not merely a narrative device; it reflects a political reality in which Europe's commitments fracture at the border and the ideals proclaimed in Brussels evaporate among the birch trees of Podlasie.

Taken together, the crisis at the Poland-Belarus frontier represents not a break with Europe's past but its resurgence: a return of the border as a tool of moral sorting, bureaucratic domination, and selective compassion. In this sense, the contemporary border does not replicate the Stalinist camp or the Soviet filtration point, but it draws from the same repertoire of statecraft—one in which administrative categories organize human worth, and where frontier spaces become the experimental ground for political visions enacted upon vulnerable bodies. History, here, does not repeat itself. But as Exeler's work, Brown's borderlands scholarship, and Holland's film collectively reveal, it returns with new instruments and with devastating clarity.

Populism, Moral Community, and the Politics of Purification

If the border is a Durkheimian stage on which Europe enacts the boundaries of moral community, populism provides the language through which the drama is narrated. Cas Mudde famously defines populism as a *thin-centered ideology* built on a single Manichean division between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," a worldview too narrow to stand alone but powerful enough to reshape whatever ideology it attaches itself to.²⁷ This vision presupposes a unified and homogenous people whose supposed general will is both singular and morally infallible.²⁸ Yet real societies are heterogeneous. To preserve the illusion of unity, populist movements must identify elements that threaten the imagined coherence of "the people." In contemporary Europe, migrants—stateless, racialized, and symbolically malleable—have filled this role. They become the impurity whose expulsion affirms the purity of the national body .

The migrant thus becomes indispensable to the populist narrative: not a person so much as a symbolic instrument that sustains the moral dichotomy populism requires. Jan-Werner Müller emphasizes that populists claim exclusive representation of the people; anyone who disagrees, whether migrant or citizen, becomes morally suspect.²⁹ This explains why the Poland-Belarus border, although involving a relatively small number of

²⁶ Törnquist-Plewa, "After All These Years," 1086.

²⁷ Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 23–24.

²⁸ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6–9.

²⁹ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 9.

asylum seekers, became a symbolic flashpoint. Stephen Gross notes that right-wing populism in Europe is rooted not simply in xenophobia but in a sense of cultural disruption, demographic anxiety, and disillusionment with neoliberal cosmopolitanism.³⁰ The migrant therefore serves as a dual function: he or she personifies elite failure and provides the necessary scapegoat for populism's moral universe. The border becomes the ritual site where the community purifies itself, enacting the Durkheimian expulsion of symbolic disorder.

Yet populism is not simply a politics of exclusion; it is a politics born from genuine anxieties about belonging, representation, and the perceived failure of liberal-democratic governance. Populist movements flourish, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser argue, when mainstream elites appear distant, technocratic, or unresponsive to the social and cultural concerns of their constituents.³¹ The crisis at the Poland-Belarus frontier capitalizes on precisely these sentiments. Polish leaders frame their actions as defending sovereignty against a hostile autocrat in Belarus and an indifferent bureaucracy in Brussels. Their rhetoric resonates with citizens who feel marginalized by globalization and skeptical of cosmopolitan ideals—sentiments shared across European electorates from the Mediterranean to the North Sea.³²

Such grievances cannot be dismissed as irrational. They reflect what Müller sees as “democratic disappointment,” the widening gap between formal democratic rights and the lived sense of political agency.³³ Populist leaders step into this gap by transforming complex structural problems—economic precarity, uneven development, post-communist uncertainty—into moral arguments about corruption, betrayal, and national decline. Migration becomes the visible proxy for broader fears.

The border thus becomes the physical and symbolic terrain upon which this struggle for meaning is fought. Poland's emergency-zone decree and 2021 pushback legislation were not merely administrative tools; they were performative gestures signalling the state's capacity to protect the community.³⁴ Their effects, as have been documented by Granica and the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, demonstrate how populist narratives translate into human consequences: migrants forced back and forth between state forces, denied food, shelter, and medical care, rendered invisible by legal fiction and political necessity.³⁵ The ritual of sovereignty is enacted through the suffering of those who fall outside the imagined community.

³⁰ Stephen G. Gross, “Understanding Europe's Populist Right: The State of the Field,” *Contemporary European History* 32 (2023): 489–497.

³¹ Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 13–21.

³² Larry M. Bartels, “The Populist Phantom: Threats to Democracy Start at the Top,” *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 3 (2023): 1–9.

³³ Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 45–62.

³⁴ Republic of Poland, Decree of the President No. 171/2021 Declaring a State of Emergency in Parts of Podlaskie and Lubelskie Voivodeships, September 2, 2021; Act of 14 October 2021 Amending the Act on Foreigners, *Journal of Laws* 2021, item 1918.

³⁵ Grupa Granica, *Report on the Situation of People at the Poland–Belarus Border, October–December 2021* (Warsaw: Grupa Granica, 2021), 7–11; Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, *The Lawless Zone* (Warsaw: HFHR, 2021).

But populism's treatment of migrants cannot be understood in isolation from Europe's own liberal contradictions. The warmth extended to Ukrainian refugees after the 2022 invasion—justified and necessary as it was—exposed a selective humanitarianism conditioned by racial, cultural, and geopolitical affinities. Fassin's concept of the moral economy of humanitarianism illuminates this asymmetry once more: not all suffering is recognized equally, and compassion is shaped by political narratives rather than universalist ethics.³⁶ The contrast between Europe's embrace of Ukrainians and its abandonment of Syrians, Afghans, and Yemenis in the forests of Podlasie underscores this tension. Populism exploits such inconsistencies, framing them as evidence of elite hypocrisy. Liberal democracy, in turn, struggles to reconcile its universalist aspirations with its uneven practices.

In Holland's *Green Border*, this tension is rendered in miniature. The film's final moments—small acts of refusal by individuals within the state apparatus and quiet gestures of humanity from activists—reveal the fragility of the populist narrative. These ruptures echo Exeler's observation that systems of domination, whether Soviet or contemporary, rely on compliance and silence; moments of hesitation expose their contingency.³⁷ *Green Border* does not romanticize these acts, but it does suggest the border's violence is not inevitable. It is constructed, maintained, and therefore capable of being unmade.

Populism, in this sense, is neither an aberration nor a totalizing force. It is a symptom of unresolved tensions within European democracy and a warning about the fragility of pluralism. It challenges Europe to confront not only the dangers of majoritarianism but also the limits of its own cosmopolitan project. And at the Poland-Belarus frontier, where sovereignty, memory, and fear converge, populism reveals its deepest truth: that the battle for the border is always a battle over who counts as part of the moral community.

Conclusion

What unfolds at the Poland-Belarus border is not simply a regional dispute, nor the failure of a single asylum system, nor the cruelty of one illiberal government. It is a revelation of something older, deeper, and far more difficult to confront: the persistence of Europe's unresolved moral architecture and the way borders continue to function as laboratories for political imagination. In this forested frontier—where migrants shiver between two unyielding states, where law dissolves into exception, and where compassion competes with fear—we see how history refuses to recede into the past. It returns, not as repetition, but as rhyme: familiar structures of domination, familiar rituals of exclusion, and familiar justifications dressed in new bureaucratic language.

Yet history's return is never merely magic. It is diagnostic. It exposes the fault lines of the present. The many scholars whose work has guided this analysis have illuminated how borders become mirrors: reflecting our anxieties, our myths, our hopes, and our

³⁶ Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 1-17.

³⁷ Exeler, "Filtration Camps," 432.

failures. But historiography has its own silences. For decades, migration scholarship wrestled with numbers, systems, and institutions, often missing the symbolic and ritual dimensions that give borders their emotional power. Conversely, moral and theoretical studies sometimes flattened the lived experiences of those who move through these spaces. Only by holding the empirical and the symbolic in tension—by reading legal decrees alongside cinematic testimony, NGO reports alongside Durkheimian theory—can we see the border not just as a line, but as a stage where the human condition is laid bare.

Migration itself, as Hein de Haas and Michelle Kahn remind us, is not a crisis. It is a constitutive element of what it means to be human: movement, uncertainty, search for opportunity, escape from danger, and the hope for a life that might be lived differently. That fundamental truth is as old as civilization. What is newer—and perhaps more perilous—is the way politics increasingly distorts the truth, transforming ordinary movement into existential threat, turning fellow human beings into moral symbols, and converting borders into arenas of purification and fear. Populism feeds on that distortion, but it did not invent it. Liberalism struggles with it, but has not resolved it. Europe's postwar project gestures toward universalism but falters at its frontiers.

So the question that remains is not only political, but profoundly historical: What kind of community does Europe imagine itself to be, and at what cost? For if borders continue to serve as sites where solidarity ends, then the European project, like so many before it, risks becoming another chapter in the long history of civilizations unable to reconcile their ideals with their fears. If historians have any lesson to offer, it is that such contradictions do not remain abstract. They take shape in forests, in camps, in courtrooms, and in bodies.

Green Border makes this visible—not as allegory, but as lived reality. Its silences, ruptures, and small acts of refusal reminds us that history is not an observer; it is a participant. It judges us by how we respond to the vulnerable, by what we choose to see, and by what we allow to be hidden. The past is not a distant archive but an active force, pressing against the present with the quiet insistence of memory. Those who claim indifference to history—whether populists or technocrats, citizens or elites—forget that history is never indifferent to them. It shapes borders, policies, identities, and the moral choices available to us. *Everything old is indeed new again*. But that is not a prophecy of inevitability. It is a call to clarity.

Europe, and all who study it, must decide whether history's return will be met with repetition or with recognition. Whether borders will continue to sanctify exclusion or become spaces of shared responsibility. Whether migration will remain a battleground of political theater or be understood, finally, as the universal human story it has always been. And whether we—scholars, citizens, policymakers—will confront the rituals of violence we inherit, or retreat behind the comforting fiction that history's lessons belong to someone else. In the end, the forest between Poland and Belarus is not merely a site of suffering. It is a mirror. It reflects who we have been, who we are, and who we might yet become—if only we dare to look.

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