



“People From the Forest”: Discourse About Migrants in the Narratives of NGO Workers and Activists Involved in the Humanitarian Crisis at the Polish-Belarusian Border

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11649/sn.2803>

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a socially engaged research project based on 30 in-depth interviews with NGO workers and activists who became involved in the humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border and engaged in subversive humanitarianism. The aim is to analyze the discourse about migrants constructed by people who provided different types of support during the crisis. The theoretical part presents a brief overview of the crisis and describes hybridized humanitarian actions that were taken. It also offers a discussion of two opposite discourses about migration in Poland. One is based on securitization and is created by the state, and the other relates to compassionate solidarity with migrants and is constructed by civil society. The results of the study indicate that the representation of migrants created by NGO workers and activists engaged in subversive humanitarianism to some extent reproduces the pro-immigrant narrative of compassion to date. What is more, the study shows that activists' discourse is more

This work was supported by the Polish Ministry of Education and Science.

No competing interests have been declared.

Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences.

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individualized and emotional, while the narratives of NGO workers are more professionalized and institutional in nature.

Keywords: pro-migrant discourse; humanitarian crisis; compassion; border; bordering practices

Introduction

Since August 2021 there has been a constant humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border. Thousands of migrants who decided to enter the EU crossing this border got trapped in the primeval forest. This has happened because the Polish Border Guard pushes migrants back to Belarus and Belarusian uniformed services force them to repeatedly cross the border. Moreover, humanitarian aid organizations were not allowed in the area, and the Polish government created the discourse of criminalization of help.

In this paper, I describe how Polish pro-migrant NGO workers and activists created their discourse about migrants during the crisis. Firstly, I provide a brief overview of the crisis: its causes, the main actors and their reactions to it. Secondly, I discuss the Polish discourse about migrations, especially about refugees and asylum seekers, from 2015 – when forced migrants became present in Polish mainstream debate – until the 2021 humanitarian crisis. I compare two different narratives: one created by the state and based on securitization, and the other constructed by pro-migrant groups and built on compassionate solidarity. Furthermore, I write about my positionality as a socially engaged researcher and present the methodology of the study. In the empirical part, I analyze the narration about migrants developed by the NGO workers and activists who decided to get involved in the crisis. Lastly, I compare the discourse created by the activists with the narration constructed collectively by professionals from NGOs. In conclusion I show that the discourse of compassion created during the humanitarian crisis is partially a continuation of the existing one and partially introduces a new narration about migrants.

The Humanitarian Crisis at the Polish-Belarusian Border

The crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border started when Aleksandr Lukashenko, the self-proclaimed President of Belarus, declared that as a revenge for supporting the opposition during the protests against him in 2020 he “will flood Europe with refugees” (Wilczyński, 2021). As a result, since July 2021 the Lithuanian and Polish Border Guards

had been informing about a higher than usual influx of migrants¹ across the green border.² Activists from *Grupa Granica* (The Border Group)³ – a network of NGOs working with migrants – describe Lukashenko's actions as follows: "Belarusian authorities have acted like a well-organized network of smugglers. [...] Migrants have been lured by Lukashenko with the promise of easy and safe access to Europe, and then put in a deadly situation" (Czarnota et al., 2021, p. 3). The Polish government called Lukashenko's actions "a hybrid war". Polish authorities responded with the implementation of regulations that allowed border guards to push all migrants, including asylum seekers, back to Belarus (Minister Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji, 2021). Although these regulations were against national and international laws, since 2015 issues related to migration had been part of the political game, and thus during the crisis fear management was more important than following the law.

In the second half of August 2021, *Grupa Granica* collected convincing evidence of repeated pushbacks. Soon afterwards, Polish authorities started to construct a razor blade fence along the border to prevent migrants from crossing. On 2 September 2021, the Polish parliament declared a state of emergency in the border area. The restrictions prohibited entry into the state of emergency zone for people who did not live or work there. The zone became militarized. Thousands of border guards, police officers, soldiers, and members of Territorial Defense Forces were deployed to the region of Podlasie⁴ to "protect the border against illegal migrants" ("Granica polsko-białoruska", 2021). Unauthorized entry to the zone became criminalized; penalties ranged from a fine to being arrested on the suspicion of smuggling migrants. Even humanitarian aid organizations and the media were banned from the area. In fall 2021 the number of migrants who needed assistance rose rapidly. During the peak of the crisis around 1,000 people asked for help each week. By August 2022 almost 30 migrants had died at the Polish-Belarusian border due to the violent pushbacks.

In response to the actions of the Polish state, *Grupa Granica* quickly prepared systemic actions that provided humanitarian aid at the Polish-Belarusian border.⁵ Since sup-

1 In this article, I use the term "migrants" with reference to all people who have experienced any kind of migration, both voluntary and forced.

2 The Polish-Belarusian border runs mainly across the primeval forest with swamps, rivers, and wild animals; the area is largely part of the Białowieża National Park with a strict nature reserve.

3 *Grupa Granica* is a network of NGOs created by several associations as well as independent activists and local inhabitants from the region of Podlasie; among others, the organizations involved include: Nomada Stowarzyszenie (Nomad Association), Stowarzyszenie Interwencji Prawnej (Association for Legal Intervention), Polskie Forum Migracyjne (Polish Migration Forum), Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka (The Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights), Salam Lab, Dom Otwarty (Open Home), Centrum Pomocy Prawnej im. Haliny Nieć (The Halina Nieć Center for Legal Aid), Chlebem i Solą (With Bread and Salt), uchodźcy.info, RATS Agency, Fundacja Kuchnia Konfliktu (Conflict Kitchen Foundation), Strefa WolnoSłowa (Free Word Zone), Przystanek „Świetlica” dla dzieci uchodźców ("Świetlica" Center for Refugee Children), Egala (Egala Association).

4 Podlasie is a region in the north-eastern part of Poland that borders Belarus and Lithuania.

5 It has to be mentioned that also other organizations – such as Fundacja Ocalenie (Rescue Foundation) and Klub Inteligencji Katolickiej (Club of Catholic Intelligentsia) – and entirely informal groups set up their centers in Podlasie region and provided aid.

porting migrants might have exposed those involved to uniformed services, it had to be done unofficially and in secret. The system included such elements as: humanitarian aid; medical aid; coordination activity; fundraising; education; psychological support; various information activities; contact with the media; monitoring border violence; social research about the crisis and people involved in it. Thus, at the peak of the crisis, several thousand activists and NGO workers were involved in direct and indirect assistance to the migrants or the people who supported migrants.

This would not have been possible without the engagement of local inhabitants. At the beginning of the crisis they were reluctant due to the anti-migrant narrative spread by uniformed services and some media. However, in the course of time, owing to information and educational activity undertaken by NGOs, some local people realized that the Border Guard pushed migrants back to the cold forest, and they decided to get involved. Thus, in 2021 a new form of social engagement emerged in the Polish-Belarusian borderland, a form that had been present in many Western-European countries since 2015. Donatella della Porta and Elias Steinhilper observe that during the so-called "long summer of migration" (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021, p. 181) there appeared a pro-migrant hybrid composed of two categories: NGO workers who provide professionalized support for migrants, and activists coming from migrant solidarity social movements. NGO workers represent depoliticized, vertically organized groups, whose actions are generally consensual towards the state, whereas activists are embedded in grassroots, horizontal actions, which are in conflict with mainstream state-based narrations and actions of the state. The combination of these two social forces has led to the emergence of a hybrid entity which, on the one hand, uses the experience of non-governmental organizations in the area of financing, know-how, communication, and building structures, and, on the other hand, displays the features of a grassroots, heterogeneous, nationwide social movement with a horizontal network.

Discourse About Migrants in Poland: From Refugees to Illegal Migrants

The issue of migrants, especially forced migrants, appeared in Polish public debate in 2015. The discourse was very quickly appropriated by the right-wing media and politicians, and consequently became anti-migration (Krzyżanowski, 2018). After 2015, the term "refugee" appeared more frequently in mainstream public discourse with a negative connotation. The use of the rhetoric of the "refugee crisis" in political struggle in the election campaign resulted in the radicalization of attitudes towards migrants and an increase in the reluctance to accept them (Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej & Newspoint, 2015). The most common narrations about refugees included: cultural and religious differences that could not be reconciled with Polishness; potential epidemiological threat related to diseases transmitted by refugees; increase in crime caused by the influx of refugees; their alleged

laziness and excessive use of the social benefits system. Over the years such narration was sustained by the right-wing government to consolidate its electorate. The year 2021 and the crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border, as well as the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, caused a shift in mainstream public discourse about migrants and refugees. People at the Polish-Belarusian border were called "illegal migrants" (Terytoriali, 2021). People who were fleeing Ukraine started to be called "(real) refugees". However, the latter term had a positive link with compassion, solidarity, and brotherhood.

After 2015, there also emerged a pro-migrant discourse. It was contrary to mainstream discourse and thus extreme polarization between those two narratives occurred. However, the pro-migrant discourse, which was based on human rights, solidarity, and openness (Pietrusińska, 2018), did not function in parallel or independently. It was a kind of anti-discourse (Foucault, 2000) as it constantly negated the representations and topoi appearing in the anti-migrant discourse, and created counter-narratives and counter-representations (anti-anti-image) of refugees. For instance, the figure of mother and child fleeing a war zone often appeared in pro-migrant narratives as a negation of the representation of refugees as "young bucks".

Moreover, the pro-migrant discourse is ambivalent due to its important element of compassion. Compassion is defined as a benevolent disposition which is fundamentally other-regarding, as indicated by the Latin etymology of the word: "suffering with" (Williams, 2008). It is one of the most common emotions among volunteers who were involved in the so-called refugee crisis of 2015 (Maestri & Monforte, 2020). In such narratives, refugees are presented as helpless, especially since they are mostly women and children (Pietrusińska, 2020). The refugee is shown as a person in a difficult life situation, e.g. of war, described by emotional terms such as tragedy, flight, bombing, hardship, insecurity, and sense of loss.

At the same time, this representation of refugees refers to the moral duty of Westerners towards forced migrants, whom the former should jointly protect and help. In this narrative, Europeans appear as a kind of saviors. Hence, this representation reveals the asymmetry of relations between refugees and the host society. Compassion may be a strong motivation that makes people get involved in voluntary work with migrants. This emotion is often used by "NGOs and charities to optimize the recruitment, sustain the involvement and guide the actions of participants" (Maestri & Monforte, 2020, p. 224). However, it also imposes a risk of unequal positioning in relation to migrants (Hyndman, 2020; Sirriyeh, 2018), as "discourses of compassion have functioned not as expressions of equality or solidarity, but as demonstrations of power" (Peterie, 2017, p. 352).

Compassion is an emotion that might operate on the spectrum from pity to solidarity; it is also related to deservingness (Maestri & Monforte, 2020). How volunteers perceive migrants they help, what emotions towards them they have, and how they construct narration about this group – all these factors shape their real actions. Through compassion, volunteers build the representation of "deserving refugees" and, conversely, those migrants

who do not deserve support. "Since some pain is more compelling than other pain, we must make judgments about which cases deserve attention" (Berlant, 2004, p. 11). Thus, volunteers who work with refugees often rationalize their decision to help some migrants as it is not possible to support all of them. The representation of deserving and undeserving migrants plays an important role in the justification of social engagement and allows one to identify the moral values and emotions that underpin it.

Writing on their research among British volunteers engaged in the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, Gaja Maestri and Pierre Monforte conclude as follows:

In order to sustain their engagement over time they develop coping mechanisms, through which they focus on practical support tasks with no direct involvement in the judgment about who deserves their compassion. By doing so, they produce ambiguous effects with regard to their engagement in refugee support groups. On the one hand, volunteers tend to view their role as mere executors of tasks, hence strengthening the tendency to detach themselves emotionally from the experience of refugees. At the same time, however, they also unsettle the dominant compassionate response to the "refugee crisis" by acknowledging the complex and political nature of refugees' vulnerability. (Maestri & Monforte, 2020, p. 932)

In this article, I examine whether similar processes of building solidarity with migrants based on compassion occurred among Polish NGO workers and activists involved in the crisis.

Methodology of the Study: Being a Researcher and Activist

The analysis presented in this paper is based on 30 individual in-depth interviews conducted between October 2021 and February 2022 with activists and NGO workers involved in the humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border.⁶ The overall aim of my research project is to describe and explore a new form of solidarity with migrants. As the collected material is extremely rich, in this paper I only focus on partial data and offer answers to the following questions: What representations of migrants are created by NGO workers and activists? Is there any difference between individual and institutional discourse about migrants? How do these representations relate to the existing Polish discourse about migrants?

To address these questions, I talked with a heterogeneous group of people. However, the majority of them were adult females. I differentiated my sample based on two factors: (1) being an NGO worker with previous experience in working with migrants; (2) being an activist who was not associated with any NGOs before or deeply engaged in migration issues, as well as the type and scope of involvement. The latter included: work at the border to provide humanitarian aid; coordination of intervention teams; provision of

⁶ When I finished writing this article in July 2022, the crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border was ongoing.

medical aid; fundraising and provision of material assistance; provision of psychological and well-being support; involvement in social media campaigns; educational activity. To reach my interlocutors, I used the snowball strategy and contacts from my own activism work. The data collected were coded and analyzed with MaxQDA, which enabled me to identify the different representations of migrants. I used the cross-coding and multiple coding approaches.

It is also important to define my positionality as I have been actively involved in the crisis from the very beginning. In August 2021 I was in the borderland as an educator. When the government decided to impose a "no-go zone" at the border I decided that I would not be involved in the interventions there. Although I stopped going to Podlasie I remained involved in the actions of *Grupa Granica*. Consequently, I decided that my activism would be mainly related to research and education. It was a big cognitive and moral challenge for me as "trying to be both activist and researcher can lead to identity confusion and communication problems" (Kara, 2017, p. 1). I have done reflexive, emotional, and cognitive work to define my positionality in this project – I do my research and write from the position of an involved researcher.

In the process of data collection and analysis, I follow the autoethnographic approach which: uses researchers' personal experiences as one of the standpoints; acknowledges and values relationships with other people involved in the crisis; uses deep and careful self-reflection; balances intellectual and methodological rigor and emotions; tends to provide social justice (Adams et al., 2015). Even though this article is not written as self-narration, it is based on observation of my own emotions and reflections combined with analysis of in-depth interviews. To support this autoethnographic dimension of my research, I was also interviewed by my colleague. This autoethnographic insight provided me with deepened self-reflection and a greater understanding of the emotional and cognitive aspects of involvement in this humanitarian crisis.

As I am involved in the crisis and I treat my research as a form of activism, the language that I use in this paper is politically engaged. This is a conscious decision since I believe that my moral obligation as a researcher is to inform people about the cruelty of Polish authorities – both towards migrants and their own citizens. As an engaged researcher, throughout this article I use emotionally charged vocabulary and show my attitude towards the situation. Although I wrote it from a certain standpoint, I followed methodological guidelines to obtain the highest level of scientific integrity and research reliability.

Migrants in the Narration of NGO Workers and Activists

The interviewed NGO workers and activists were involved in the humanitarian crisis and they often mentioned migrants in their testimonies. Although they talked about them in various ways, they all referred to the vulnerable position of migrants in one way or another. Only some interviewees differentiated them by talking about their gender, age,

race, or origin. In general, both the activists and NGO workers tended to use collective designations to describe the people who they helped, like "migrants", "refugees", "people from the forest", or "silhouettes emerging from the darkness" [AF11].⁷

The interviewees who were involved in interventions in the forest created more graphic images of migrants. They recalled that it was extremely difficult to find them there. One of the activists mentioned:

I just had the interventions only at night. I just don't know what these people look like, [...] there is a forest and it all looks the same... and suddenly there are silhouettes and they stand out so much. But they are also often well hidden. Sometimes it's hard to find them now. [AF4]

Another interlocutor described his experience of meeting migrants as follows:

There is some kind of weird cognitive situation. I mean, you get to this place, this pin [on the map], and these people are really there. And you think to yourself – you know it. All of you know it. You know the stories of other interventions... but this moment, this contact, this interaction. The fact that it is happening is kind of striking, weird to me. There is something about it that they really are there [...], that in these Polish forests of Podlasie you have these people from Syria, Iraq, Cameroon, Afghanistan and so on. [AM3]

One of the activists talked about the relief that she felt when she found migrants: "When you get to them [migrants] and they are there, you feel relief. Because sometimes they aren't there, because border guards have taken them" [AF5].

All of these testimonies show emotional and cognitive dissonance experienced by the interviewees. Here, migrants appear almost as beings from another dimension. As if the reality of the forest was parallel to ordinary life and migrants were oneiric characters.

The interviewees also expressed their astonishment at the migrants' condition. An NGO worker described one of her first interventions in the following way:

[...] I went there prepared, with the powers of attorney. We had a camera to do all the documentation [...] and possibly submit [asylum] applications on their behalf. We didn't know at all what condition they would be in. There were eleven people. These people were shaking, they were drenched, they barely talked, they couldn't get up, they stared at us with empty eyes. And it was terrible. I threw these papers on the grass and we took care of these people. We dressed them, we gave them something to eat, something to drink. And I remember reprimanding myself in my mind: "God, what am I doing here with these powers of attorney?! You have to save people here!" [NF4]

Although during interventions NGO workers and activists met migrants in different conditions, the main theme when they described "people in the forest" was suffering. One of the interviewees said: "[These] people are in need. People have died. They are suffering.

⁷ Quotations from the interviews are referenced as follows: A/N – activist / NGO worker; F/M – female/male; interview number in a particular group of interviewees: female activists, male activists, female NGO workers, male NGO workers.

They are freezing. This suffering has become so visible, tangible" [AF7]. The connotations of suffering are related to cold, hunger, violence, and death. A number of those interviewed, no matter if they had been at the border or not, mentioned cold and hypothermia as the first thing that came to their mind when they were describing the situation of migrants. "When it got cold in the fall, I thought to myself 'Oh my, I'm cold and those people in these forests are freezing there.' I always thought about it when I was airing my apartment" [AF8]. Another common theme was related to hunger and thirst. Many interviewees talked about migrants who were starving to death and dying because of dehydration. One of the activists described hunger among migrants as follows:

[...] I haven't seen people who were so hungry. Even for many years I struggled with the topic of the Moria camp in Greece, because there were such [bad] conditions. And now I think that we were struggling with people having to line up for three hours for each meal to eat. But that's a completely different level of it here, isn't it? Those people in the forest would be happy to queue for nine hours to get food from anyone. [NF6]

Another theme was related to violence, not only physical and psychological, but also symbolic. The interviewees often used medical terms when describing the state of migrants. They talked about fractures, broken bones, food and water poisoning, hypothermia, vomiting, starvation, wounds, dog bites, unconsciousness, worsening chronic diseases, and miscarriages. Moreover, terms related to the mental state of migrants also appeared in the accounts. The interviewees said that migrants were traumatized, anxious, panicked, confused, faraway, or unresponsive. This medicalized discourse is present in many testimonies. It might be a way for the activists to disconnect from the difficult emotions by using more professional language.

Some activists also talked about the deaths at the border. Those interviewees often emphasized that migrants were victims of multiple pushbacks and violence from both Polish and Belarusian border guards. They appeared in the narration as one of the main reasons for deaths among migrants and for their suffering. None of the interviewees ever said that the migrants themselves put their own life at risk to get to Europe. It was always uniformed services and authorities that "endanger[ed] the lives and health of migrants as part of political games" [AM4]. While talking about death at the border one of my interlocutors said:

When I was at the cemetery in Bohoniki, where we visited the graves of the dead, I talked to the family of this deceased child. And two days later the mother of this child died. I thought I would go crazy on that day. And I also talked to a guy who buried his two brothers in the zone between Belarus and Poland. That's why I have no respect to border guards. I despise them. [AF11]

Apart from physical and psychological violence, many narrations also included mentions of symbolic violence, mainly lack of respect to human rights. A number of interviewees said that in the "no-go zone" all human rights were suspended, which dehumanized migrants. One interlocutor talked emotionally about this situation:

It is so moving. It is so depressing and shocking that these people have no privileges and are stripped of everything because they are crossing the border here. But a moment ago, still in their country, they could still have hope. Although the situation in those countries varies, they are coming with some great hope and what happens to them here is this [violence]. [AF3]

Even though, in reality, "people from the forest" are a very heterogeneous group, this diversity was not visible in the interviewees' narrations. My interlocutors met people in different condition: some of them were in good shape and did not need any assistance, others were a little bit frightened, cold and soaked, but were generally in good condition, still others needed immediate medical assistance as their life was in danger. The absence of heterogeneity in the narrations may result from the fact that NGO workers and activists unconsciously tried to construct a representation of "deserving migrants". This tendency to emphasize suffering also involved comparing the situation of migrants to the extermination of the Jews during the Second World War. Those who made such comparisons almost always claimed that they were aware that it is not exactly the same process. However, they saw a great resemblance between both situations:

Well, history repeats itself. I mean... I deal with Jewish affairs and I have a terrible cliché. [...] I know this is something else historically, but still... When compared to the Holocaust, it is definitely something else... But I have a feeling – when I hear about hiding in the forest – that the elements are certainly common. [AF2]

Another interlocutor also expressed a similar approach. She said:

Hiding, freezing, all this brings to mind the occupation, associations with the extermination of Jews. [...] We made packages for people who were in hiding. That brings an unambiguous association with the times of the occupation, with hiding Jews. Of course, there is no risk of death [in the concentration camp] here. But let me tell you, except for this, this is a one-to-one situation. [AF7]

I would argue that the interviewees made comparisons with the Holocaust as it is the only accessible and known discursive method rooted in Polish culture to describe senseless suffering. In Polish discourse, we do not have narratives other than the one from the Second World War to use when we talk about torture and violence. Moreover, the Holocaust and the humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border have several common topoi. For instance, the topos of the forest and hiding people. Hence, until we produce a new corpus of topoi to represent the current situation we may not avoid borrowings from the Holocaust narrative.

Compassionate language was the most common among activists: they mainly presented migrants as deserving recipients of help. Only a few interviewees mentioned negative characteristics of migrants. Some of them indicated that there are repulsive aspects of dealing with their physicality. One activist felt ashamed admitting the following:

I also learned a different approach to physicality. I also have family experiences related to caring for a sick person, but these are different experiences, in different conditions. But

here at the interface with physicality... that these people vomit, that they cling to you. Worse – they stink because they haven't washed for a few weeks. [AF3]

Another person who coordinated intervention teams said that some migrants irritated her because they were constantly asking for help:

Sometimes I get annoyed with these people for spamming me with messages. All I can hear is: "We are dying! We are dying!" And I just want to snap: "Stop whining. We'll come, but in a few hours." Anyway, a friend of mine once wrote to get rid of such whining: "Stop writing and save the battery!" This is just terrible because, on the one hand, I understand that these people are panicking, that this contact with us is the only hope that someone will help them. So they write and write and write, or call and call and call, and I am a bit indifferent to it. [NF1]

Such comments were extremely rare in the interviewees' narrations; they hardly brought up any negative connotations at all. Even when they did talk about some unpleasant situations related to migrants' behaviors, they immediately introduced other stories which showed that migrants are not like that. Hence, the interviewees created a representation of migrants which would prove that they deserve aid. In their accounts, they omitted unpleasant, negative or irritating aspects of contact with migrants. Even if some of those interviewed mentioned them, they tried to cover them up with stories that presented migrants as grateful, deserving objects of help.

My interlocutors often provided examples that were supposed to prove how good migrants are. For instance, an activist said: "We met a family and there was a Syrian guy with them. They took him because he had lost his group" [AF4]. Another interviewee recalled a situation when a medical team met a group of migrants where one person was in deep hypothermia: "We were so surprised because it was so cold and all these guys were without their jackets because they had taken them off to cover this unconscious guy. It was unbelievable because they had just met him a few hours earlier" [AF12]. An activist told me emotionally about one of her interventions: "When we were leaving, this man took my hands in his and started rubbing them because he didn't want me to get cold" [AF10]. In the interviewees' narrations, there was much more evidence confirming extreme solidarity among migrants, which presented them from the good side.

I observed that NGO workers and activists mainly developed a representation of migrants that helped them to justify their engagement. Migrants were presented as suffering victims of brutal actions of Polish and Belarusian uniformed services. They suffered both physically and mentally and they were deprived of all human rights. They were also passive objects of help provided by the people I interviewed. They were grateful for the support; they did not complain about anything and were presented as good people. Almost all negative connotations that appeared in the narrations were related to external factors, not migrants themselves. There were very few mentions of negative aspects of contact with migrants – mainly related to their physicality. Thus, their representation indicates that they deserve help.

It is worth noting the fact that my interviewees did not dispute mainstream anti-immigrant discourse by introducing the figure of female and child refugee in their narrations. Instead, they tended to prove that all "people from the forest" deserved help.

Individual vs. Institutional Tale About Migrants

Although the general representation of migrants is coherent, in the course of analysis of the collected testimonies I grasped a difference between the institutional discourse of NGO workers and the individual discourse of activists. From my own experiences with *Grupa Granica* I know that this group carefully, systematically, and deliberately created their collective narration. It was also visible in the narration of NGO workers, which was coherent among this interviewed subgroup. The narrations of activists were more diverse and individualistic and they sometimes contradicted the general message sent by the *Grupa Granica*.

Among NGO workers, people met in the forest were referred to as "migrants", "migrating people", "people on the way", "people with migration experience", or simply "people in the forest". Activists, in turn, more often described them as "refugees". NGO workers used more specialized and precise language; they talked about "trespassing", "expulsions", "asylum procedures", and "interims". Moreover, they used medicalized vocabulary while describing the condition of migrants. When they talked they were less emotional than activists.

NGO workers were more aware of the asymmetry of the relation between them and the migrants than the activists. For example, when asked about interventions, one of them stated:

When we are in the forest and we talk to people, [...] you know you have to collect information for interims; you know that you have to ask a lot of different questions. But you see, you are curious where these people are from, or if they are alone or if they have lost someone or not. But this situation in the forest, when you are a person who helps them with something, brings them something, it is such an unequal situation. [...] Or when there are the media. Of course, they will ask if they can take a photo, but someone who gets food or drink from you would very rarely say no. This situation is super uneven. [NF7]

Moreover, NGO workers more often indicated that migrants should have a sense of agency. In their narrations, their relations with migrants were presented as the relation between client and service provider. An NGO worker described the process of providing support at the border in the following way:

I go there for a specific purpose. I don't go there to make friends. I don't go to save people either. I think to myself that I go there so that they [migrants] can go into the procedure; [I go there] in order to enforce it from this state, [to enforce] the right that these people have. That is my main goal. And I have to do whatever it takes to make it happen. [NF5]

On the other hand, although activists also talked about asymmetrical relations with the refugees, they were not aware of this issue: they said they went to the forest to save them. Activists were more eager to tell troubling stories from the forest as they wanted to justify that migrants really needed help. They also tended to empathize with migrants; for instance, they compared themselves with migrants and their situation. One activist referred to the migration of Polish refugees in the 1980s and observed that those people were similar to current refugees. Moreover, she claimed that because Poles had been accepted all over the world "we owe something as a refugee nation" [AF7]. Another interviewee also compared the situation of migrants to the situation of Poles; however, she was talking about possible future. She pointed out that due to climate change one day Poles might be in a similar situation. She explained that she helped them because she wished "that there were people in the world who would want to help us if we were in a difficult situation even though they didn't know us; that they would think about us and it would hurt them" [AF3]. Some activists motivated their engagement in a similar way, saying that they helped migrants because they hoped that if they were in such a situation some people would also support them.

What is more, activists often tried to deny the narration of the mainstream media about migrants by creating anti-anti-migration discourse. For instance, one of them said:

Well, in the media I hear that refugees were throwing stones at the Polish soldiers and that someone was wounded and so on. But you come here later and you find out directly from these people that they were given sacks with stones and that they got dogs on them and told them to throw those stones. And it wasn't only them who were throwing, but also Belarusians. [AF9]

A comparison between these two discourses reveals that the individual one is more compassionate. NGO workers tried not to evaluate who deserved support, whereas activists looked for proof confirming that migrants really deserved help. For NGO workers, human dignity was the only reason for providing assistance. On the other hand, activists tended to justify their actions by empathy and their narration was more emotional. Moreover, they tended to deny mainstream narration about migrants. They called refugees "people from the forest" to prove that they really deserved help.

Conclusions

The narration about migrants that emerges from my research partially reproduces pro-migrant discourse to date. However, it also introduces some new elements. Like the existing pro-migrant discourse, the discourse about migrants constructed by the interviewed NGO workers and activists is compassionate. As observed, migrants were described as helpless and dependent, thus the relationship between them and my interviewees was

asymmetrical. This representation of migrants has been present in the pro-migrant discourse and the new crisis preserves it. On the other hand, new themes appeared in the narrations, such as suffering, bad medical condition, and physical, psychological and symbolic violence experienced by migrants. Moreover, there were also comparisons to the Holocaust, which is a novelty in the Polish pro-migrant discourse. Another important change is related to the rejection of anti-anti-migrant approach. Most of the interviewees did not try to deny mainstream discourse about "young bucks" by proving that in the forest there were also women and children who needed help. On the contrary, they claimed that everyone deserves support.

Although compassionate representation of migrants was present in both individual and institutional discourse, it was more visible in the activists' accounts. This may confirm the results of other studies on the role of compassion in humanitarian aid (Armbruster, 2019; Duffield, 2004; Hyndman, 2020; Sirriyeh, 2018). The interviewed activists used discourse of compassion to justify that the migrants at the Polish-Belarusian border really deserved their help. In their accounts, they talked about refugees who were fleeing from war zones and who were suffering. This representation also created an image of people deprived of agency, who were the objects of help provided by activists. This asymmetry of power has already been present in Polish pro-migrant narratives.

Although the NGO workers also used discourse of compassion, they did more emotional work to mitigate its negative influence in terms of power relations. Like British activists (Maestri & Monforte, 2020), Polish NGO workers with a longer experience in working with migrants, developed coping and discursive strategies to deal with asymmetrical power relations that emerge from the compassionate attitude. They tended to focus on practical tasks and they avoided making judgments about the deservingness of migrants. They tried not to differentiate between migrants and refugees, calling all of them "people from the forest". They also emotionally distanced themselves from migrants. This strategy seems to be an important step in pro-migrant narration, as it introduces more reflexivity and reciprocity into the relationship between NGO workers and migrants.

Overall, my analysis confirms that compassion present in the general Polish pro-migrant discourse is also the case in the narratives about the humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border. Such discourse provides arguments to prove that migrants who are trapped there are in need of help. Since Polish authorities criminalize the provision of humanitarian aid in certain parts of Poland, such discourse is extremely needed. Nevertheless, the people who provide this support should be aware of the asymmetric relation that emerges between them and the migrants. To some extent, NGO workers present a more aware discourse, which is based more on universal human rights rather than on the figure of "deserving migrants". These changes in discourse might indicate that the general pro-migrant discourse will develop into a more emancipatory and equitable one.

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„Ludzie z lasu”. Dyskurs o migrantach w narracjach osób aktywistycznych oraz osób pracujących w organizacjach pozarządowych zaangażowanych w kryzys humanitarny na granicy polsko-białoruskiej

Abstrakt

W artykule przedstawiam wyniki społecznie zaangażowanych badań (30 wywiadów pogłębionych) z pracownikami NGO i aktywistami zaangażowanymi w kryzys humanitarny na granicy polsko-białoruskiej w ramach wywrotowego humanitaryzmu. Celem artykułu jest analiza dyskursu o migrantach konstruowanego przez osoby, które udzielały się w różny sposób w czasie kryzysu. W części teoretycznej przedstawiam krótki opis kryzysu i zhybrydowanych działań podjętych w celu ograniczenia jego skutków. Ponadto omawiam dwa dyskursy o migracji, które zderzają się ze sobą w Polsce – jeden, państwowy, oparty na sekurytyzacji i drugi, dotyczący solidarności wynikającej ze współczucia wobec migrantów, konstruowany przez społeczeństwo obywatelskie. Wyniki badań dowodzą, że reprezentacja migrantów stworzona w ramach wywrotowego humanitaryzmu odtwarza dotychczasową promigrancką narrację opartą na współczuciu. Co więcej, badania pokazują, że dyskurs aktywistów jest bardziejindywidualizowany i emocjonalny, a narracje pracowników NGO są bardziej sprofesjonalizowane.

Słowa kluczowe: dyskurs promigrancki; kryzys humanitarny; współczucie; granica; praktyki graniczne

Citation

Pietrusińska, M. J. (2022). "People from the forest": Discourse about migrants in the narratives of NGO workers and activists involved in the humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border. *Sprawy Narodowościowe: Seria nowa*, 2022(54), Article 2803. <https://doi.org/10.11649/sn.2803>