

The 2021 Migration Crisis in the Eyes of the Polish Priests from the Polish-Belarusian Borderland

Kryzys migracyjny w 2021 roku oczami polskich księży
z rejonu przy granicy polsko-białoruskiej


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Abstract: This publication is a result of interviews carried out at the end of November-beginning of December 2021 in the areas along the border between Poland and Belarus with Roman Catholic priests providing pastoral ministry in that area. The aim of the interviews was to gain insight into the social moods and attitudes of the clergy with respect to the migration crisis in the year 2021. It may be guessed that the priests from the borderland parishes are more prone to thinking about the community in national rather than evangelical categories, which most probably is an outcome of the historical experiences of Poland with Russia and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the loss of independence and subordination to the communist authorities in Moscow.

Keywords: migrations, Polish-Belarusian border, priests, refugees, Catholic Church

Streszczenie: Opracowanie jest efektem badań zrealizowanych na przełomie listopada i grudnia 2021 r. na terenach przy granicy Polski z Białorusią, przeprowadzonych wśród księży rzymskokatolickich pełniących posługę duszpasterską na tym obszarze. Celem badań było poznanie nastrojów społecznych i postaw duchownych dotyczących kryzysu migracyjnego w 2021 r. Wnioskować można, że księża z parafii w rejonie przygranicznym są bardziej skłonni myśleć o wspólnotcie w kategoriach narodowościowych niż ewangelicznych, co zapewne wynika z doświadczeń historycznych Polski z Rosją i Związkiem Socjalistycznych Republik Radzieckich (ZSRR), uratą niepodległości i zależnością od władzy komunistycznej rządzącej z Moskwy.

Słowa kluczowe: migracje, granica polsko-białoruska, księża, uchodźcy, Kościół katolicki

The 2021 migration crisis along the Polish-Belarusian border undoubtedly has many faces.¹ The multitude of media and political narrations, frequently entirely different, requires special caution when formulating syntheses and judgments with respect to this issue. Caution is all the more needed if one takes into account that a migration crisis is always connected with tragedies of concrete individuals who are frequently deprived of the possibility to express their opinion, unable to defend themselves against all kinds of violence, both physical and mental. In the case of the 2021 migration crisis along the Polish-Belarusian border, part of the tragedy was that the people were treated by the Lukashenka regime like objects. The tragedy concerned not only migrants but affected also the Poles who live close to the border. They found themselves in a totally new situation. Their fields, villages and courtyards were penetrated by strangers who did not speak a language that would be comprehensible to them. Soon after, the military and representatives of various media turned up in those areas. The news from the borderland became top stories for the entire Poland. The peaceful ambience of those areas was disturbed in many ways. The local inhabitants had to face a totally new situation, which they did not want and had nothing to do with. We carried out our interviews in that area along the Polish-Belarusian border and in such a context, and this publication is their outcome. Our interviews – carried out at the end of November-beginning of December 2021 – were with the Roman Catholic priests providing pastoral ministry alongside the border. The aim of the interviews was to gain insight into the social moods and attitudes of the clergy with respect to the migration crisis in the year 2021. We also wanted to confront the official standpoint of the Catholic Church in Poland with the opinions of the priests providing ministry in Podlasie, which is the region in the immediate vicinity of the Polish-Belarusian border. The results of our survey are preceded with information on the political context of the events that were of interest to us and a description of the profile of the community that was covered by the survey. The official position of the Catholic Church in Poland was presented through an analysis of the statements made by the Chairman of the Conference of Polish Bishops, Abp. Stefan Gądecki. This publication

¹ The article has been written as part of the project "Bezpieczeństwo narodowe – religia – historia" [National Security – Religion – History] carried out at the Interdisciplinary Research Centres of the University of Warsaw "Tożsamość – Dialog – Bezpieczeństwo" [Identity – Dialogue – Security].

fits into interdisciplinary research typical for security studies. Unceasingly important for these studies are the following themes: personal security, national security, security of areas protected by the North Atlantic Alliance, security of the European Union (EU) territory, military security, culture and identity, both national and regional, regional security (a concrete part of Europe), migration, use of coercive measures by the state, military operations and Border Guards activities, and conditions for the prosperous development of society.

1. The political context of the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border

In the autumn of 2021, life in Poland was dominated by the events taking place at the Polish-Belarusian border. The events were associated with the migration crisis at the border between Belarus and the EU, which was part of the migration crisis in Europe caused by organized smuggling of immigrants and refugees (mostly young men) to the EU *inter alia* from Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries of the Middle East and Africa across the Belarusian-Lithuanian, Belarusian-Polish and Belarusian-Latvian border. In the background of those events are the sanctions imposed on Belarus, and non-recognition by the EU of the rigged presidential elections in 2021, the winner of which was Alexander Lukashenka, who had been in power since 1994. In response, the Lukashenka regime organized channels for smuggling refugees and migrants in order to destabilize the EU. The authorities of Lithuania, Poland and Latvia treated this organised smuggling as a situation reminiscent of a hybrid war and decided to introduce states of emergency in the areas along the borders with Belarus. In the international arena, an important partner of A. Lukashenka was Vladimir Putin which was manifested by the consolidation of military cooperation.

2. Description of the community in the region

The areas which belong to the geographical region of Podlasie lie at the juncture of many cultures. Many historical tribulations contributed to

the problems with delimiting the boundaries of Podlasie. It was only the establishment of Podlasie Voivodship 1520 that helped to delimit the boundaries of this historical region. After World War I, the administrative division of Podlasie was changed. On August 2, 1919, Białystok Voivodship was established and the lands north of the Bug river were included therein, whereas the lands south of the river were included in Lublin Voivodship. Those land went through many administrative ups and downs to be at present – since January 1, 1990 – again part of Podlasie Voivodship, stretching from the border with Belarus across the northern part to the Bug river up to Lithuania and the Kaliningrad Oblast, while the southern part bordering on Belarus was included in Lublin Voivodship. It is worth mentioning the complicated history of this region since it has contributed to implanting of various religions and denominations as well as the settlement of numerous ethnic and national groups (Beszta-Borowski 2012: 116). The existence of many religions and denominations caused many problems and contributed to the shaping of what is now also a pluralistic community. The growth of social tensions in the latter part of the 19th century and the outbreak of the January Uprising in 1863 resulted in escalated repressions against the Catholics in Podlasie. An example of those persecutions mentioned should be the fact that the Uniate place of the special cult at Grabarka (formerly known as Moszczona), associated with the cholera epidemic at the beginning of the 18th century, was put under Orthodox administration. This site taken away from the Uniates is nowadays a major Orthodox sanctuary in Poland (Maroszek 1997: 33–38; see Maroszek 1996).

The current identity of the local population has been shaped by the history of the region. As regards religion, the greatest imprint has been left by the entanglement of biographies, family and neighbourly histories of Christians of Eastern and Western (Roman) rites. Despite good inter-denominational relations, there are also problems in Podlasie. They can be seen primarily in Catholic-Orthodox relations which have four reasons: historical, ethnic, socio-political and associated with pastoral cooperation of the Churches. Conflicts motivated by ethnic origin are frequently a cause of trouble, all the more so that it is mostly connected with the political option that is chosen. The Orthodox do not conceal that they sympathise with left-wing parties.

The areas covered by our survey are characterised by a culture which has been shaped as a result of many tensions, wounds, and fears. The historical experience exerts an impact on the current way of thinking, perception of

the world, and the way of building the present and the future. Undoubtedly, this rich religious and cultural diversity of the population from the surveyed area is both the wealth of this community as well as its tragedy that has been struggled with by successive generations. Perhaps the fact that nowadays these lands become depopulated is connected with the young people's wishing to build their lives in a different space, in other contexts, without cultural, ethnic and religious entanglements of Podlasie.

3. The official position of the Catholic Church *vis-à-vis* the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border

In order to get to know the contents as to the official attitude of the Catholic Church in Poland towards the issues connected with the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border in 2021 we have analysed the statements on this subject of the Chairman of the Conference of Polish Bishops, Abp. S. Gądecki. The main statements of the hierarchy in this area were as follows: 1) *Apel Przewodniczącego Konferencji Episkopatu Polski ws. pomocy humanitarnej dla migrantów* [Appeal by the Chairman of the Polish Bishops' Conference on Humanitarian Aid for Migrants] of October 4, 2021 (Gądecki 2021b); 2) *Apel przewodniczącego Konferencji Episkopatu Polski arcybiskupa Stanisława Gądeckiego ws. pomocy migrantom* [Appeal by the Chairman of the Polish Bishops' Conference Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki on Assistance to Migrants] of November 8, 2021 (Gądecki 2021a); 3) *Komunikat przewodniczącego Konferencji Episkopatu Polski wobec eskalacji napięć na granicy polsko-białoruskiej* [Message from the Chairman of the Polish Bishops' Conference in View of the Escalation of Tensions on the Polish-Belarusian Border], of November 10, 2021 (Gądecki 2021c); 4) *Oświadczenie Rady Stałej Konferencji Episkopatu Polski w sprawie apelu Papieża Franciszka* [Statement of the Permanent Council of the Polish Bishops' Conference on the Appeal of Pope Francis] of December 22, 2021 (Gądecki 2021d). The last one, *The Statement of the Standing Council of the Conference of Polish Bishops*, is not a statement of Abp. S. Gądecki as such, but the text was signed by him on behalf of the small group of hierarchs he is the chairman of. The analysis of Abp. S. Gądecki's statements was meant to provide answers to two questions, firstly: What should be the involvement of the Catholic Church in Poland in the context of the 2021 migration crisis

at the Polish-Belarusian border?, and, secondly: What “political” contents are identifiable in the Church’s message concerning the migration crisis?

As regards the first issue: What should be the involvement of the Catholic Church in Poland in the context of the 2021 migration crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border? The Chairman of the Conference of Polish Bishops believed that in the activities of Church and religious communities, just like state institutions and non-governmental organisations, priority should be given to sensitivity to what happens to the migrants and medical and humanitarian aid. Archbishop argued in favour of offering help pointing to the inalienable dignity of every man regardless of their status, origin or religion, as well as the law of brotherly love, whilst he saw humanitarian compassion as a manifestation of humaneness. Going forth from the so-defined ideological level, he declared the readiness of the Church to take part in specific undertakings which were to serve the common good and fit into the legal order. The main undertaking was to arrange humanitarian corridors coordinated by Caritas Polska. It involved the organisation of a mechanism which would allow giving concrete assistance to the most vulnerable victims of wars and persecutions in a safe and controlled manner. It should be noted that according to him the fully controlled and safe method of giving assistance through relocation of refugees should be based on their sovereign decision as regards the choice of the target country. The opposite of this controlled form is chaotic migrations, without the sense of security, organised by gangs of traffickers, who lure people with a change to get to the dream paradise in Europe (Gądecki 2021b).

Apart from the declarations of readiness to organise humanitarian corridors, the Church in Poland – as Abp. S. Gądecki assured – became involved in organising aid to migrants by giving support to the centres for foreigners and Border Guard facilities providing accommodation for migrants and refugees and setting up Tents of Hope administered by Caritas Polska in borderland parishes. An important organisational step was the national fundraising campaign for migrants from the Polish-Belarusian border after all Holy Masses on Sunday, November 21, 2021. The aim of the campaign was to finance help activities in the border areas during the migration crisis and the long-time process of integrating the refugees who decided to remain in Poland (Gądecki 2021a). The readiness to provide support to the migrants who decided to stay in Poland was declared by Polish bishops in the Statement of the Standing Council of the Polish Episcopate: “We are ready to provide help, based on the existing legal

possibilities and in line with the applicable state migration regulations, to all those who declare a will to come and settle down in our country. This concerns both their reception and providing necessary social support, as well as long-term assistance to integrate them into our society (learning Polish and preparing to take up a job in Poland). This type of assistance has been offered by Caritas for many years to the immigrants who already live and work in Poland. This assistance will be continued and developed" (Gądecki 2021d).

As regards the Tents of Hope, as Caritas Polska informed on November 19, 2021, they were organised as a support base for aid organizations and borderland inhabitants who were helping stray migrants, as well as local communities. In the first place, the Tents of Hope were put up in the village of Podlipki, Krynki municipality, and in Białowieża. They handed out, among other things, sleeping bags, blankets, coats, footwear, thermos flasks, food, hygiene products, toys for children and so-called "Help Packs" (backpacks containing water, hand warmers, energy bars, dry food provisions, thermal blankets) to aid organisations operating in the borderland areas, inhabitants of nearby localities who provided help to migrants and officers of uniformed services. Caritas also organised meetings for inhabitants of borderland localities on helping migrants and the problems associated therewith. Such meetings were held in: Nowy Dwór, Kuźnica, Minkówka, Krynki, Jałówka, Białowieża, Klimówka, Podlipki and Michałowo (*Caritas rozszerza pomoc na granicy* 2021).

The second issue: What "political" contents are identifiable in the Church's message concerning the migration crisis? In Abp. S. Gądecki statements tension can be traced between the teaching of the Church about migrants and Polish law as well as providing security to the Poles. Let us remind that the issues of national security were invoked by Pope Francis in his message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2018. In this document, the Pope states: „The principle of the centrality of the human person [...] obliges us to always prioritise personal safety over national security" (Francis 2018). This statement is echoed in many texts by Abp. S. Gądecki. He believes, however, that Christians should be convinced that the right and duty to defend the state borders can be reconciled with providing help to the people who found themselves in a dramatic "dead-end" situation as the hostages of geopolitical games of certain politicians (Gądecki 2021b). On the other hand, it is the duty of the authorities to detect a potential threat on the part of the people who try to cross the national borders. However,

this should not lead to stigmatizing the migrants by making unfounded generalizations that every refugee is a potential terrorist (Gądecki 2021b). The striving to reconcile the creation of security in Poland and seeking ways to mitigate the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border is evidenced by the following words: "We need to show our solidarity to the people in need without damage to the security of the Republic of Poland and its citizens" (Gądecki 2021a). Another statement of the hierarch was in a similar tenor: "Another day has passed of us being a witness of the dramatic events on the Polish-Belarusian border." "On behalf of the Conference of Polish Bishops, I firmly condemn Belarusian utilisation of human tragedies for carrying out actions against Poland's sovereignty. Migrants are mostly victims of ruthless political actions and the greed of trafficking mafias. For this reason, I wish to reiterate that the people touched by this evil need our solidarity and care. At the same time, I would like to address words of gratitude to the people and institutions offering such help with respect for the laws in force in Poland. I would also like to express my admiration for all state services, especially the Border Guards, the army and the police for their dedicated defence of Polish borders. I assure you that I am close to You and Your nearest in prayer at those difficult times of service for the good of the homeland" (Gądecki 2021c).

On the basis of the statements of the Chairman of the Conference of Polish Bishops as regards the attitude of the Catholic Church in Poland towards the issues connected with the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border in 2021 the following conclusions may be formulated: The Church wants to be close to the people who need help, including migrants, regardless of their origin or religion. It undoubtedly does not want to be a factor in the political polarisation of society. It rather wants to build a community in public life not so much through official documents or solemn statements, but at the level of pastoral actions focused on providing help to those in need. The statements of Abp. S. Gądecki may be understood as an attempt at realising the metapolic mission of the Church in the political community – the nation. The framework of this mission continues to be as follows: the teaching of the Church, Polish legislation, including the 1997 Constitution of the Republic of Poland and the Concordat between the Republic of Poland and the Holy See of 1993. Archbishop's statements express a firm striving at not succumbing to the attempts of political instrumentalisation of the Church and appropriation of religion by any political party, but at

the same time, he asserts that Christians should be present in political and social life.

4. The analysis of results

We carried out our survey in two dioceses – Drohiczyn and Białystok. It should be noted that the Polish-Belarusian border is 418 km long, the majority of which coincides with the boundary of Drohiczyn and Białystok dioceses (the remaining fragment with the boundaries of Elk and Siedlce dioceses). We decided to interview priests treating them as a specific group that, first, can realise the stance of the Catholic Church in practice, and secondly, in the Polish communities of small towns and villages (which dominate in that region) exerts significant influence on public opinion, and at the same time because of their contacts with the community of the faithful may be familiar with social moods. The interviews were carried out by the questionnaire method with open and closed questions. We applied a targeted selection of respondents addressing the questionnaire to priests from the selected dioceses. All in all, we managed to get 20 interviews with priests, in most cases working in parishes located at a distance of not more than 50 km from the border, of which four are situated in the border zone at a distance of less than 2 km from the state border. Although the sample is not large when we take into account the methodology of social studies, given the number of parishes in the borderland areas and the community of the priests working in those parishes, the sample is representative for the majority of those parishes. The priests are of different ages: six of them are of less than 40 years of age, nine are in the 41–60 years bracket, and only three are past their 60th birthday. Urban and rural parishes are represented almost equally. The majority of priests have been serving in their parish for several years; only one declared more than 10 years of service. The eastern part of Poland is generally less developed economically, and is poorer, but also – as confirmed by sociological studies or the results of consecutive parliamentary and presidential elections – is inhabited by communities that are more conservative, and attached to tradition.

The region adjacent to the Polish-Belarusian border is a land of small towns and villages, pretty quiet, perhaps even somewhat dormant, where life's pace is much slower. According to our respondents, one of the major

social problems of their parishes is their depopulation as a result of the younger generation's going away, mainly in search of a job, and thus the population of the faithful becoming older (as many as 17 out of 20 respondents declared that this was the most acute problem). As perceivable problems, almost half mentioned also lack of social activeness, apathy and alcoholism. In this context, it is not surprising that the events at the Polish-Belarusian border are described there as a disturbance of peace and a sense of security, while the dominant sentiments felt by both the priests themselves and their parishioners are uncertainty, fear and anxiety. It is linked with both being afraid of the Belarusian regime, supported by Russia, as well as dislike and fear of the migrants, usually differing as regards religion and culture. Our interlocutors described this as follows: "The crisis on the border ushered in general anxiety and caused a threat"; "People fear that there is a possibility of the outbreak of a war with the Russian Federation"; "There has been an intensification of uncertainty as regards the future, the fear about one's own safety, a feeling of being lost has crept in"; "People began to fear that there would be war, that the migrants would present a threat"; "There is an atrophy of the sense of security, people panic when they have to leave their houses or apartments after dark."

The events on the Polish-Belarusian border are also described in a military language as a hybrid war, an attack against Poland or an attempt at destabilising the state to be able to attack it later. Alexander Lukashenka and the President of the Russian Federation V. Putin are both perceived as the main initiators of these events, whereas the foreigners illegally crossing the Polish border are sometimes treated as their victims, but also as equally guilty invaders. Describing the current situation on the border our respondents claimed that what was going on there was "using people for politics," "smuggling of people on a large scale," "a political conflict with the state governed by a usurper," "an attack against the Polish border with the use of weak people." Others, however, perceived what was going on at the border as "a deluge of bolshevism, Islamism and terror," "an invasion of a peaceful settlement by the Huns" or said that "It seems that it is a form of human trafficking for the attainment of political and financial benefits." They are sometimes called "live shields," but I think that they are also "live weapons" or "missiles." In this context, it is not surprising that the associations the locals have as regards the foreigners camping out at the border are usually negative. Twice as many respondents (12) present their negative picture than those who stress the fact that they are victims who deserve

compassion (6). In those adverse statements, our interlocutors emphasized that the foreigners are not refugees but economic migrants or aggressive criminals. They happen to use the words: bandits, terrorists, and invaders. Asked about the picture of the refugees that the parishioners had the priests said, for instance: "a picture of smart alecks and economic migrants," "they are perceived as economic migrants and criminals, since by crossing the border in illegal places they breach the laws," "aggressive, arrogant, cheeky, manipulated, incomprehensible, dangerous, requiring care, assistance and support in their own country," "Rich people who seek an even better life. The poorest ones stayed in Iraq." The priests expressed also their own fears connected with the migrants as they said: "Not all migrants have anything to go back to in their home countries. This may lead to their more and more radical behaviour," "Most dangerous may be the behaviour of the immigrants who manage to cross the border illegally. It happened that they went into the houses in search of food, and hid in farm buildings. It may, though does not have to, be an opportunity for using violence." However, less frequent were the opinion suggesting that those people were victims used for political goals by the Belarusian regime. The priests described the refugees with the following words: "Wretched people used in Putin's fight against Europe. Financed and brought in as cannon fodder," "Inhumanely used by Lukashenka."

The somewhat hostile attitude towards the migrants does not substantially differ from the views dominating society. Analysing the results of the surveys carried out by the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) on a nationwide sample one can notice how over the past few years the attitude of society to migrants and refugees has been changing. Still, in May 2015, the question of whether Poland should accept refugees from countries involved in armed conflicts was affirmatively answered by 72% of the Poles, although merely 14% believed that they should be allowed to settle in Poland, whereas the majority (58%) accepted their temporary reception until the end of the conflict in their home country. 20% of the respondents were generally against receiving refugees, while 7% had no opinion in this respect. After a few months of the growing migration crisis, but also very clearly anti-immigration narration in the electoral campaign of the Law and Justice party, in October of the same year when asked the identical question, 43% of the respondents were against receiving refugees, 46% accepted receiving them until they would be able to return to their home country, whereas only 8% consented to the settlement of refugees in Poland. The reluctance to receive

refugees grew even more after the terrorist attacks in Paris and in December 2015, 53% of the Poles believed that Poland should not accept refugees at all. Even greater was the percentage (63%) of negative responses to the question about receiving refugees from the Middle East and Africa (CBOS 2015). The latest results of the CBOS surveys are from mid-September 2021 when the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border had already started and the state of emergency in the border zone was proclaimed on 2 September. The survey included the identical question concerning the reception of refugees from areas of armed conflict. The results show that 48% of the respondents were against receiving refugees, while 41% consented to such actions, and the majority (33%) accepted only temporary reception. In the same survey, it was asked whether the Polish authorities should allow the migrants staying at the Polish-Belarusian border to seek asylum in our country. The majority (53%) are against it, one-third of the respondents (33%) believe that the authorities offer them such a possibility, while 15% had no opinion on this subject (CBOS 2021). Thus, it can be clearly seen that the opinions of the priests from the border areas reflect broader social attitudes.

Sometimes the crisis at the border was seen from the global perspective as a clash of international interests of world powers the consequences of which are borne by Poland and in particular the borderland population. The statements of our respondents included the following declarations: "The current situation in the country is serious, but on the global scale it is a game in which Poland seems not to mean anything and does not have much say. In the long run, it will be like a bleeding wound that does not heal. Obviously, the entire country does suffer, but the borderland used to be the C and D region (poorer, less developed – author's clarification) and now the situation of fear, uncertainty will not favour development"; "The present crisis has been planned and is inscribed in a greater international conflict. In order to save its face, Poland will have to bear the consequences of the party which will be defending itself in this conflict, in line with the rules of a just war."

The fact that they live in the border areas, the nearness of the crisis, changes introduced in that area by the state of emergency, the increased presence of military and Border Guard units significantly affect the local community. Our respondents believe that a consequence of the crisis on the border is not only the sense of threat, uncertainty or fear of an armed conflict. The priests also noticed that the situation disclosed or caused ethnic and religious conflicts. The borderland areas (Lublin and Podlasie

Voivodships bordering on Belarus) are inhabited by ethnic and religious minorities. In the opinion of the priests, the crisis on the border has divided the community, since the Poles accept what the authorities do and are hostile to Belarusians as well as the Belarusian minority in Poland which in their opinion manifests anti-Polish attitudes.

The statements of the priests, who describe both their own feelings as well as the attitudes of their parishioners, are dominated by the conviction that the presence of the military restores the sense of security in the community. They said, for example: "People are happy that the army guards them"; "Soldiers who are stationed by the church give the sense of security to the parishioners"; "The confidence in the services – the border guards, the military, the police – has increased"; "Now we feel safe thanks to the presence of the military, the police and other services on our border." Moreover, they are convinced that the natural attitude, a patriotic duty towards the homeland should be to support the activities of the government and enforcement services. It is worth looking at this from a somewhat broader perspective since the presented attitudes very well fit into the phenomenon described by Marcin Napiórkowski as turbo-patriotism, that is the attitude of a pathetic, blind, ostentatious attachment to nationality as the foundation of a society, steadfastly referring to history or the ideas of it, emphasizing national pride and the desire for greatness (Napiórkowski 2019). The right-wing conservative parties making up the United Right coalition owe their electoral success in 2015, *inter alia*, to their turbo-patriotic narrations. Apart from the programme of social support for families, it was the ideological message with its strongly emphasized specifically understood patriotism that seems to have been the element that distinguished these parties from others and attracted voters. Labelling every sphere of political and social activity with the adjective "national," constant emphasizing the inseparable bond between Polishness and Catholicism and the continuous rekindling of the conviction about internal and external enemies who threaten our sovereignty – these are the key elements of the government's narration dominating in public television and other right-wing media.

The government propaganda and turbo-patriotism were very clearly reflected in the statements of our interviewees. Describing the attitudes of their parishioners and presenting their own opinions, the priests said, e.g.: "The crisis on the border triggered a growth of 'belligerent moods' in certain circles, usually male, the desire to defend the national and local reason of state; solidarizing with uniformed services, greater support for the work

of the uniformed services"; "the threat comes from anti-Polish attitudes, [people who – Eds.] accuse the Polish government of the lack of humanism, closing the borders. Those groups are very active, they have funds and are very aggressive towards the patriots"; "The parishioners are for maintaining the border tight. They asked for a moral explanation of their fears and a kind of caution in extending aid to the immigrants; obviously, inconsiderate aid promoted by left-wing groups." The decisive majority of the interviewed priests spoke with approval about government activities, stressing not only the need to defend the state borders but also fitting into it the narration of patriotism and independence. Responding to the question of how the Polish state should resolve the crisis on the border the priests declared: "just like it well does right now," "consistently put up the wall along the border, isolate journalists and pseudo-voluntaries from the border," "affirm in the consciences [of people – Eds.] the need to defend the borders of [their – Eds.] country." There were also statements suggesting that the actions of the Polish authorities defend Europe and as may be inferred from those statements – not only against the migrants camping out on the border but also against the expansion of culturally alien impacts. This is, for instance, indicated by such statements: "the present situation may be compared to the Vienna Victory or the year 1920. Europe should thank Poland for the defence against the deluge by another culture," "the Polish state fulfils its duties to both its citizens and the European Union." Only one respondent suggested that the successful resolution of the crisis on the border required greater cooperation of Poland with its allies from NATO and the EU, in particular other democratic neighbours of Belarus.

In our questionnaires, we asked whether and how the crisis on the border affected the ministry or the life of the priests and their parishioners. Over one-half of the respondents told us that because of that situation, parishioners turn to the priests with their fears, doubts, and questions concerning how they should behave, asking for help, prayer, and conversation. At the same time, which may be somewhat surprising in this context, more than one-half of the respondents claimed that the crisis on the border did not affect their pastoral service, while those who noticed the impact mentioned various issues, the spiritual support to the uniformed services, restricted contacts because of the state of emergency and constraints connected with the COVID-19 epidemic. One of the priests talked about the need to organise a lecture with reference to the current situation, while the other two mentioned greater determination in their work. Here is an example of

such a statement: "I feel a greater responsibility for the local community; I also feel that I have to live more by the Gospel and preach this message to the faithful."

Talking about the impact of the crisis on the parish community the priests stressed that besides the sense of uncertainty or fear that situation liberated in people great deposits of solidarity and the willingness to help, though mostly towards the representatives of the uniformed services guarding the border. The priests described this with clear approval: "The crisis evoked empathy. People help each other, get involved in helping and social campaigns of the Church, and charity collections. The ladies in our parish baked cakes for the soldiers and police officers as part of the 'Murem za polskim mundurem' [We all stand behind the Polish uniform like a wall],² a collection and handing out of food, cooking meals, collection and personal purchase of gifts for the border guards (tarpaulins and ropes for the tents in the forest camps of border guards), instant soups for the immigrants found in the forest," "organisation of the collection of food for soldiers and police officers," "the community supports the Polish army with a good word and offering hot drinks and food to the soldiers." Definitely, less frequently the priests mention spontaneous or organized help to the migrants; only three statements contains such information like for instance: "people bring various items (clothes, socks, sweets) for the immigrants," "the parishioners sometimes ask for financial support so that can hand it over later to the migrants."

The feeling of concern mostly about representatives of one's own national or state community is even more evident in the responses to the question about the perceived possibilities of the parish's involvement in connection with the crisis on the border. Half of our respondents see the role of parishes mostly in offering support, help and care to representatives of uniformed services defending the Polish borders and in consolidating the patriotic attitudes of parishioners. It is unambiguously shown by such recurring statements: "The parish offers to the stationed soldiers of the Polish army household facilities, warm beverages," "the parish is involved in offering help and support to the uniformed services, creating for them living conditions

² "We stand behind the Polish uniform like a wall" – a slogan for many actions undertaken by the Polish Ministry of National Defence in collaboration with various entities, including the Polish Television, aimed at manifesting support to the uniformed services guarding the Polish borders during the migration crisis.

as closely as possible like those at home; consolidation of local solidarity, unity in the community and building mutual responsibility for one's own and other parishioners' fate; awakening patriotic attitudes," "we can affirm in the consciences the need to defend the borders of the homeland."

Several priests emphasised mostly the possibility of the parish's involvement in prayer (prayers for peace, for soldiers). Any mention of helping the migrants could be seen in the statements of only three priests, of which once with an additional comment: "Our possibilities are limited, the parish is small. We can offer help directly to people (feed and clothe them), but the question is whether the immigrants will be willing to use this help." One of the respondents declared: "I do not see any room for helping the migrants, only the soldiers who sacrifice themselves on the border in the defence of the homeland," while another when asked how the Polish state should resolve the crisis on the border, suggested that cold water should be poured on the immigrants who are trying to get to Poland. In the situation of the crisis on the border, in similar categories as the role of parishes the priests see the role of the Catholic Church, which in their opinion should first of all offer help and support to the uniformed services and the Poles who live in the border zone as well as consolidate patriotism and unity of the people. Every fifth respondent believed that the role of the Church was first of all to offer prayer; two priests mentioned humanitarian aid, though without indicating to whom it would be addressed, while one mentioned support to the immigrants who stay in the centres. Describing the activities of their own parishes the priests practically did not invoke the idea of Christian mercy; referring to the role of the Church only to respondents notes this aspect. "The Church is striving to resolve this crisis in a dual manner: 1) with prayer for the Polish services and the migrants, 2) material aid to all those that are affected by this crisis (refugees, our services, local population)," "The Church faces a specific problem: to be faithful to the historical experience of Poland (invasions and wars with Islam) or to the evangelical interpretation present in the teaching of the Holy Father Francis and many Polish bishops."

However, more frequently the priests from the border areas are critical of the words of encouragement to practice the evangelical idea of mercy or discerning a fellow human being in culturally and religiously different foreigners, which can be heard in the speeches of Pope Francis and the position of Polish bishops. Following are a few examples of such critical statements: "But if the migrants move on, we shall be in real trouble. It seems that nobody cares. various institutions, including the Church ones, are concerned

with their image and practice propaganda”; “The role of the Church is to firmly speak for the right of nations to self-determination, remind of the principle of *vim vi repellere licet*, [...] condemn the use of helpless people for the purposes of international politics as an outrageous sin, [...] direct humanitarian aid to support exclusively the uniformed services and other units defending the borders”; “The Church should be the guardian of truth and support the victims rather than the criminals. It should remind the principle of ‘*ordo caritatis*’ and avoid false mercy”; “The Church should first of all become what it should be and follow the rule that blood is thicker than water. Care and support, for the time being, moral support to own people and then, if possible, to others. What kind of an institution is the one which does not care for its own and practices some ideology: ecologism, planet, green energy, sanitarianism, migrants? Somehow the bishops do not convert the infidels and do not call for this. [...] The Church is completely unprepared [...], does not or does not want to see (I mean the top hierarchy) the process that will completely change the world.”

Conclusions

The survey has shown quite clearly that the crisis on the border disturbed the peace and the sense of security of borderland inhabitants. This seems to be based on two elements. On one hand, fears are triggered by the immediate neighbourhood of the Lukashenka regime supported by the Russian Federation, which for the past few years has been carrying out an expansive policy, and the stereotype of the Muslim-terrorist functioning in social consciousness, undoubtedly not only in Poland. The migrants, mostly from Muslim countries, locked in a specific trap, forced by the Belarusian services to repeatedly cross and re-cross the border illegally, and sometimes even to charge it, arouse greater fear than compassion. A similar attitude is shared also by the priests from the borderland parishes, who are prone to think about the community in national rather than evangelical categories. It may be also assumed that certain impacts on the opinions of the priests are exerted by the right-wing conservative media which are most frequently mentioned by the priests as the main source of information. Sometimes one can trace in their statements clear references to the government propaganda presented on public television,

for example invoking the slogan promoted by that TV station: “We stand behind the Polish uniform like a wall.” Perhaps the attitude of the priests could be explained by Polish history, in which for centuries, especially at the time of the partitions and after World War II, there was a very distinct relationship between Catholicism and Polishness as opposed specifically to strangers, ethnically and denominationally different, threatening our religion as a significant element of Polish identity.

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