

Manufactured Cruelties: Belarus, Poland and the Refugee Crisis

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Refugee crises are often manufactured by governments. They can be done at the source: war, famine, rapacious institutions. They can also be manufactured by the refusal of governments to accept those seeking asylum, sanctuary and refuge.

The latter is very much in evidence in Europe: governments of the European Union are staring down desperate humans keen to travel into the EU; Belarus, engaging in its own form of mega-trafficking, has become a conduit for the movement of asylum seekers and migrants fleeing from Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan.

Despite being granted Belarussian visas at considerable cost, many being initially housed in government hotels, their stay is only intended as temporary. After brief respite, they are pushed towards the country’s border with Poland, Latvia and Lithuania. How they get there [is not entirely clear](#). Some migrants are escorted by uniformed men; others pay additional fees to be transported. It has [also been reported](#) that Belarussian security forces have furnished instructions and tools – axes and wire cutters – to aid the crossing of the border. Attempts by Belarussian personnel to destroy border fences near Czeremcha, and disorientate Polish soldiers with stroboscopes and lasers, [have also been noted](#).

Once at the border, the migrants are not allowed to approach any checkpoints to seek asylum. Nor are they allowed to return to Minsk, threatened by Belarussian border guards who insist on keeping them there.

Trapped in purgatorial fashion along the border, the migrants find themselves sleeping in rude conditions and left at the mercy of the elements. There have inadequate supplies, lack warm clothing and are starving. One [estimate](#) has put the death toll at nine.

All political sides are making hay from this suffering. Lukashenko can be accused of being an opportunistic trafficker of desperate folk and keen on jailing opponents in a desperate bit to stay in power, but Poland’s Law and Justice Party has happily stirred xenophobic hysteria. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and President Andrzej Duda are part of an administration that does not shy away from demonising arrivals they associate with

terrorists with kinky characteristics. Doing so supplies an appropriate distraction from accusations of corruption, galloping inflation and a troubling rise in COVID-19 numbers.

In September, the Minister of the Interior, Mariusz Kamiński, and the National Defence Minister, Mariusz Błaszczak, [appeared at a press conference](#) to show a picture of a man copulating with a cow. The content had been allegedly found on a phone belonging to an Afghan migrant lurking in the woods. Spokesman for the Ministry of the Interior, Stanisław Żaryn, [suggested](#) that this was an act “associated with sexual disorders”, signalling a government campaign to link refugees with zoophilia and paedophilia.

In a gesture of such refined generosity, TVP Info, the main propaganda outlet of the ruling party, [ran a video](#) with a suitably prurient title: “He raped a cow and wanted to enter Poland?” There were two problems with the footage: the material, recorded on a VHS videotape, was drawn from bestiality porn from the 1970s; and the animal in question was a mare, not a cow.

Earlier this month, Duda signed a bill into law to construct [what was described](#) as “a high-tech barrier on the border with Belarus to guard against an influx of irregular migrants.” The barrier, valued at some €350 million, was “needed due to increased migratory pressure from Belarus”. The right to asylum had all but entirely vanished.

Liz Throssell, spokesperson from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), [is adamant](#) that, “The human rights of migrants and refugees have to come first.” Unfortunately, she was far from informative on what solutions might be pursued on the Belarus-EU border. “It is really important they must be respected under international human rights refugee law, but as for the political dimension to this, I would leave that to others to address”.

Along the Belarus-Polish border, refugees and migrants have been instrumentalised, their rights assiduously ignored. Lukashenko has been accused of using a form of “hybrid” warfare by throwing migrants at the border like willing assailants of rabid intent. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, [makes the point](#). “It is a hybrid attack, a brutal attack, a violent attack and a shameful attack.” Such nasty terminology has turned those wishing to make their way to the EU into foot soldiers in a political cause they wish to play no part in. Wedged in between this vicious play of power, these unfortunates trapped on the border find themselves divested of their humanity, their desires, their wishes.

The EU is also playing its own vile game, falling back upon frontier states who have held themselves up to be saviours of European civilisation. “It is important that Lukashenko understands that [the regime’s] behaviour comes with a price,” European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [warned](#) after talks with US President Joe Biden. Sanctions are being considered against the airlines that have been accused of facilitating human trafficking.

There is one final perversion in all this. In essentially condemning human trafficking, the EU and its counterparts are condemning the right to asylum, which such trafficking aids. With that sentiment, von der Leyen would regard Oskar Schindler and his more recent equivalent, Iraq’s Ali Al Jenabi, as traffickers worthy of punishment.

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Featured image: Migrants on the Belarusian-Polish border. Leonid Shcheglov/BelTA/TASS

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