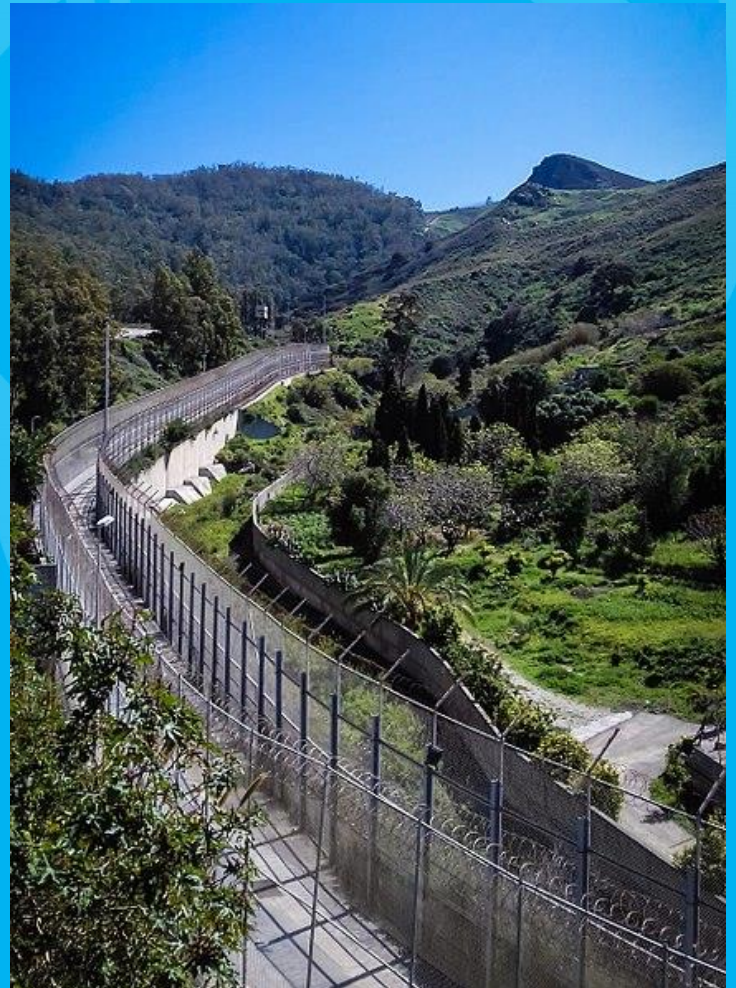


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Walling the EU Borders: Past Experiences and (In)Effectiveness

To put the dramatic events at the border between Poland and Belarus in perspective, this issue of CMR Spotlight is devoted to Schengen border walls and what they mean – be they on the border of Poland, Spain, or Hungary. As Jan Grzymski, Marta Jaroszewicz, and Mateusz Krępa write: “The current ubiquitous walling of external Schengen borders might jeopardize the very foundation of the European project: the respect of human dignity and human rights, humanitarianism and liberal values”.



Ceuta-Morocco border fence

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Walling the EU Borders: Past Experiences and (In)Effectiveness

The Context for the Fence at the Polish-Belarusian Border

Jan Grzymiski, Marta Jaroszewicz, Mateusz Krępa

In mid-August 2021, Poland’s eastern border, and simultaneously the Schengen one, became a scene for unprecedented political and humanitarian upheaval. At the very border of Poland and Belarus, several dozen people, mostly from Iraq and Afghanistan, were trapped in the hostile border environment. This analysis aims at contextualizing that development in the perspective of European border practices. In particular, we focus on wider context, within which this hostile border environment could have been possible, that is: the Polish securitizing border practices performed within the Schengen rationale; the routinization of walling of the EU borders; and the hostile cross-border activity from the Belarusian side.

Securitization of Migration and Borders

The extensive media coverage and the enhanced political interest in the situation in Usnarz Górny at the Polish-Belarusian border triggered a series of reactions by the Polish government, which led to an overt securitization of borders and migrants. It included: declaring the [state of emergency](#) in Poland’s eastern borderland; constructing

within one month a nearly [130 km-long](#) provisional wire fence at the actual border; and deploying [more than 900 soldiers](#) to assist guards on Poland's 400 km frontier with Belarus. The border guards have also – until the moment of writing – reported more than [1500](#) attempts of what is being depicted as “illegal border crossing” through the Polish-Belarusian frontier. Most importantly, there has already been [five confirmed deaths](#) of migrants as result of cold weather in the borderland forests.

This paper aims at exposing the larger context of this securitization. Alongside the local internal political dynamic in Poland, it is anchored mainly in the Schengen rationale which is driven by a generalized suspicion towards non-EU nationals crossing the Schengen borders ([Huysmans 2006](#)). It is, therefore, predominantly constituted by the ‘matrix of control tools comprising a set of exclusionary discourses, laws, institutions, technologies and practices’ ([Carrera and Hernanz 2015](#)). The pivotal element of this matrix is heavy reliance on many techniques of anticipatory and digital surveillance related to non-EU citizens. This Schengen rationale was internalized within the Polish migration

and border control governance at the time of Poland’s accession to the European Union. It led to the effective socialization of the Schengen control matrix by the Polish border guards.

The Schengen matrix of control is mostly relying on sophisticated technologies. In this context, the widespread practices of walling EU borders may appear to be a return to an archaic power repertoire. More than three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, nearly 1000 km of walls have been erected at the external borders of the European Union ([Benedicto and Brunet, 2018: 29](#)) and more than 30,000 deaths of those attempting to cross the Schengen sea and land borders have been documented and reported by independent organizations ([De Genova 2017: 33](#)). This number, compared to [nearly 400 deaths related to the Berlin Wall crossings](#), indicates how lethal the current Schengen borders have become in the defence of the European “freedom of movement” and “way of life” ([Jones 2016](#)).

Hence, borders and walls can kill people, either by physical encounter with wire elements or due to a hostile environment – “let people die”: through acts of omissions, push-backs, or abandonment performed by border control agents. Therefore, the Schengen borders became thanatopolitical borders ([Vaughan-Williams 2015: 45-69](#)). Moreover, walling is ultimately ineffective in controlling migratory movements as they are not closing migration routes, but only redirecting migrants and exposing them to

more dangerous routes. “Longer routes lead to higher prices paid to smugglers, which also leads to greater indebtedness of the people making the journey and a greater risk to their lives.” ([Benedicto and Brunet, 2018: 29](#)).

Routinization of Walling of the EU Borders

It seems there is a tacit social approval of walling borders within the wider EU public, regardless of critical voices raised by numerous NGOs and human rights activists. It led to the routinization of the walls at the EU borders, which were first constructed as an emergency measure. Now, walls are at the top of not only populist agendas. They are also endorsed by technocratic and mainstream politics. Consequently, the current walling of the Polish-Belarusian border is treated by most of the Polish public as “natural” and taken for granted. The Polish government is also able to depict erecting a wire fence as an effort to enhance the effectiveness of the protection of the external Schengen border. In such a perspective, the Spanish-Moroccan and Hungarian-Serbian walls serve as illustrative examples of responding to emergency situations and the subsequent routinization of the walling of EU borders.

The Spanish-Moroccan border wall

Spain has a land border with Morocco in two Spanish exclaves situated in Africa: Ceuta and Melilla. However, it is not the Moroccans against whom the wall has been built. Each day, thousands of Moroccan citizens pass the border in both directions. The Spanish walls have been built to stop migration from Sub-

Saharan Africa and, in that process, the cooperation with Moroccan border services also plays an important role.

At the same time, humanitarian organizations accuse the Spanish guards of repulsing the African migrants captured on their territory to Morocco without registering them and without recognizing their actual situation. Then, Moroccan services transfer migrants outside the country's southern borders in desert areas, without providing them with humanitarian aid ([Ferenc 2018: 142](#)). Therefore, although the Ceuta and Melilla fences became a symbol of so-called "Fortress Europe", they serve more as a filter – their aim is not a total closure but rather selectivity.

Moreover, the Spanish-Moroccan wall itself would not stop the migration without the activities of both Spanish and Moroccan border services, despite the fact that the physical barrier is considerable. The wall has the form of two steel mesh, six meters high, with razor wire on top, between which there is a path for patrolling vehicles. Yet again, the barrier itself can be dangerous and there were reported cases of deaths of those attempting to cross it.

Hungarian-Serbian border wall

The fence constructed by Hungary on its southern border can be considered as an ad hoc emergency management tool, responding to the 2015 so-called "migration crisis". However, there are some similarities with the Ceuta and Melilla case. The Hungarian wall is also not aimed at preventing migration from

the neighbouring country itself, but it is considered to be against "the further others" – migrants from the Middle East entering the EU via the Balkan route. It also did not provoke conflict between the countries split by the fence. Instead, the Serbian government in a nuanced way used that issue to present itself as a more humanitarian one and to move closer politically to the EU ([Korte 2020: 12-13](#)).

The barrier has been accompanied by push-backs: when migrants are forced back over a border without any legal procedure. These practices became the official policy of the Hungarian government, while all integration measures for recognized refugees were cut. Meanwhile, Serbia was recognized as a "safe third country" and giving assistance to asylum seekers became penalized by the Hungarian law ([Korte 2020: 7-8](#)). Moreover, applying for asylum became possible only in two so-called transit-centres with a limited daily capacity. These measures, instead of the wall alone, have been considered as the factor which halted migration. However, similarly to the previous case, that halt is in reality the export of the phenomenon to another place.

The Hungarian-Serbian border wall serves as a good example of instrumental use of the border fences by both sides of the barrier. The Hungarian government presented it as a symbol of its agency and efficacy in providing security to the Hungarian people, which was especially relevant in the context of the parliamentary election in 2015. In turn, the Serbian authorities used the fence in their

relations with the EU. Therefore, in the Hungarian case, the border issue became a tool of primarily domestic politics, which served to manifest the government's power to maintain sovereignty.

Hostile Cross-Border Activity

The situation in Usnarz Górny at the Polish-Belarusian border is presented not only as an external security threat to Poland posed by the migrants themselves, but also as a vehicle of foreign hostile interference by Belarus. In line with the logic of the securitization of migration, it further dehumanized migrants as merely instruments of a geopolitical hybrid attack, rather than subjects of compassion towards suffering human beings.

In May/June 2021, in the aftermath of the EU sanctions, the Belarusian authorities gradually started opening a new channel of irregular migration to the EU via the Baltic states and Poland. As [documented by journalistic investigations and confirmed by the law enforcement agencies of EU states bordering Belarus](#), the Belarusian authorities re-launched or intensified flights from several Middle Eastern and African countries and organised a route of migrants' smuggling through the EU border. Migrants, mainly originating from Iraq and Afghanistan, tempted by the perspective of easy entry into the EU, supposedly paid several thousand dollars for the trip to Minsk, from where they were transported to the EU border and encouraged or pushed to cross it. Most probably, the majority had not been aware of

the hardships during the trip, including the weather conditions and the alleged practices of push-backs applied by Lithuanian, Latvian and Polish border guards. In that sense, the people trapped in Usnarz Górny became instruments of the [wider geopolitical game](#).

The Polish-Belarusian border is a unique frontline area, that while dividing the local and ethnic communities, remains a "hard", "geopolitical" barrier. During the Soviet times, the entire Polish-Soviet border was characterized by very low intensity of cross-border mobility. Physically fenced off by so-called *sistiema* (long barbed-wire fence), this border could have been defined as another "Iron Curtain" since, in practice, it was easier for Polish citizens to leave for Western Europe than the USSR. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, cross-border mobility was liberalized, and Poland kept a visa-free regime for Belarusian citizens till 2003.

The border securitization related to the Schengen accession requirements, alongside with the deterioration of the political situation in Belarus and the revisionist external tendencies of Russia, led to the hindering of cross-border mobility. Certain hopes for a liberalization of the border movements appeared after Belarus created visa-free zones for tourists in the border area, and after the signing of the EU-Belarus visa facilitation agreement in 2020. With the current walling of the Polish-Belarusian border, the inhabitants of border areas are again facing strong re-bordering tendencies, which might possibly lead to reinforcing the

peripheral status of that region. Finally, it may also have negative consequences for the Belarusian minority in Poland, which was anyway subject to strong assimilation tendencies ([Sadowski 1998](#); [Barwiński 2014](#)).

Conclusions

While the situation is still unfolding, we draw some tentative conclusions based on what has already occurred. The aim of this paper was to put the erecting of the wire fence at the Polish-Belarusian border in the perspective of walling in Europe and to confront it with the experience and already existing analysis of other Schengen bordering practices, including border walling and push-back episodes.

The creation of the hostile border environment in Usnarz Górny led to the emergence of a public discourse which has been reproducing, yet again, the figure of migrants as a threat to security, stability, and internal social coherence. Hence, regardless of the actual threat, the situation at the Polish-Belarusian border was discursively constructed as a “border spectacle” ([De Genova 2002](#)), which served also the logic of internal Polish politics. Consequently, it quickly started being presented as a manifestation of sovereign determination and persistence to protect the country. Even being mostly symbolic, archaic, and ultimately ineffective, border walls are, in principle, erected by governments as a representation of a swift and effective solution to the protection of borders against – what is

persistently described as – the “influx of illegal migration”. In such a context, walling borders responds to both: the promise of political agency and the need for a power manifestation of the sovereign states, already significantly weakened by global interconnectedness ([Bigo 2002](#)).

In what was still Cold War Europe, back in 1987, Ronald Reagan urged Mikhail Gorbachev to “tear down this wall”, referring to the Berlin Wall. Two years later, in the midst of the “Autumn of Nations” enthusiasm of the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe, the Wall in Berlin was dismantled by a joyous popular crowd. The ominous symbolism of dividing walls seemed to be strong enough to prevent building future new walls in liberal, united, and peaceful Europe. The current ubiquitous walling of external Schengen borders might jeopardize the very foundation of the European project: the respect of human dignity and human rights, humanitarianism and liberal values. All this should put the current erection of the wire wall at the Polish border in a more nuanced and critical perspective.



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