

No. 2 (36), February 2022

‘Researchers at the Border’, or on social responsibility of researchers in documenting the border crisis

In this issue, two CMR members who have been conducting research at the Polish-Belarusian border reflect on how research in crisis situations should be done. Mateusz Krępa [@MateuszKrepa](#) and dr Kamila Fiałkowska [@FiaKamila](#) are part of the [Researchers at the Border](#) collective, constituted to facilitate the collaboration of researchers covering the ongoing humanitarian crisis.



Białowieża Forest

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Humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian frontier and how to address it scholarly

Mateusz Krępa, Kamila Fiałkowska

It has been half a year since migrants at the Polish-Belarusian frontier have been faced with a humanitarian crisis. Although the number of people arriving at the border has dropped, it does not mean that the difficult situation is solved, as there is evidence that several hundred (if not more) are still on the Belarusian side of the border. The numbers may be relevant in a strictly technical discourse, while one is talking about the way to ‘manage the arrivals’. But for science, even if the arrivals are stopped completely, questions do not stop to emerge.

The primary question is how to talk about the situation. As [Cetta Mainwaring \(2016\)](#) argued, there are two important problems with the portrayal of migrants in the public discourse. First, they are deprived of their agency when politicians, journalists, academics or activists tend to say that something *was done to* the migrants, rather than that they *did* something. It is not easy to avoid describing the situation that way, as things are really *done to* people on

the move – they are allowed or not allowed to cross, detained, returned, pushed-back, granted or refused protection, abused by smugglers or rescued by activists etc. The Border Group (*Grupa Granica*) – a collective of Polish NGOs rescuing migrants at the frontier – reports about deciding upon migration paths: “All these decisions are taken by the institutions of various countries, and migrants themselves have been dehumanised and treated as objects – pawns on a chessboard.” ([Grupa Granica 2021](#)). We also write that migrants *are faced* with the crisis, while saying the opposite – that they *caused* the crisis – simultaneously provides the migrants with more agency and presents them as a threat and an evil. This is a paradox of the migration discourse – that the largest degree of agency has been ascribed to migrants (in words only, of course) by those who want to depict them in the worst way possible ([Moll 2016](#)).

This discourse is also highly problematic as it presents males (especially young and Muslim)

as a threat, while women and children are depicted as tools used to warm and soften this unalterable image. It is linked with the second problem noted by Mainwaring, which is that migrants are being portrayed as either victims or villains. While citizens of a given country possess complex and multifaceted identities, the migrants are 'simply migrants', i.e. the 'dangerous others' ([Aradau 2004](#)). They can also be seen as deprived of all politicalness, when presented as just suffering human beings – a bare life, to use the notion of [Giorgio Agamben \(1995\)](#).

Therefore, the discourse is the first challenge to be addressed by scholars. Another one is the question of sources of information. The zone near the border is still under the state of emergency, or – again using [Agambenian notions \(2005\)](#) – under the state of exception where the law is suspended. This means it is not possible to conduct research directly where most of the events are going on. Or, in the reported absence of people on the move: how is the void filled? What do the armed forces actually do, and how do they and their representatives justify their enduring presence? What is the daily reality of people living under the state of exception? And likewise – what are the realities of detained persons, in guarded detention centers spread around Poland? The [number of these increased in 2021](#), and there are [many doubts regarding basic minimum standards and the humane treatment of detainees](#). To date, we can only observe from afar – it is still possible to observe the situation 'almost there', e.g. in the villages near the state of emergency zone, or by talking to people engaged in the events personally.

Conducting research on the humanitarian crisis at the frontier leads to two further questions. The first is about ethics: should and could

scholars speak to the migrants faced with the crisis? If yes, then where, when, and how? Should scholars strive to be impartial and indifferent to all sides (the migrants, the NGOs, the Polish state), or should they openly contest the governmental policies and assume that the research is inherently political, and the researcher cannot stay external to the reality which he or she researches? Then, the second question is about security: how to conduct research which is safe for the people on the move, the activists and the researchers themselves?

The feeling that research on the humanitarian crisis should be conducted, that all the above-mentioned questions should be addressed and discussed and, furthermore, that cooperation between scholars is even more valuable than usually, led to the emergence of a bottom-up, collective and non-institutional structure named 'Researchers at the Border' ([Badaczki i badacze na granicy, BBnG](#)).

'Researchers at the Border' – the scope and principles

Initially, two PhD students from the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Natalia Judzińska and Nina Boichenko, had the idea to create a network. The idea grew, gathering an increasing number of researchers all over Poland, already active on site or ready to support ongoing activities (including the authors of these words), and the network became more of a collective. The material element of the initiative is the research base in Świnoroje, just next to the zone of the state of emergency. The base serves for ongoing research activities on site – it accommodates scholars who arrive to conduct their fieldwork. It also hosts events organised by the collective – until now, two seminars have been held.

During the first gathering, in mid-December 2021, we discussed issues addressed above: how to speak about the situation, the social responsibility of the researchers to document the crisis and most of all – how to research it in an ethical and secure way.

In that sense, the infrastructure facilitated the ‘production’ of the other components of the collective. Discussions held during the first seminar demonstrated how important the ethical component of the research conducted in such a context is for us. It should be stressed that as the collective is not institutionalized, and virtually all persons interested in participating in it become its members, we do not make any binding decisions. However, we do stress that there are important principles to be maintained during work on the border (literally and symbolically - on the issues concerning the border crisis) and these are respect and an ethical approach regarding the people one talks to (people on the move, activists, local activists, inhabitants of the border area, people deployed to the border - armed and non-armed services) and data management, co-operation and support among the researchers involved. All we can do and, in fact, all we want to do, is to produce, distribute and disseminate knowledge and other forms of self-help resources. Finally, regarding the material component, we need to emphasise that the collective received support from the owners of the villa ‘Rousseau’ in Świnoroje, where the base is set up, from the already mentioned Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences (in the form of equipment and some institutional assistance), as well as from many persons contributing to the crowdfunding to cover the costs of functioning of the base.

The knowledge which was produced is, first of all, the know-how on how to do and not to do research at a time of emergency, in and out of the zone, often concerning issues as sensitive and delicate as human life, dignity and safety. Thus, we decided to collect it in the form of guidance about good practices of conducting research in crisis situations. We consider the no-harm principle to be the primary, as obtaining data can never be at the cost of informants. We should avoid not only traumatizing the interlocutor, but also interviewing the same person many times. The issue is strictly linked with the data protection principle – one scholar cannot inform another about their informant unless the person concerned agrees. In fact, the ethics, the data protection and security are interlinked in a very complicated entanglement. The aim of the group is, therefore, to make this entanglement as simple as possible and to agree collectively on some broadly shared standards within the scientific community.

Another issue concerning knowledge sharing is to inform each other about research already being done or planned. This is, first of all, to avoid duplicating work, but also to share possible tips, discuss doubts together or improve methodological tools. The collective gathers short descriptions of the research conducted at the frontier by persons who expressed their wish to participate in that initiative and provided information about their work. During both seminars (the second was held at the end of January 2022 in a hybrid form and gathered around fifty participants), several scholars presented their plans, activities or preliminary results, discussed their theoretical and methodological approaches and exchanged comments and ideas. It would be trivial to say how much added value it provided to all, but we

want to stress that it was a very *ad hoc* conference.

Last but not least, the collective aims to share the data obtained by the researchers. It means that the data collected at the frontier, in an anonymised form and with the consent of the informants, could be stored as the Humanitarian Crisis Archive (*Archiwum Kryzysu Humanitarnego*, AKH) in an open-access repository. It is still to be discussed and agreed upon what will be the rules of storing and accessing that data, but collective members expressed their belief that it is extremely important to preserve the materials about the ongoing situation, which otherwise would appear ephemeral and could be lost.

Is a different kind of science (and academia) possible?

Academia today is not an easily navigable field. It is highly competitive, operating on a neoliberal logic, valorising research activities. Rather than valuable research and findings that lead to expanding knowledge on given phenomena, it is the number of acquired research grants or published peer reviewed papers in highly cited journals that are the goal and a measure of our success (or failure).

Writing, our main activity of informing the wider academic (and not only) community about our scientific achievements, is a highly individualistic, solitary and often frustrating experience, with many faults to the peer review process. It is not enough to merely publish your

research (frequently enough) not to perish. One needs to make it visible and citable. Needless to say, for researchers from the academic (semi)peripheries, this task is as difficult as it is to make their voice (and publications) recognised as an important contribution to the discipline.

In these difficult realities, an initiative such as Researchers at the Border is a rarity. As a bottom up, democratic and autonomous collective, based on principles of cooperation, support and self-help, it is committed to the highest ethical standards and academic rigour. Researchers on the Border sparks hope for different kinds of academia and science. While we are aware that our academic realities are far from equal and there are hierarchies in the knowledge production, the urgency of the matter and shared sense of social responsibility to document this extraordinary situation brought together scholars and academics who want to share, discuss and work together in a manner quite opposite of what is frequently observed in academia. And even if this will last only a short while, the experience so far has been empowering.

Perhaps we are able to take a step further and transform the way migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and other people on the move appear in the discourse – join us if you wish to do the same and strengthen our efforts (e-mail us at: badaczenagranicy@gmail.com), but also reach out to us to learn more about ongoing research initiatives and reflect on the situation, because the crisis at the border, sadly, continues.

Mateusz Krępa



A graduate of international relations and internal security, currently a PhD candidate at the Doctoral School of Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw in the Security Science discipline and a Scholar in the research project concerning mobility, migration and the COVID-19 epidemic. The subject of his doctoral dissertation concerns non-governmental organizations helping migrants in Poland in the context of security ideology. In the past, an employee of public administration, performing tasks in Poland, Greece, and Italy, including direct work with migrants.

Kamila Fiałkowska



PhD, Researcher and Head of Socio-Cultural Research Unit at the Centre of Migration Research. Her research revolves around gender relations in migratory settings, construction of gender and national/ethnic identities and inequalities. Currently she is involved in research on the migration of Polish Roma and migrant farmworkers in Poland and Germany.

Keywords: Poland, Belarus, border, frontier, humanitarian crisis, research ethics

Suggested citation: Krępa M. Fiałkowska K. (2022) *'Researchers at the Border', or on social responsibility of researchers in documenting the border crisis*, CMR Spotlight 2(36).

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Editors of CMR Spotlight: Michał Nowosielski, Dominika Pszczołkowska

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