

Five stories from the border

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29 November 2021

It's a cold rainy day at the end of August. I stand with some other activists and journalists in the middle of somebody's field, on a side of a brook. On the other side of this nameless body of water stands a line of policemen, ready to prevent anybody from crossing it. 300 metres behind them a military camp is set up on the edge of a forest. Huge green tent, army transporters, heavily armed men looking for a cover from the rain.

All this display of power has been staged, because the security of the eastern Polish border is being undermined. There is a threat lurking in the shadows below the trees behind the military camp, on the Belarusian side of the border. This threat is a group of 33 refugees from Afghanistan taken over by the Taliban just a couple of weeks ago. 32 humans and a cat.

Our Dari translator tries to communicate with these refugees every day. The police have pushed us 300 metres away from them and the army troops set up their camp in a way, that we cannot even see each other. The translator uses a loudspeaker, so her voice can reach across the field. Usually she is answered by Mohammad, a young man whose voice is strong enough to reach our ears, even if it is muffled by the rain. We just want to check how they are. It's the third week that they are stuck in between Polish and Belarusian forces, each side telling them that they are the other's responsibility. They are hungry, cold and wet. The children and the elderly start to get sick.

We came here to show solidarity, to welcome them and try to get to know them better. But the fascist rulers of this country said that the border must be protected, that they cannot be allowed to cross. They say, that even the refugee cat is there just to make them look more human than they are, to make us trust them. So, we weren't even allowed to pass them food and clean water.

I look at the men in the uniforms in front of me. They speak the same language as me, they grew up listening to similar stories. But I feel they are complete strangers to me. I don't understand their indifference. They stay in between me and my Afghan brothers and sisters whom I want to cheer up, whom I want to get to know better, even though we don't have much in common, even though we don't understand each other's language.

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We run across a field, bent low, hoping that nobody will see us from the road. We hide in the shadow of the trees on the edge of the forest. There they are. They are sat on the damp ground, waiting for the night darkness to continue their clandestine journey.

'We are friends, we are not police' we whisper to gain their trust. They are surprised to see us. They are starved, their clothes are wet, they are shivering from cold. A couple of days before they flew from Kinshasa to Minsk. They were promised that it would be an easy way to get into the European Union and apply for asylum. From Minsk they were taken to the border with Poland. The Belarusian soldiers just told them to go across the border, so they walked the whole night through fields and forests and when the sun came up, they hid in the shadows of the trees. They didn't have any plan what to do next, they were scared of contact with the police.

We share with them some food, blankets and dry clothing, regretting that we were not able to carry more on our backs. Then we start to explain them what's their situation. We

don't have good news. It was the first week of September, the fascists in the government have just declared a state of emergency in the border area to bring here more military troops, to prevent journalists and activists from documenting the violence and to fight those who practice their freedom of movement, defying existence of the borders.

We tell them, that probably the best thing for them to do is to try to walk west, further away from this hell, the best to Germany. But the chances they make it without having connection with smugglers is low. German border is 700km away and with their jackets covered with mud and black faces they wouldn't make it through racist police checkpoints. Anyway, some of them are not able to walk anymore. O. lies on the ground barely conscious. She needs medical help.

We know that calling an ambulance is not the best thing to do. A dispatcher would inform the border guard about our whereabouts immediately. But it seems that there is no other way. Still, we are determined not to let the fascist troops push these people back to Belarus. We contact a lawyer who's ready to intervene at any moment; there are 3 photojournalists with us. We hope that the border guard won't break the law and hurt anybody if it would be documented and recorded. We hope that these refugees will be able to apply for asylum and won't be pushed back to Belarus.

We were hugely mistaken. The next day O. calls us to tell us that she was dragged out of the hospital by the military and together with others pushed back to Belarus. Belarusian soldiers shot fired bullets under their feet, so they ran across the border back to Poland and they hid in an abandoned house. She said they needed help, but we couldn't reach them; they were just next to the border, deep inside the militarised zone that we were not allowed to enter.

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I sit with Dorota in H.'s kitchen. We drink black coffee and listen to the old woman's story. She tells us about her cousin, a Jewish girl who was adopted by her aunt during the war. When the Nazis were forcing Jews from the nearby towns into train carriages the parents would throw their children out of the trains' windows. They knew where they were taken to and they hoped that by abandoning their kids they would give them a chance of survival.

We walk from village to village, from door to door to talk with the people living near the border about the atrocities, crimes and acts of violence that are being committed in the name of "defending the country". We are terrified how often the older people bring up the memories of the Holocaust. We exchange stories. We tell about the refugees who have to hide in the forests, who have been sentenced to a slow death by starving and exhaustion, being pushed there and back across the border numerous times for the crime of crossing the border. Then we hear the stories of other people hiding in the forests 80 years before, or being hid in cellars and cowsheds by good-hearted neighbours. And about other neighbours who didn't hesitate to report to the Nazis, counting on a reward or just out of their own antisemitic initiative. The accuracy of this parallel is frightening.

On a more optimistic note, we also hear the words of encouragement and declarations of readiness to help. 'Look at this village', one woman says, 'half of the houses are empty – we would fit everybody who wants to come here'. Unfortunately, it's not that simple. The men who hold power, who give orders to the police and the army have decided not to let anybody to help migrants. They play an old game of presenting the stranger as an enemy. The weaker this enemy is, the stronger these men look. Taking decisive steps, sending the troops to the border, building a wall. Ruling by spreading fear and hatred.

We also meet people who bought the government's narrative. Some are quite aggressive, they shut the door in front of our noses, they insult us and the migrants we want to talk about, they promise they will report any strangers to the police and won't help them for sure. But the majority are just scared and confused. They say that the government must

do something, that building a wall on the border is necessary, but at the same time none of them would refuse to give water to a thirsty stranger, or even welcome them in their houses if they would need to warm up and rest.

We try to soothe them, to convince them there is nothing to fear. But at the same time, we are terrified. We are scared of what's going to come in winter, of the vicious circle of violence and hatred, of that the forests around us will turn into mass graves of people who were just seeking safety in a couple of months.

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“They just want us to die. Everywhere in the damn world they don't understand that we leave our home because of a hard, a really hard war. We just want to live like the others, not to die on the borders everywhere.”

I read J.'s messages at 2am in the night. He is a Syrian refugee, settled in Germany since 2016. But his family has got stuck at the Polish-Belarusian border at the end of September. They are stranded in dense forests, being pushed there and back across the border. Temperature in the night already drops close to 0°C and it is impossible to spend a night in a forest without getting completely soaked. A week ago, we've read the first reports about casualties on this border. 5 migrants died of hypothermia.

We've made an effort to spread our contact on Facebook groups, Telegram channels and other places where migrants share information about the possible routes. We are a network of activists, both locals and strangers in the area, committed to not let anybody die on the border. Our goal is unachievable, we fight against a state machine that has chose to kill people in the name of the Polish people. The death is imperceptible, yet inevitable. Nobody can survive longer than a couple of days in these forests without help. And the death can be easily blamed on the nature, the weather, the smugglers, the Belarus' dictator.

Everyday now we get dozens calls for help. Migrants lost in the forests beg to bring them some warm food. Families look for their relatives lost at the border. Today I am a dispatcher. From the desperate, dramatic messages I try to read people's whereabouts and their needs. I check if anybody from our network is near enough to try to find them. Then I intermediate between the search group and the lost migrants. Sometimes we succeed and find them in the forest. We leave warm soup, hot tea and dry clothes. We try to have a short conversation, learn about their journey, document the violence they've experienced. But we have to leave soon. We don't want to bring the attention of the border guard. We already know that we cannot mediate with them. The only way for the migrants to survive is to get across this country on their own or with the help of smugglers.

We are not able to reach everybody. We don't have enough resources. From the dozens of requests for help I read today I have to choose those, that we are most probably able to fulfil. Still, we will fail at most of them. J. shared with us a location of his family this afternoon. They were hiding in a forest just on the border. No outsider would find them, he or she would be turned back at the first police checkpoint. But we have a friend who lives in that area. She goes with her husband in the cover of the night. They search the forest. They are almost at the exact location that J. sent us. And suddenly they hear the dogs barking, they see the light of strong police torches. Then a woman screams and a child cries. The rescue came too late. The border guard was there first to push J.'s family back to Belarus.

I've been reading these messages from the migrants and the activists all day. I hope nobody will ask us for help anymore tonight. There is nobody who would be able to reach them anyway, all the members of our network are exhausted after all day of search and rescue operations and hiding from the police and the military. I just relate the story to J. I apologise him for not being able to help his family. I want to talk with him more, I

don't want to leave him alone with his dark thoughts, but I know I have to try to get some sleep. Tomorrow will probably be even harder.

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It's the last days of November. Last week the first snow fell in eastern Poland. Usually a pleasing view, this year it just strengthened our fears. Snow decreases the chances of survival for people hiding in the forests dramatically. It also makes the job of those, who try to find the migrants and bring them back to where they came from, much easier.

I've been away from the border for two months now, but I keep talking with my friends on the ground. I try to support them as much, as I can from afar. Each week the stories they tell are more and more terrifying.

Aga tells me she is scared to leave the 'rescue base' alone. The area is swarming with uniformed and heavily armed men, who refuse to identify themselves. They try to intimidate activists and locals who want to help migrants. They've brutally attacked journalists who try to document the violence and abuses at the border. Groups of local fascists patrol the forests and villages. It's hard to distinguish them from the police, army and border guard.

Of course, the violence and intimidation that the activists experience is just a fraction of what the migrants face. In fact, some of them got tired of being peaceful and docile. They started to use violence themselves to fight for their freedom of movement. They cut the trees on the border and fell them on the fences made of razor wire. They throw stones at the police. Some have rioted in one of the detention centres.

Many make it across this border. Apparently, every day dozens reach Germany. But it's just the beginning of winter and it doesn't look like the border will fall anytime soon or that the Polish government will take a step back and stop murdering the people on the move.