



# THE ROLE OF POLAND'S EASTERN BORDER IN GLOBAL MIGRATION SYSTEMS

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**Abstract.** While Poland has been perceived as a country that mainly receives migrants from the neighbouring Eastern Europe, it is also increasingly now representing an attractive place to work or study for migrants from other countries completely foreign from Poland in terms of their language and culture. However, as data on such international migrations are affected by numerous errors but can be supplemented by long-term statistics on border traffic, the work detailed here has sought: (a) to evaluate long-term trends to the structure of foreign traffic incoming across the country's eastern border; (b) to identify causes of change in the composition of incoming cross-border traffic in terms of nationality, in relation to the geopolitical situation (pertaining both in Europe and the countries of origin); (c) to define the roles particular sections of Poland's eastern border play in the migration-pressure context. The study was based on statistical data for the period 1994-2019 obtained from the Polish Border Guard. In an effort to encapsulate current migration tendencies, particular attention was paid to the citizens of Syria, Somalia, Nigeria, Iraq, Bangladesh and India. However, analysis also extended to the inflow of citizens of relatively closer migration origin, i.e. from countries like Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Kazakhstan. In the period under investigation, Poland's eastern border was found to have been subject to the impact of economic factors (influencing cross-border traffic), while also – over time – becoming ever-more susceptible to geopolitical events (e.g. the crisis in Ukraine and the migration crisis in Europe as a whole). Significant growth was to be observed, not only (obviously) in numbers incoming from neighbouring countries, but also where other, non-European countries were concerned. Looked at long-term (over the last 30 years), Poland's eastern border can be seen to have changed in nature several times, transcending local status in favour of global, but also moving in the opposite direction.

**Keywords:** border, border traffic, eastern border of Poland, migration.

## Introduction

Movements of people form an element inherent to the processes of both globalisation and integration. They have been facilitated as means of transport have developed dynamically and become increasingly affordable (Castells, 1996) – to the extent that new forms of spatial mobility are generated. Furthermore, the development of various mass media has the effect of both raising levels of awareness of migration destinations and networks of migrants, whose contacts with other family members are also facilitated (Vertovec, 2004; Czaika & de Haas, 2014).

Illegal migration is a further element of migratory flow. Major push factors here are military conflicts (cf. Donato & Massey, 2016), or the activities of terrorist groups (Kari, Malasowe & Collins, 2018), in source areas for migration, as well as economic and political factors (de Haas, 2011).

Inflows to European countries (especially European Union; EU) have increased significantly since the middle of the 2010s. Within them, the flow of illegal migrants has mainly concentrated on southern areas (involving passage across the Mediterranean, to both Italy and Greece, with further movement through the Balkans across to Western Europe). In the peak year of 2015, 885,400 attempts to cross the EU border illegally were recorded for the Eastern Mediterranean Route, as well as 764,000 for the route involving the Western Balkans (FRONTEX, 2016).

In the case of Poland, migrations intensified in particular once the Eastern Bloc had collapsed, and after Poland had acceded to the EU. Processes entailed the outflow of Polish migrants, but also (indeed to an ever-greater extent) the inflow of foreigners. Thus, while Poland had been perceived as a country that mainly took in migrants from neighbouring countries to the east (primarily Ukraine), it is now seen increasingly as an attractive destination for work or study, among migrants from countries further afield, and hence entirely 'foreign' in linguistic and cultural terms.

That said, as quantification of the international migration taking place is an effort burdened by numerous errors, it is advisable to supplement knowledge with long-term data on movements of the population of a given country across selected borders.

And where the functions of Poland's border are concerned, it is possible to note impacts reflecting political change. At the (pre-1989) outset, the situation was one of very limited permeability of the 'Iron Curtain' type; though this paradoxically gave way rapidly to complete openness of borders in the context of the systemic transition, only for this to be lost as eastern borders of Poland became more secure once more in line with the 2004 and 2007 EU and Schengen Area accessions.

The work giving rise to this paper sought: (a) to assess long-term trends to the structure of cross-border traffic incoming from abroad, as broken down by reference to nationality but also different sections of the eastern border of Poland; (b) to identify the causes of change in composition by nationality of incoming cross-border traffic, by seeking to relate this to the geopolitical situation (in Europe and the countries of origin); (c) to define the roles of particular sections of Polish border in the migration-pressure context. The work overall was based on statistical data for the period 1994-2019 obtained from the Polish Border Guard.

Indeed, to ensure that key current migration tendencies were encapsulated (notably intensified inflow of migrants to the EU from Africa and the Middle East, as well as the economic migrations from South Asia), particular attention was paid to the citizens of Syria, Somalia, Nigeria, Iraq, Bangladesh and India. Likewise, the inflow of citizens from origins of migration relatively closer was also analysed, the countries involved here being Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, etc.

This article pre-dates the 2021 migratory crisis on Poland's eastern border, but it reveals earlier trends that can be treated as a kind of forecast of future events. It allows us to hypothesise that, irrespective of the current dominance of the citizens of neighbouring countries in border traffic, the Polish eastern border is increasingly a place of concentration of legal traffic of non-European residents as well. Both the analysis of the traffic from 1994-2019 and the subsequent events on the Polish eastern border support the thesis that all EU Member States face the same migration challenges (Morsut & Kruke, 2017). Moreover, previous studies show how volumes of irregular migration along the same routes, in successive periods, are correlated with each other. This is probably the result of the formation of migration networks (Cottier & Salehyan, 2021), but may also be due to previous experiences of legal movement across the borders of the EU. This confirms the importance of long-term studies of the structure characterising border traffic.

## Data

Source data on border traffic was provided by the Polish Border Guard Headquarters. Its detailed database contains information on: (1) passenger traffic, with a simple breakdown into Poles and foreigners, (2) vehicular traffic (including cars, trucks, buses), and (3) arrivals of foreigners organised by citizenship. Each of the traffic categories is available with a detailed breakdown into: individual border sections (including sea and air borders), locations of the border crossings involved, crossing directions and types of border crossing point. The database makes it possible for crossings of Poland's eastern border to be identified on a 'day by day' basis.

However, the work underpinning this article has also used FRONTEX data on illegal crossings of the EU border, as well as Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy data on numbers of work permits issued to foreigners, and *Statistics Poland* data on numbers of foreign students in Poland.

For comparison purposes, volumes of border traffic and other flows were referred to 2019 (rather than 2020), given the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. This allowed two 'normal' periods to be compared, with no account therefore taken of the huge impact of the pandemic on the volume of international flows (given that this would fail to reflect the purpose of this article).

The analysis presented here makes use of data reflecting people's travel into Poland in the years 1994-2019. These originate in a detailed database with information on directions of movement (inward/outward), location of border crossing point, nature of that point (by rail, road, etc.), and citizenship of persons crossing. Data were analysed separately for each of the three segments of Poland's eastern border (with Russia, Belarus or Ukraine). The analysis of data by citizenship was split into two parts, of which the first distinguished between citizens of Poland and foreigners (with it thus needing to be noted how, along each border segment, it is persons with the passport of the respective neighbour-state to the east that dominate). The aim of this was to reveal main trends for the 1994-2019 period. To assess the degree to which people are 'local', there was closer scrutiny over inward movements of foreigners across all sections of the eastern border.

## Changes in the Functions of Borders

The increasing intensity of flows of people and goods between countries (Scott, 1998; Brenner, 1999; Newman, 2006) is a reflection of progressing globalisation, just as it also reflects the development of regional-level trans-border cooperation, not only in Europe (where INTERREG is often involved). More and more often the decisions people take entail work, residence or study beyond the home country. Even as this at times happens out of necessity, it is more and more common for it to be a matter of choice. The status of 'citizen of the world' is no longer reserved for a narrow group of people.

On that basis, recognition of the creation of a new 'borderless' world is important, with this performance engendering a new perspective on the border as a zone of contact (Ratti, 1993), as well as increased permeability of borders. However, this kind of 'optimistic vision' regarding the disappearance of borders as barriers between states (van Houtum, 2005) needs to be seen as present in real life in just a few parts of the world (like Europe's Schengen Area). Even in such areas, distinct borders continue to exist between integrating territory and areas lying beyond it. There are indeed many parts of the world in which borders retain their original barrier function (Moraczewska, 2008), and/or create a periphery and spatial isolation (Więckowski, 2019), e.g. in terms of transport accessibility and socio-economic development (Jakubowski & Miszczuk, 2021). Borders may also be seen as a resource (Sohn, 2014) capable of contributing to the development of wider border areas.

Poland exemplifies the situation faced and manifested by states with borders of two types. Its borders with Germany, Czechia, Slovakia and Lithuania enjoy the status of internal borders of the Schengen Area, across which there is a guarantee of freedom of movement of both people and goods. On the other hand, the country’s border with Russia (Kaliningrad District), Belarus and Ukraine is at the same time the external border of the EU and the Schengen Area, with a function as barrier to movement of all types therefore served. Along the eastern border, while economic factors do much to determine border traffic, a key role is also played by formal-administrative and geopolitical conditions (Wiśniewski & Komornicki, 2021).

The geopolitical events of recent years offer much evidence that the process whereby borders become increasingly permeable does not have to be linear in nature (by any means), and is not in fact irreversible in any way (Komornicki & Wiśniewski, 2017).

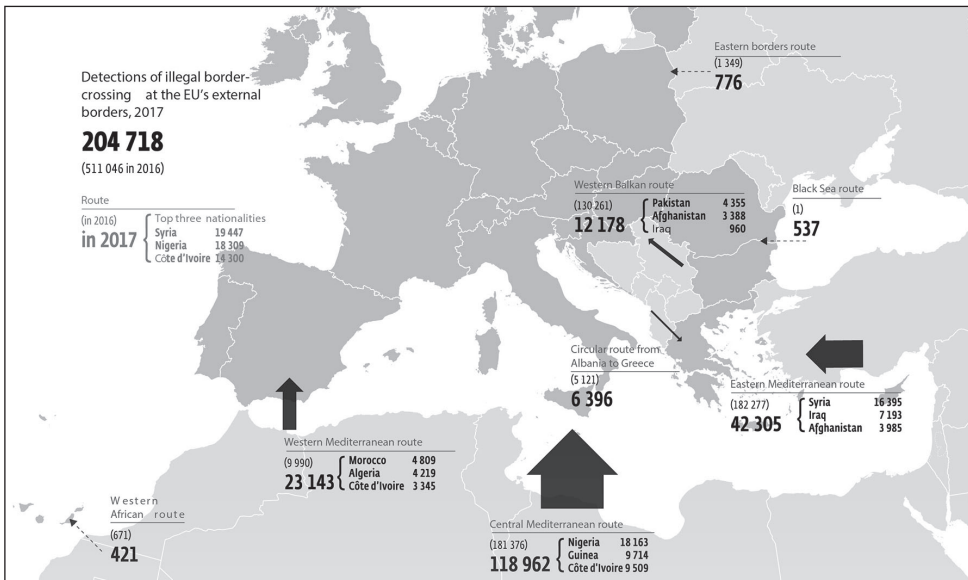


Figure 1. Primary routes used in illegal migration, 2016/2017  
Source: FRONTEX (2018, p. 18).

Still, the diverse processes ongoing in today’s world (and involving, *inter alia*, mass migration to the EU, military conflicts, BREXIT and integration processes) demand a renewal of thinking on both the conceptualisation and the functioning of borders. Integration processes taking place in Europe and expressed in the free flow of people, goods and services within the confines of the Schengen Area give rise to changed thinking where European borders are concerned, with this new way requiring that a distinction be drawn between internal boundaries (with borders as zones of cooperation) and external ones (with borders serving as dividing lines or filters). Poland’s eastern border is of the second type, in that it is, at the same time, the external border of the EU and its Schengen Area. Its significance and correct functioning is, therefore, extremely important to the security of the entire EU. As it happens, the eastern (continental) border of the Schengen Area (encompassing the border segments of Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland and Norway, also as neighbours with Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus and Russia) is situated away from the

main migration routes<sup>1</sup> (especially the ones in which illegal migration predominates). Thus, as of 2017, only 776 cases of illegal crossing of the borders involved were registered along the entire segment considered (even as there had been 1349 such cases in 2016) (Fig. 1). A majority of these concerned the citizens of Vietnam (261), Ukraine (105) and Russia (69) – although there were also 41 attempts at illegal crossing of the border registered for citizens of India, along with 24 each for those of citizens of Syria and Bangladesh (FRONTEX, 2018).

In contrast, the primary migration route leads through Southern Europe (the Central Mediterranean route, through the maritime borders of Italy and Malta). There, 2017 brought as many as 118,962 attempts (2016 as many as 181,376) at the illegal crossing of the border (out of a total of 204,718). Among the 2017 total, 18,163 crossings were by citizens of Nigeria, 9714 – by those of Guinea, and 9509 – by those of Ivory Coast (FRONTEX, 2018). In contrast, the Eastern Mediterranean route (passing through the maritime borders of Cyprus and Greece, as well as the land borders between Greece and Turkey and Bulgaria and Turkey) constitutes a migration pathway from war-ravaged Syria. In 2017 there were 42,305 attempts to cross the border illegally (cf. 182,277 in 2016), of which 16,395 concerned the citizens of Syria, 7193 those of Iraq, and 3985 those of Afghanistan (FRONTEX, 2018).

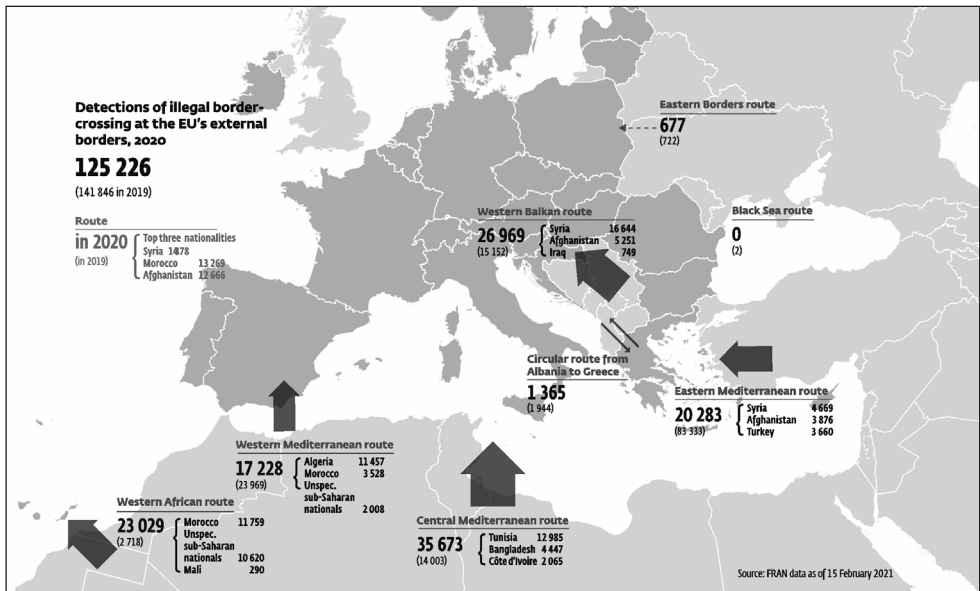


Figure 2. Primary routes used in illegal migration, 2019/2020  
 Source: FRONTEX (2021b, p. 14).

More than 125,000 attempts to cross the EU's external borders illegally were registered in 2020, with most involving Syrian nationals, as followed by those of Morocco and Afghanistan (Fig. 2). The Central Mediterranean route remained the main one for migrant inflows, although the volume

<sup>1</sup> Everything changed in the second half of 2021 due to a massive inflow of migrants, first across the Lithuanian-Belarusian and Latvian-Belarusian borders and then – on a much larger scale – across the Polish-Belarusian border. Between January and August 2021, 8000 attempts to cross the EU border illegally were recorded along the eastern section of the EU border (an increase of over 1400% compared to the same period of the previous year). The largest numbers of people involved in this came from Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria (FRONTEX, 2021a).

was down significantly to 35,673 people (mainly from Tunisia – 12985), Bangladesh (4447) and Côte d'Ivoire (2065) (Fig. 2). There was an increased role for the Western Balkan route, along which illegal migrants from Syria prevail. Migrants from Syria also dominated on the Eastern Mediterranean route. Its importance was lower than in 2019, when more than 83,000 attempts to cross the EU borders illegally were recorded.

## Transformations in the Trends for Migration Shown by Poland

Migrations constitute an essential component of the flows considered. In Poland, these accelerated in particular following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and Poland's accession to the EU. As political changes have taken place, so also have the functions of Poland's borders changed: starting from the period of very limited permeability associated with the pre-1989 'Iron Curtain', through the complete openness of borders accompanying the period of systemic transition post-1989, to the recent tightening of eastern borders as a result of Poland's accession to the EU (2004) and to the Schengen Area (2007).

Poland was perceived as a country of migration outflow over quite a long period. Through to the end of the 1970s the magnitude of this remained relatively small, in connection with the strict control organs of the state were able to exercise (outflow was at 27,500 people a year on average in the years 1950-1980, see Gawryszewski, 2005). However, the early 1980s brought a significant liberalisation of regulations related to the issuing and use of passports (as documents allowing for foreign travel). While passports valid for several years began to be issued, a requirement from earlier times that they should pass back to the Ministry of Home Affairs on travellers' returns remained in place. On the other hand, there was a simplification of the procedure by which a passport already issued might be returned. The essential changes took place at the end of 1988, when passports valid for multiple trips and for all countries of the world were introduced, and an end was put to the aforesaid requirement of the documents being returned to the issuing office (Stola, 2012). These changes were associated with an enormous increase in migration flows, and an estimated 1.2 million Polish citizens apparently left the country for good in the years 1981-1989, making this the most intense period of migratory outflow in the history of communist-era Poland (Stola, 2012). The main destinations for these migrations were the countries already featuring migration networks that had taken shape even before World War II (primarily involving the USA and Federal Republic of Germany), or else at the War's end (United Kingdom). During the 1960s, Sweden was a further quite popular destination, even as 'Solidarity'-related emigration went largely to Australia, Canada, Italy or Greece.

Systemic transformations associated with regime change activated a whole host of processes that also extended to those linked with migration. At the end of the 1990s, some 300-400,000 people would leave Poland each year, mainly for economic reasons. A major migratory outflow was observed from the region of Opole (southern Poland), mainly among those with dual (Polish and German) citizenship, with this status being in a position to facilitate the gaining of a job in Germany very markedly. Traffic across Poland's eastern border has been subject to major change since the beginning of the socio-economic transformation back in 1989. The direct causes of these changes in the first part of the period were (after Komornicki, 1999; Komornicki & Wiśniewski, 2017): (a) ultimate liberalisation of Poland's regulations regarding passports; (b) easing of the passport regimes in the countries of the former Soviet Union; (c) the decentralisation and privatisation of road transport and foreign trade; (d) growing poverty in the societies of the former Soviet Union (motivation to travel

to Poland to sell goods of low quality) and in a part of Polish society (pushing demand for the goods in question); (e) competitiveness of goods produced by some branches of Polish industry on the markets of the eastern neighbours; (f) high customs and excise taxes on alcoholic beverages, tobacco and fuels in Poland, motivating petty smuggling of the respective goods from beyond the eastern border; and (g) the establishment of new border crossing points and development of bilateral railway and coach connections. Several of the factors mentioned proved to be short-term in nature, and unstable, with the result that the intensity of cross-border traffic was subject to fluctuation.

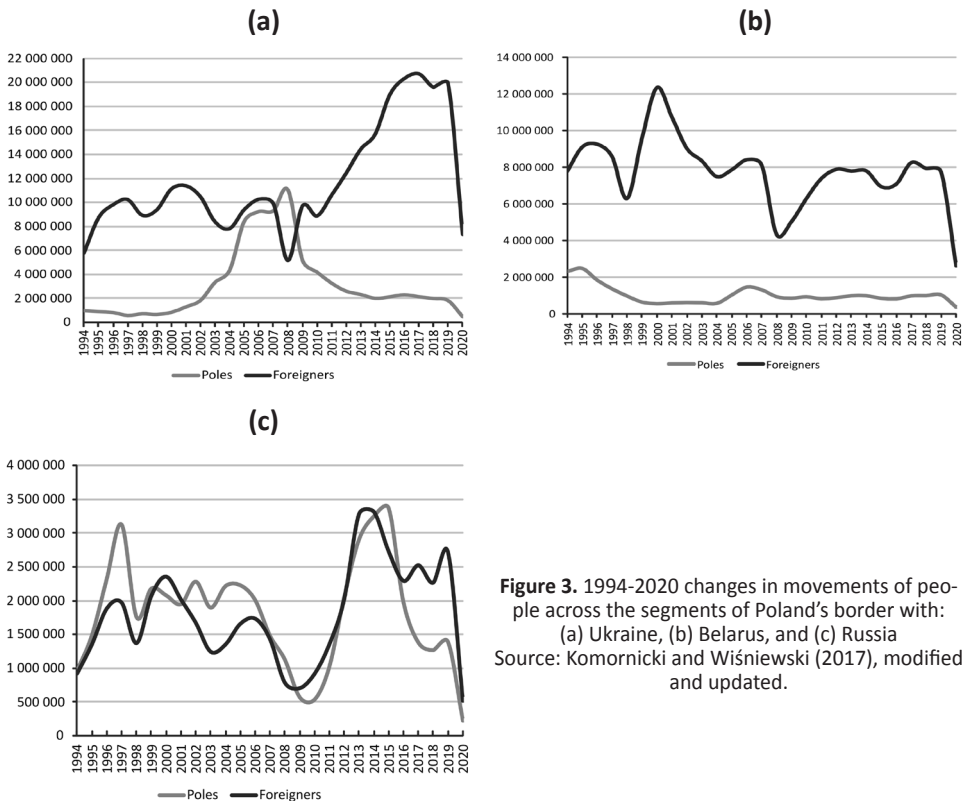
Poland's accession to the EU, and the consequent (and later step-by-step) opening-up of certain labour markets to the inhabitants of accession countries, triggered successive waves of migration outflow. Overall, it was primarily to the United Kingdom, Germany, Ireland and The Netherlands that Poles went, albeit at slightly differing times. It is estimated that, as of 2019, as many as 2,415,000 Poles were resident abroad. Of these, 2,008,000 were in EU Member States (e.g. with 704,000 in Germany, 678,000 in the United Kingdom, 135,000 in The Netherlands and 112,000 in Ireland), see (GUS, 2020). Poland's EU accession at the same time meant change in the permeability of eastern borders (with the 2003 introduction of visa regimes for the citizens of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine). It was in this way that a process involving marked differentiation of the situations along particular segments of Poland's eastern border took shape, as further modified thereafter by the country's incorporation into the Schengen Area.

The last dozen or so years has brought a considerable increase in the level of interest in coming to Poland being shown by migrants. This is well seen in the overall statistics for cross-border traffic (with continuity of statistical registration only in fact maintained for the country's eastern border). Thus, in the years 2004-2019 the eastern land border experienced a 30% increase in numbers of border-crossing events (inflow only). There was likewise an increase in numbers of foreign students in Polish tertiary education. In fact, the years 2005-2019 brought an 8-fold increase in size for this group – from 10,092 to 82,194. Furthermore, this increase does not relate solely to students from countries of similar language and culture (Ukraine and Belarus – even though these were involved in respective 19- and 6-fold increases), given that it also relates to fellow EU Member States (e.g. Spain) and countries as distant in geographical, cultural and linguistic terms as India or Cameroon.

A factor also motivating migrants is the relatively attractive labour market, which, given the demographic problems of Poland, has gaps in supply that actually need filling. An extremely high level of interest in securing a job in Poland is to be observed primarily among Ukrainians, given not only the geographical and linguistic proximity, but also Ukraine's specific and severe economic and geopolitical situation. While as of 2008 the level of issue of work permits to Ukrainian citizens was at just 5400, 11 years later the figure had reached 330,000 (MRPiPS, 2020). An increasing interest in Poland as a place to live and work is also to be observed among the citizens of yet-further countries, such as Georgia (with a more than 76-fold increase in number of work permits issued across the 2008-2019 period), India (a more than 12-fold increase), The Philippines (36-fold), and Bangladesh (127-fold – from 54 to 6888 work permits). The growing importance of Poland as a migration destination is also confirmed by research done on the Indian side. While 1998 witnessed just 98 official cases of migration from India to Poland, by 2012 that figure has risen to 1157 (Potnuru & Sam, 2015).

## A General Overview of Traffic along the Eastern Border

During the entire period of transformation, different segments of the border featured distinct dynamics when it came to the structure characterising traffic across the border, even as things were different for Polish citizens and foreigners. In the years 1994-2003 movements of people across the border in the Ukrainian segment (Fig. 3a) were prevalently in an inward direction and involving foreigners (of course mainly Ukrainians themselves). The situation changed once the visa regime had been introduced for the citizens of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, when a spectacular increase could be observed in relation to travel involving Polish citizens, principally with a view to goods on which excise tax is levied in Poland being purchased over there. However, a distinct drop in the movement of foreigners across the Polish-Ukrainian border, even as traffic involving Polish citizens continued to grow, reflected a further sharpening of the visa regime for the citizens of Poland's neighbour countries to the east (the introduction of visas for entry into the Schengen Area). The introduction of local cross-border traffic agreements resulted in a renewed increase in the traffic across the Polish-Ukrainian border involving foreigners (albeit with an absolute dominance of citizens of Ukraine – reaching 97% in 2019). In contrast, movements of Polish citizens declined abruptly.



**Figure 3.** 1994-2020 changes in movements of people across the segments of Poland's border with: (a) Ukraine, (b) Belarus, and (c) Russia  
Source: Komornicki and Wiśniewski (2017), modified and updated.

Fluctuations in the magnitude of cross-border traffic were much smaller at the Polish-Belarusian border (Fig. 3b), where foreigners prevailed during the entire period under analysis. The most



marked decreases in the magnitude of cross-border movements of foreigners were associated with the Russian crisis (1998) and the introduction of the so-called Schengen visas (2007). Traffic involving Poles remained at a rather stable level. This by the way implies that, along the Belarusian segment of the border, there was no takeover of trade-and-smuggling activities by residents of Poland. Given that, compared with the Ukrainian border, there is more diversified composition of traffic in terms of citizenship (with citizens of Belarus 'only' accounting for 88% of traffic), this can be taken to reveal a more major (Russia-EU) transit component to the traffic across this border.

What have clearly been the most limited changes are those to be noted along the Polish-Russian border (i.e. the border with Kaliningrad District). It is along this segment of the border that the amount of traffic is seen to depend most on the political and geopolitical situation at the given time. Not until 2016 did it prove possible to observe significant change in the volume of border traffic attributable to Poles and Russians (88.1% of the total in 2019) (Fig. 3c). After that date, the numbers of crossings made by Poles decreased significantly, due to the suspension – by Poland – of local border traffic.

In 2007, i.e. the last year for which complete data on cross-border traffic are available for all segments (meaning Poland's western and southern borders as well), incoming movements of foreigners across all three segments of the eastern border accounted for 15.9% of all crossings by foreigners of Polish land borders in general (and 15% of all inward movements where air and maritime transport are also included). The conclusion is thus that the role played by the entire eastern border at that time was relatively limited. As to the present situation there is a lack of information given the non-registration of the relevant data.

## **Movements of People across the Eastern Border, by Nationality**

A majority of foreigners incoming across Poland's eastern border are citizens of the countries neighbouring across the respective segments. Among remaining nationalities, those most represented (at all segments) hail from other neighbouring states (i.e. Russia, Germany, Lithuania and Czechia); as followed by the citizens of further countries not distant in geographical terms (like Moldavia and Romania) – see Table 1. Countries in the 'top ten' are thus able to account for the vast majority of all incoming foreigners along each of the border segments (once account has been taken of the dominant influence of citizens from the state immediately across the given border). Beyond that, in the case of each segment it is possible to identify certain distinct elements of the cross-border traffic involved. Thus, at the Polish-Ukrainian border there is a noticeable transit traffic originating in Moldova, but passing through Ukraine rather than Romania. A further aspect of significance here is the way in this particular movement has increased considerably in recent years, to involve 62,857 people in 2019, as compared with 14,997 as recently as in 2013.

Equally, the 'top ten' countries also include such geographically distant cases as Portugal. Where the Russian segment is concerned, traffic is dominated by German citizens (presumably engaging in historical and sentimental tourism), as well as those of Lithuania (a less obvious phenomenon, given the open nature of the Polish-Lithuanian border). It seems clear that this is explainable in terms of shopping visits made within the framework of agreements involving local traffic, and specifically, dual-citizenship Lithuanians residing in Kaliningrad District motivated by the price differential. This would reflect the way in which some 70% of this 'Lithuanian' traffic involves the local Gołdap/Gusev crossing, which is situated along the eastern fragment of the Polish-Russian border. This in the face of the fact that the Lithuanian minority lives primarily in the eastern part of

the enclave, along the border with Lithuania (Zimovina, 2016). At the Polish-Belarusian border it is an inflow of Russians that prevails (including in transit), as followed by Ukrainians and Germans.

**Table 1.** The ‘top ten’ nationalities represented most frequently in movements into Poland in 2019, by segment of the Polish border

| Nationality   | Ukrainian segment |            | Russian segment  |            | Belarusian segment |            |
|---|-------------------|------------|------------------|------------|--------------------|------------|
|   | Number of visits  | Share in % | Number of visits | Share in % | Number of visits   | Share in % |
| Belarusian  | 10 713            | 2.8        | 15 140           | 9.3        |                    |            |
| Belgian   |                   |            |                  |            | 3 386              | 0.6        |
| Czech   | 22 926            | 6.1        | 1 314            | 0.8        | 4 985              | 0.9        |
| Estonian  |                   |            | 1 244            | 0.8        |                    |            |
| German  | 58 386            | 15.4       | 67 039           | 41.3       | 37 742             | 6.7        |
| Israeli   |                   |            | 1 772            | 1.1        | 3 605              | 0.6        |
| Kazakh  |                   |            | 4 113            | 2.5        | 5 274              | 0.9        |
| Latvian   | 12 935            | 3.4        | 2 033            | 1.3        |                    |            |
| Lithuanian  | 35 757            | 9.4        | 37 600           | 23.2       | 8 689              | 1.5        |
| Moldavian   | 62 857            | 16.6       | 2 202            | 1.4        | 4 412              | 0.8        |
| Portugal  | 9 339             | 2.5        |                  |            |                    |            |
| Romanian  | 67 610            | 17.9       |                  |            |                    |            |
| Russian   | 12 190            | 3.2        |                  |            | 388 486            | 69.3       |
| Serbian   |                   |            |                  |            | 4 978              | 0.9        |
| Slovakian   | 7 773             | 2.1        |                  |            |                    |            |
| Ukrainian   |                   |            | 9 907            | 6.1        | 47 070             | 8.4        |
| ‘Top 10’ (Total)  | 300 486           | 79.4       | 142 364          | 87.8       | 508 627            | 90.7       |
| Remaining nationalities   | 78 057            | 20.6       | 19 770           | 12.2       | 51 969             | 9.3        |
| Total (except for the dominating nationality at each of the segments) | 378 543           | 100.0      | 162 134          | 100.0      | 560 596            | 100.0      |

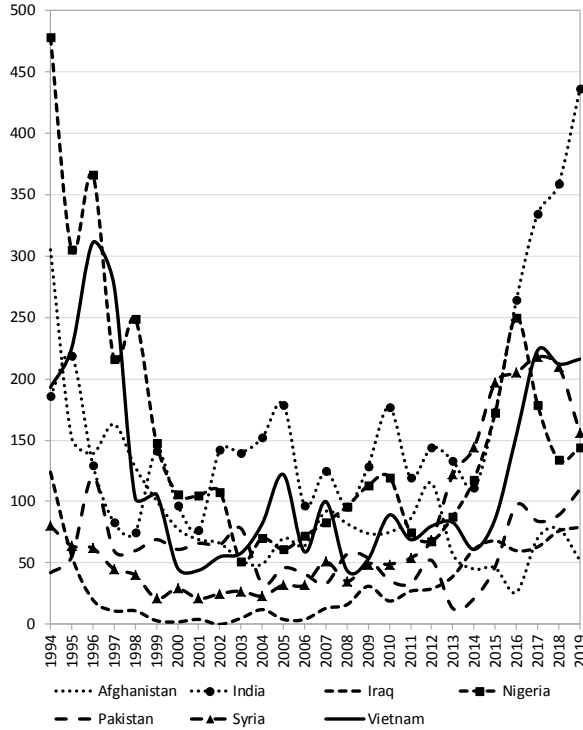
Source: authors’ own elaboration based on Border Guard data.

The distribution of some of the ‘third’ nationalities using crossing points along Poland’s eastern border points to directions of transit, including across Polish territory. Involved here are, for instance, the citizens of Lithuania and Latvia who travel to Ukraine.

As of 2019 the eastern border was crossed by 5161 persons registered as refugees in conformity with Article 1 of the 1951 Convention. Almost all of these appeared at the border crossings between Poland and Belarus, and those involved were mainly of Chechen nationality. The inflow of such people had in fact been still-greater in earlier years, though there was no separate registration to offer confirmation of that fact.

Figure 4 shows the dynamics characterising the incoming traffic of the citizens of particular non-European (i.e. Asian and African) states. As the data in question are confined to people incoming across Poland’s land border with Belarus, Ukraine and Russia, the numbers cannot be treated as

representing the respective totals. This is so because clear significance ought to be assigned to movement by air, as well as (for example) the opportunities afforded for people to come in from German territory.



**Figure 4.** Traffic among the citizens of selected non-European countries incoming across Poland's eastern border (with Ukraine, Russia and Belarus) <sup>2</sup>  
 Source: authors' own elaboration of Border Guard data.

That said, it was assumed that traffic incoming via the eastern border might at least serve as an indirect indicator of the migration pressure exerted from selected countries. This reflects a circumstance in which Poland is always the very first country of the Schengen Area and EU to be entered by a foreigner. The absolute numbers of the latter taking this route are not high (at the level of several dozen to a few hundred), but indication offered in regard to dynamics may still have its significance when it comes to pointing out directions of migration.

The portrayal of the situation obtained points to the existence of distinct phases of differing intensity, where citizens of non-European countries are concerned. It was through to the end of the 1990s that numbers of these were relatively the greatest, even if the trend was a clearly downward one. At that time, Poland had still not joined the EU, and visa regulations were relatively more liberal. Equally, it can be supposed that some people even then entered Poland legally with a view to going on to cross the western border with Germany in an illegal fashion.

Moreover, we know that citizens of numerous countries in Asia and Africa were staying (especially for education) in the former Soviet Union at the moment that polity disintegrated. In subse-

<sup>2</sup> China is not shown in the figure, due to what would be the large difference in the scale of arrivals as compared with other countries.

quent years, these people may well have travelled across countries of the region. However, as the eastern border of Poland came to be sealed more and more tightly (in line with EU requirements as accession to the Union approached), the regional movements described here dried up progressively, with only a very small and stabilised number of post-2000 crossing of Poland’s eastern border being made by citizens of non-European countries. It is characteristic that this was true of people from almost all countries considered, including China. Such a situation persisted until 2014, but thereafter a re-increase was to be observed, where people originating in Asia and Africa were concerned. This breakpoint in time indicates clearly an association with an increase in numbers of refugees and the appearance of strong migration pressure overall.

Such increases in the level of traffic were not only true of China (with an increase from 157 people in 2000 to 2055 in 2019), but also of India and Vietnam (possibly in part because economic relations intensified overall), and of Iraq, Pakistan, Syria and Nigeria (albeit with a reduced inflow from the last two countries for the last two years analysed). Since all of the registered events involving border crossing are legal, it can be supposed that where countries (like Syria and Nigeria) affected by conflicts are concerned, we are dealing with movements of people who have managed to acquire a Polish visa (probably given the presence in Poland of relatives). However, this does not change the way in which dynamics already observable for several years might be taken as indicating:

- a facility to travel across the territories of Eastern European countries characteristic of certain groups of potential migrants;
- a slow overcoming of stagnation when it comes to the structure characterising movements across the eastern border (i.e. a ‘re-appearance’ of the citizens of countries not in Poland’s immediate vicinity);
- future migration pressure capable of making itself felt along the analysed border in years to come.

Figure 5 shows the structure to incoming traffic among persons from selected non-European countries in 1996 and then in 2019, with a breakdown by border segments. It is possible to indicate features of direction of travel that can be thought to characterise representatives of certain countries. Thus, it is at the border with Belarus that citizens of China appear first and foremost. Their presence in relatively large numbers at the border with the Russian Federation’s Kaliningrad District is also characteristic. In remaining cases, traffic is distributed between crossing points along the Polish-Belarusian and Polish-Ukrainian borders.

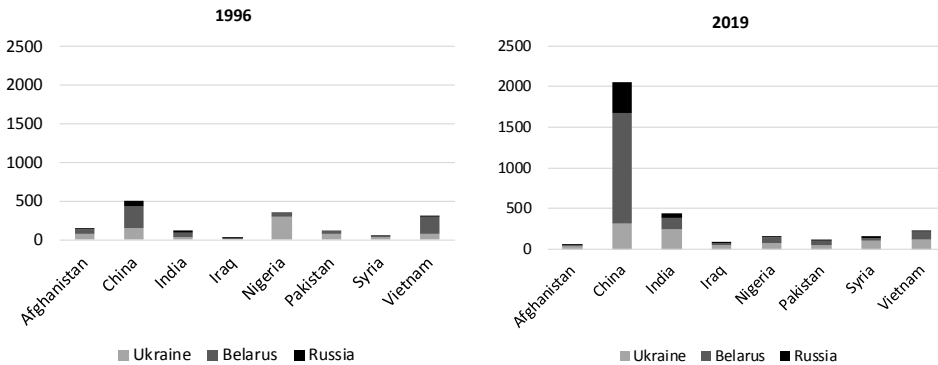


Figure 5. Directions in which the border with Poland was crossed – in 1996 and 2019 – by citizens of selected non-European states.

Source: author’s own elaboration on the basis of Border Guard data.

Indeed, as of 2019, while the scale of migratory flow out of Afghanistan, Nigeria, Pakistan and Vietnam proved to be lower than in 1996, the figures for China, India, Iraq and Syria show an intensification. However, a structural comparison indicates a relative increase in the significance of the Ukrainian border. Nowadays, this border segment dominates as the locus of concentration of overland inward movements from the typical emigration countries (Syria, Iraq and India). Also characteristic is the fact that an increase in numbers of movements of citizens from these countries took place in the period, during which core traffic structure was dominated unambiguously by Ukrainians. Conflict between Russia and Ukraine reduced amounts of transit traffic through Ukraine, above all from Russia. Paradoxically, there was, at the same time, an increase in numbers of citizens of countries affected by conflicts who travelled the route. This may again suggest that it is this Polish-Ukrainian border that can be the potential recipient of migration pressure hypothetically exerted by non-European countries.

It was only post-2011 that data from the Border Guard began to specify the category of 'refugee' only (Fig. 6). Thereafter through to 2019, it was possible to observe distinct structural change in this regard. Equally, in the years 2011-2012, refugees appeared in similar numbers at both the Belarusian and Ukrainian borders. In 2013, the overall number of these declined very markedly, only for them to re-increase again thereafter. Simultaneously, the Belarusian border was coming to be the clearly dominant one in terms of numbers of refugees passing across it. As Chechens continued to dominate the traffic in question, the idea that these choose more stable routes for their travels looks sound.



**Figure 6.** Refugees along Poland's eastern border as of 2011-2019  
Source: authors' own elaboration based on Border Guard data.

## Conclusions

In the period under investigation, Poland's eastern border seems to have felt the impact of economic factors (influencing cross-border traffic), while also becoming more and more susceptible to geopolitical events (e.g. the crisis in Ukraine and the migrant crisis in Europe as a whole). There was marked growth in numbers of foreigners incoming, not only from neighbouring countries (obviously), but also from other, non-European states. Furthermore, as time passed the border in question here was becoming more and more heterogeneous. Unique if local in character

is the border with the Kaliningrad District as a Russian enclave adjacent to EU territory, even as the border with Belarus exhibits characteristic features of a 'global' border, given a configuration of transport routes allowing for transit. The Polish-Ukrainian border can be defined as intermediate in form, with Ukrainians very much dominating incoming movement across the border (even to the tune of 97% in 2019). Nevertheless, it was precisely at this border that citizens of quite a number of non-European countries began to reappear in relatively the greatest numbers, not least where nationals of countries ravaged by conflict (such as Syria) were concerned. On the other hand, refugees as such – in line with the classification under the 1951 Convention – showed a clear 'preference' for the Polish-Belarusian border.

The considerations here lead to interesting conclusions as regards structural changes affecting cross-border traffic, as a reflection of conflicts taking place in the very neighbouring country, as well as more distant states in parallel. These changes prove specific for particular groups of those crossing the border (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Processes of change affecting the structure to cross-border traffic in the years 2014-2019

| Segment of the border  | Citizens of the neighbouring country                          | Transit from other countries of the region | Transit from distant countries, including those hit by conflicts | Refugees under the 1951 Convention |
|--|---|--|--|------------------------------------|
| with Ukraine, i.e. a state in which military conflict is actually taking place | increase in traffic incoming into Poland and the EU           | much reduced                               | increased  | reduced number                     |
| with Belarus, i.e. a state seen as stable, but also authoritarian              | stagnation as regards traffic incoming into Poland and the EU | slightly increased                         | phenomenon of marginal scale only                                | increased number                   |

Source: authors' own elaboration.

Over the longer term of the last 30 years, Poland's eastern border can be said to have modified its character several times, from local to global and *vice versa*. The phases characteristic of this process of shift have entailed:

- through to 1991 – a border that is hardly permeable, albeit mostly local in character anyway (being crossed by the citizens of Poland and of the Soviet Union), if with some regulated transit (e.g. into Poland from Romania via the Ukrainian SSR);
- between 1991 and 2001 – a border of rapidly enhancing permeability experiencing rapid growth in crossing traffic that also diversifies abruptly, prior to a reversal of that process; and a border that thus takes on global characteristics, as people from various (also non-European) states become involved;
- between 2001 and 2013 – a border again becoming less permeable as Poland accedes first to the EU and then to the Schengen Area, with the shares of all crossings that are due to citizens of 'third' countries now becoming very small, even as traffic across the segments with the different neighbours diversifies, if with a mainly local character of traffic reasserting itself;
- between 2014 and 2019 – a border that is coming to be influenced, albeit selectively and disparately, by conflicts both proximate (in Ukraine itself) and more distant (in Syria); and hence also a border again beginning to manifest 'global' features;
- in 2020 and 2021 – a border whose traffic volume and structure again changes rapidly, albeit in a manner whose final outcome may not yet be predicted in full: even as traffic plummets in the context of the pandemic of COVID-19, a migratory movement being provoked politically gathers pace, drastically increasing the scale of both the refugee problem and numbers of crossings achieved illegally.

When results obtained are looked at from the perspective of the migration crisis ongoing through 2021 (also therefore at the time of writing), the earlier increase in numbers of citizens of Asian and African countries crossing Poland's eastern border legally might be seen as a component of the process by which knowledge on potential illegal migration and refugee routes diffuses. The diagnosed structural differences between Polish-Ukrainian and Polish-Belarusian movements also look characteristic. Even in the earlier period, the latter already represented a direction of inflow for refugees, even as gradual diversification of the structure of normal movements occurred mainly on the border with Ukraine. It may be forecast that, even should the current (pandemic and EU migration) crises come to an end, certain quantitative and structural changes to the traffic crossing Poland's eastern border will accelerate. The study carried out and trends found point to a more-permanent globalisation of this border. And, while bilateral traffic (especially with Ukraine) will probably remain dominant, this will be lighter than in previous years.

The long observation period also allows changes in the traffic affecting Poland's eastern border to be set in the wider context of migration in response to climate change. This truth is pointed to by Cottier and Salehyan (2021), who note that, while cases of people being apprehended on a border are not a perfect indicator of climate emigration rates, the advantages of this over other measures (like applications to migrate legally or be granted asylum) remain clear.

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