



# SECURITY FOR WHOM?

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**T**he words “migration” and “security” very often go hand-in-hand in political statements and media reports. Migrants are portrayed as posing a threat to the safety and security of modern societies – not only in Poland, but also in many countries of the Global North. As early as 2007, the world-renowned Polish social theorist Zygmunt Bauman noted that refugees are the modern-day

embodiment of the wicked witches or goblins known from urban legends. Moreover, the term “refugee” is now applied both to people fleeing their homes to seek international protection and to various groups of unwanted migrants.

To migrate is simply to move from one country or region to another. When we think of migration, however, most of us are instantly struck with images of people climbing fences or crossing the sea on overcrowded boats. We do not imagine people travelling by airplane: ourselves or our friends traveling freely around the globe, going on vacation or seeking employment, winning scholarships to study in a different country, attending conferences, or moving abroad for love. This illustrates how divided the world is: between



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Migration has always been present, as one of the forces behind the evolutionary success of the human species. But why do contemporary migrations stir such strong emotions?

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Large steel fence protecting the border between Mexico and the United States at the Tinajas Altas Mountains in Arizona (Sonoran Desert)

some who do have the right to migrate – mainly white and rich inhabitants of the Global North, and others whose right to do so is taken away (or at least called into question) – persons of color, poorer people, inhabitants of the Global South.

## People

When we think about the security threat posed by migration, we again think about ourselves, and about those who might be dangerous to us. In most cases, however, this threat is imaginary or abstract. Examples include the fear that we may lose our way of life. In the European Union, we even have a commissioner once officially described as being tasked with

“protecting” our European way of life. And yes, this official’s responsibilities include migration. When ordinary people are asked about their concerns related to migration, they are likely to mention the threat of higher crime, of terrorism, and – especially in Poland – a danger to the Catholic religion.

Such fears are easy to instill. This is done very adroitly by politicians – chiefly those from populist and right-wing parties, but such rhetoric is increasingly being pushed irrespective of party lines. Indeed, protecting national borders from “others” is now at the forefront of public debate. Migration is exploited as a talking point, to get voters to come out to the polls. Fearmongering about various groups of “others” (people portrayed as not belonging) has become an



Migrants from Colombia at the US-Mexican border

increasingly prevalent message in political discourse. A stark example can be found in the Polish political scene over the past 20 years (with scare tactics ranging from the prospect of higher crime, to refugees, to fear of “gender ideology” and the LGBT+ community), but other countries have also taken a similar route. The threat posed by people on the move is typically found in narratives about borders (being protected from “attacks” and “invasions”), crime and terrorism.

These fears are often exaggerated, not backed up by evidence. Instead, they are fueled using lies or misrepresentations that have little to do with reality. Such misinformation campaigns are aimed at stoking up negative emotions, primarily fear.

But what does not get mentioned in these narratives? The safety of the migrants themselves. When this topic does very rarely turn up in the media, it takes the form of shocking images. One such example was the image of the body of a two-year-old Kurdish boy from Syria, Aylan Kurdi, found on a Greek beach in 2015 – he had drowned in a failed attempt to flee to Europe. Similar incidents also took place along the Polish border with Belarus, with migrants hiding out in the woods, suffering injuries and even dying, as reported by the activist group *Grupa Granica*. Emphasis is rarely placed on the reasons why people decide to flee their homes, on the desperation that drives them to leave places where people suffer harm, or on the journey itself and the related dangers. The latter are largely created by us, the societies of the Global North, through the hands of our elected politicians.

However, narratives that juxtapose “our” safety and security vs. “theirs” – in a nutshell, “us” vs. “them”

– are unnecessary. We can and should bring these two viewpoints together in the spirit of solidarity and shared responsibility for others, and remember that the safety of some people very often affects the safety of others.

## Borders

The process of “protecting” borders takes place on several levels. On the legal level, it involves making it more difficult for citizens of many countries to legally visit the countries of the Global North. It is nearly impossible for them to obtain a visa. But without a visa, they are unable to travel by ship or plane. Unless they have valid travel documents, no one is allowed on board.

On the physical level, it involves erecting fences and walls. Such barriers are increasingly widespread: the Transnational Institute reports that between 1989 and 2018 walls were built along 58 borders, and the reason for building two-thirds of them was the prevention of migration, terrorism, and contraband of goods and human smuggling and trafficking. However, these physical walls, built at the cost of millions of euros, are not an effective barrier. Many people are so desperate that they find ways to overcome these walls. But this comes at the price of numerous injuries: bone fractures from jumping off the walls and cuts caused by barbed or, increasingly, razor wire. Over the past two years, we have observed such incidents on the Polish-Belarusian border.

On the electronic level, it involves installing electronic equipment along both land and sea borders. Sales of such equipment and border protection management services are a gigantic industry worth nearly \$50 billion a year according to the Transnational Institute’s estimates.

These tools are backed up by the actions of the border guard agencies, such as their growing use of violence against migrants. Here, we should ask what forms of violence we can accept as a society. Is shooting migrants one of them? If so, what does such a stance say about us and our values, which we are so proud of?

This elaborate system benefits individuals and organizations that facilitate illegal border crossings. These include both international criminal organizations and individuals. Without their “help,” migrants are often unable to get from their countries of origin to the countries of the Global North. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that trafficking people from Latin American and the Caribbean into the United States alone brings in an average of \$7 billion a year. However, smugglers earn such money only because legal migration channels are closed to these people. Consequently, the societies of the Global North are at least morally responsible

not only for the earnings of criminal organizations, but also for the deaths of migrants. Border security measures prompt migrants to attempt to cross borders in increasingly dangerous places – across deserts, seas, and raging rivers. According to the IOM’s estimates, since 2014, 56,000 people have died trying to cross borders, and two-thirds of those deaths took place *en route* to Europe and the United States.

## Crime

Let us now turn to the relationship between migration and crime. It is quite simply a myth that migrants commit more crimes than local inhabitants. Most studies demonstrate conclusively the opposite – that those who migrate in search of a better life commit far fewer crimes. They are primarily focused on earning money and supporting their families in their countries of origin or settling down in their new countries. Or, to put it another way, they simply do not have the time to commit crimes. Besides, getting caught and convicted of a crime entails serious consequences, which often include deportation. Therefore, engaging in crime means risking the failure of their whole migration project.

Of course, this does not mean that no migrant will ever commit a crime. Such situations do occur among migrants, as they do in every community. However, migrants as a group certainly do not pose a major threat. Many people link certain types of crimes with specific nationalities. Such accounts are most often untrue or largely exaggerated, and they are based on prejudice and stereotypes as opposed to facts.

Rising crime rates are typically seen among the children of migrants born and raised in a new country – a situation that results from the integration fiasco. These children want to be treated in the same way as their peers, but that is not the reality. Their prospects of success are hindered by the prevalence of xenophobic attitudes and the relatively poor financial situation of their parents. They have the same aspirations as their friends, but they cannot fulfill them in a legal way. But does this make them inherently more “criminal”? It does not, if we compare them with other individuals of the same socioeconomic status, but with no migration experience in the family. If truth be told, the responsibility for such behavior on the part of young people with migration backgrounds falls on the host society, which has excluded them and condemned them to a life of poverty, on the scarcity of jobs or the prevalence of low-wage positions, and on the lack of quality education.

The same holds true for the widely discussed French neighborhoods inhabited by people of African descent. Crime rates there are no higher than in other neighborhoods that have similar socioeconomic characteristics and are inhabited by white, ethnically

French people. So why are the police afraid of these places? Because police officers too often misuse force or even resort to violence there, which makes them hated by residents of such neighborhoods. Both sides fear each other, which fuels mutual aggression and the use of violence for trivial reasons. Similar phenomena occur in American ghettos inhabited by black communities.

That said, the fact remains that individuals with migrant backgrounds are overrepresented in many European prisons. Why is this the case, if they don’t actually commit more crimes? This results primarily from how the criminal justice system operates. Such individuals are more likely to be arrested by the police and remanded in custody (they stand out because of their skin color or because they live in bad neighborhoods) and to be sentenced to more severe punishments, including more frequent imprisonment,

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and less likely to be granted parole or released on bail. New types of crimes, ones that no one else commits, are also created to apply to them. Examples include illegal border crossing.

## Terrorism

Lastly, let’s consider the topic of terrorism. As law professor Ilya Somin argues, the alleged link drawn between terrorism and migration results from political manipulation. No data confirm the allegation that an influx of migrants increases the number of terrorist incidents perpetrated by such individuals. This goes both for European countries and for the United States. Instead, we see a very different trend: a growing number of terrorist attacks against migrants, committed by alt-right groups.

A certain relationship between migration and terrorism can be observed – but it is back in the countries that people flee to seek refuge in safer countries, including the EU. Indeed, according to the Global Terrorism Index 2023 study, terrorist attacks occur most frequently in such countries as Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, Iraq, and Nigeria: many nationals of these countries show up at the Polish-Belarusian border and ask for protection in other EU countries. ■

Further reading:

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Somin I., Does the Threat of Terrorism Justify Migration Restrictions?, *Verfassungblog*, <https://verfassungblog.de/os5-migration-restrictions/>

Wacquant L., *Prisons of Poverty*, 2009.