

ŁUKASZ MOLL (ORCID: 0000-0002-2251-9351)

## Mobile Commoning from the Margins to the Fore? Hospitality on the Polish-Belarusian and Polish-Ukrainian Borders (2021–2022)

The article was written as an intervention piece in the midst of the massive escape of war refugees to Poland during the first four weeks of the war in Ukraine (24 February–24 March 2022). It aims to map and discuss the condition of grassroots hospitality (and inhospitality) in Poland between Autumn 2021 and Spring 2022. It was a time of shifting context in terms of policies: from the state of exception, migrant push-backs, and walling the border with Belarus, to the policy of solidarity with war refugees, legitimized humanitarianism and open border with Ukraine. In the course of half a year, the frames of bottom-up hospitality on Eastern borders of Poland changed entirely and abruptly. When a couple of thousands of migrants from the Middle East and beyond were camping in the border zone between Belarus and Poland, unable to claim asylum in the EU, practices of solidarity from the bottom up were barely tolerated by Polish state, if not criminalized and condemned. In these realities, structures of support remained an informal, fugitive, and underground network. But with the Russian attack on Ukraine on 24th February 2022, Poland opened its border for the unprecedented arrival of over two million

people (during first month of the war) and bottom-up solidarity became a massive response of Polish society, which started to organize shelters, transportation, food and medicines. The same politicians and media which were fighting hospitality to migrants — in terms of ‘crimes of solidarity’ — on the border with Belarus, this time welcomed it with enthusiasm and support. The article proposes to view the nascent rise of grassroots hospitality with Ukrainian migrants in terms of ‘mobile commoning’: precarious, makeshift and autonomous practices of solidarity with people on the move. Mobile commoning is considered here as potential basis for a different migration policy in the EU. At the same time, the Polish case is analyzed as an instructive study of the limits of political universalism which are constructed at and by the borders.

**Keywords:** mobile commoning, Polish borders, EU borders, migration governance, refugees, universalism

From Autumn 2021 to Spring 2022, the refugee issue in Poland gained new momentum and it evolved from one extreme to the other. It was triggered with a planned operation and provocation by the Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko, who organized the transit of a couple of thousands of migrants from the Middle East — mostly Iraq, Syria, Iran and Afghanistan, but also places like Cuba, Somalia, Cameroon and Sri Lanka. And it was completely reformulated with the invasion of Russia on Ukraine on 24 February 2022, when over two million people reached Poland during the first two weeks of the war. In the first case, the Polish government responded with harsh border measures and forbade helping migrants who suffered hunger, cold, and beatings. In the second case, it encouraged citizens to manifest radical hospitality to Ukrainians. The difference in the state response is not difficult to explain and this article will discuss it only briefly. Also, the reaction of Polish society to the refugee issue — limited support, provided mostly by activists and some local residents in the case of the humanitarian crisis on the border with Belarus, and full-fledged citizen mobilization after the attack on Ukraine — can be rather easily explained by the different context: geopolitical interests (against Russia and Belarus), national sympathies and cultural closeness (towards Ukrainians), the scale of the crisis (millions of neighbors instead of thousands of people from afar), the reaction of politicians and the media (pro-Ukrainian consensus), the demographic characteristics of Ukrainian refugees (overwhelmingly women and children), and social ties with the more than 1 million Ukrainians who already lived in Poland before the war.

But, for my purposes, what is the most interesting puzzle in the shifting status of grassroots solidarity with migrants which happened just over the course of several months? Why is it the case that ‘the pressure on our borders’, ‘uncontrolled migration’, or ‘the migratory wave’ provoked such different responses in the practices of hospitality and inhospitality to newcomers? In this article, I propose conceptualizing the practices of bottom-up solidarity with people on the move in terms of ‘mobile commoning’. The concept of mobile commoning was introduced in migration studies and applied to some empirical cases in order to explore precarious, makeshift and autonomous practices, institutions and networks of support and solidarity with migrants in the context of the securitization of borders and the inhospitable policies of the state (e.g. English, Grazioli and Martignoni 2019; Sheller 2018; Trimikliniotes, Parsanoglou and Tsianos 2017). Mobile commoning draws our attention to the phenomenon of the ‘socialization’ or ‘communalization’ of politics of hospitality by citizens and in everyday life. It is also infor-

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med by studies of the commons, understood as autonomous structures of self-governance and cooperation functioning beyond the regimes of the private and the public. But in comparison to most commons, which are theorized as communitarian, sedentary structures with clear boundaries, mobile commons are more fluid, elusive and elastic entities, constituted rather by precarious and shifting borders (Varvarousis 2022). As for mobile commoning, what differentiates it from commoning in the (non-mobile) commons, is the openness towards the arriving commoners. This gives mobile commoning the potentiality to overcome political exclusion — maintained by borders — and move towards radical hospitality and political universalism.

At the same time, the Polish case analyzed in the article can be instructive for scholars of commoning because we find in it a very sudden and profound transformation of its meaning, scale and further prospects. The undertaking which — at the very start — was regarded as typical for NGOs, radical activists, and naïve idealists, with its informal, fugitive, and underground character, overnight became the core response of Polish society to the war in Ukraine. Without mobile commoning the Polish state would have been completely unable and unprepared to answer the needs of over two million refugees (and the number keeps rising). This demonstrates the expanding and contagious potential of mobile commoning. On the other hand, we will see that mobile commoning, even in the exceptional conditions of war in the neighboring country, didn't result in all limits to hospitality and political universalism being overcome. Not all people on the move were welcomed with the same openness, and some subjectivities remained harshly excluded from the reach of mobile commoning. Thus the Polish case provides important material for analysis of the limits of bottom-up universality towards migrants.

The case is worth reflecting on also because we were unable to predict what would happen to mobile commoning in next weeks or months. Would it only be a short-lived carnivalesque mobilization after which the state would take full responsibility? Or would it contribute to a more lasting culture of hospitality? Which institutionalized forms could this culture gain in the near future? Will it be formalized and bureaucratized? How long could it last? It is far too early to answer these questions, so the article will limit itself to a more modest aim: I want to map the shift of status of mobile commoning which is happening in Poland at the moment of writing (the end of March 2022). I believe that such up-to-date intervention can contribute to the general problem: could mobile commoning re-direct the EU's migration policy in a more hospitable direction? What can we learn from the Polish case?

## Enclosures of commonality: borders and the production of a migrant's illegality

Taking place alongside the evacuation of US troops from Afghanistan — in summer 2021 — the appearance of migrants from Asia and Africa on the Polish-Belarusian border provoked concerns about a possible 'wave' of refugees caused by the transition of power to the Taliban. The humanitarian crisis on the external borders of the EU with Belarus started even earlier in the Baltic countries: the rise of the 'illegal' border crossing was noted in Lithuania already in June, then the situation repeated itself in Latvia and Poland in August. As a result, thousands of migrants became caught in-between the instrumental and cynical policy of Lukashenko, which pushed them outside to the EU without permission to turn back and stay in Belarus, and the stubborn and hardline border policies of the EU, which was determined to avoid a similar 'refugee wave' to the 'migrant crisis' of 2015. The Polish Border Guard estimated that almost forty thousand migrants tried to cross the border from Belarus 'illegally' in 2021, in comparison with only 129 attempts in 2020 (Szczepańska 2022). The actual number of 'trespassers' had to be much higher because many migrants were not noted by the guards. The situation gained high public coverage from the Polish media in August 2021, when a group of migrants became stuck in no man's land near Usnarz Górny village, on the border with Belarus. Around sixty people stayed there — in a limbo between two countries, watched by guards from both sides of the border — for a couple of weeks, suffering from inhumane conditions.

The terms of political dispute over migrants stuck at the border were organized around the controversy: who is a legitimate refugee and what kind of border crossing is legal? My initial assumption is different. Instead of asking about legal and illegal ways of cross the border, I am interested in the role that a border itself plays — materially, discursively, symbolically — in producing legality and illegality (De Genova 2004; Üstübcü 2018, 47-82), including the status of the refugee. A border will be seen here as a biopolitical device that differentiates between the welcomed and unwelcomed movement of people, but which is at the same time contested and driven into crisis by the mobility of these people (Vaughan-Williams 2009). The fragile status of a border makes hospitality a shifting terrain — giving and retrieving it in exclusive and changing ways. Thus the practices of mobile commoning — which will be subsequently analyzed — should be seen as a bottom-up response to the appearance of the people on the move who were produced by border

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regimes as ‘illegals’, and whose rights to claim rights — e.g. the right to claim refugee status — were quite literally and physically denied in the European Union. Living as ‘illegalized’ denizens, wannabe-refugees or expelled abjects haunting the political community, these excluded people manage to transgress the limits of European universalism from below, through mobile commoning (Tazzioli and Walters 2022). If a border acts as the instrument of enclosures — of depriving the migrant of his/her embeddedness in commonality — then mobile commoning might be regarded as a counter-process of reclaiming the commons, even if in a temporary and unsteady way.

Enclosures of Europe: EUropeanization as the securitization of borders

In order to map the reasons behind the recent situation on the Polish-Belarusian border, we have to begin with its geopolitical context. Until 2021, Poland and Baltic States had not been directly involved in the higher arrivals of refugees, as was the case with the Southern bordering member states (Greece, Italy, Spain) or those Central-Eastern European countries which were located on the ‘Balkan route’ from Turkey to Western Europe (as in the case of Hungary or Austria). According to data from Eurostat (2022), after 2015 the number of asylum applications in Poland decreased and remained lower and stable until 2020 (10,255 in 2015, 9780 in 2016, 3005 in 2017, 2405 in 2018, 2765 in 2019, and 1510 in 2020). In 2021 the sum of applications rose significantly to 7700 cases, but most claimants did not come from the group of migrants who were involved in transit through Belarus. Almost 2300 applicants were Belarusians who sought to escape from post-electoral repressions in their homeland. Then 1800 Afghans applied as well, but more than half of them were collaborators of the Polish army and embassy evacuated from Afghanistan by planes with the help of the Polish state. The data from the official statement (Urząd do Spraw Cudzoziemców 2022) confirm indirectly that Poland was very reluctant to let the clandestine migrants to even submit their applications. What’s more, apart from Belarusians (95.3% positive decisions) and Afghans-collaborators (58% positive), people from other countries were largely dismissed during asylum procedures (86% negative decisions in the case of Iraqis, 68.6% in the case of Russians).

Even if the incoming of migrants between 2015 and 2020 wasn’t a big concern, the circulating images and public panics from the ‘sum-

mer of migration' of 2015, and member states' disputes around the relocation of refugees according to institutional quotas, also had their consequences for framing the refugee issue in Poland. Already the election campaign in Summer-Autumn 2015 was influenced by the fear of the mass of Muslim migrants who were depicted as a threat to Poland's security, economy, culture and identity. In May 2015, only 21% of Poles were against hosting refugees from war regions, then — after the election campaign won by the right-wing parties — this number rose to 52% in December 2016, and in the case of refugees from the Middle East and Africa to 74% in April 2017 (Cywiński, Katner and Ziółkowski 2019, 7-8). After the formation of a new government by the Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), Polish 'skepticism' about opening borders for refugees and even undisguised Islamophobia became part of the public media narratives (Bobako 2017), culminating in the figures of refugee-stranger, refugee-terrorist, refugee-Islamist (Bielecka-Prus 2018; Sydow 2016; Tymińska 2020). No wonder that stories — often fake ones — about refugees who were responsible for terrorist attacks in Europe, Sharia zones in Western cities, or mass rapes of women in public spaces, made a large part of Polish society basically insensitive to the fate of refugees, even from countries like Syria, from which people had to flee because of destroyed cities and a threat from ISIS forces. The theme of migration became 'securitized', presented in terms of a big threat, and the migrants themselves were otherized, racialized and demonized both by the narratives of the ruling party and the main part of the opposition — i.e. the liberal camp (Legut and Pędziwiatr 2018).

It is crucial to frame this stance of Polish society not in terms of some particular or cultural eccentricity. Of course, it would be unwise to completely forget about geopolitics (the EU's external border with Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia), cultural myths (*antemurale christianitis*, or the bulwark of Christian Europe; Tazbir 2017), or history (recent accession to the EU with its desire to become Westernized and de-Orientalized; Grzymiski 2016). But the situation in Poland has to be analyzed together with the EU-ropean dimension. The limitations in claims to asylum, overflowing refugee camps, rigid and fanciful Dublin regulations on the 'first secure country', or dramatic scenes near the border fences, with Frontex's patrols or during deportations — these snapshots from the 'migrant crisis' are the by-products of EU's policies. And their circulation in the member states contributed to the paradox of ontological border (in)security discussed by Nick Vaughan-Williams (2021): policies that were supposed to give citizens the sense that the

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government has the capacity to control borders provoked even more anxieties and fears, by suggesting that the sovereignty of the state is undermined by 'illegal' border crossings and turbulent scenes. The Polish government consciously referred to the discourse of 'defending Europe'. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki frequently repeated — also in English messages addressed to European partners — that

Europe, our common home, is in danger. [...] For centuries, Poland has guarded our common home when it was needed. [...] No matter where we live, we all know that when someone tries to break into your home, you defend it. This principle applies also to national borders, the borders of the European Union and NATO. Let us stand together, let us defend Europe (Rzeczpospolita 2021a).

The Polish government had a clear aim to draw lessons from the short-comings (real or imaginary) of Western countries which were accused by Polish politicians of naivety, weak humanitarianism, and inability to provide security for its citizens. A good example is a comment by the Polish Minister of National Defense, Mariusz Błaszczak:

As early as 2015, the PiS government was talking about the possible results of uncontrolled migration. The open-door policy has led to acts of terror in Western Europe. I consistently talked about it on the EU forum when I was still the Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration. I was rather bitterly satisfied that the EU came round after many months. They agreed with us. Currently, Poland is defending not only its territory against another wave of emigration. We also defend the entire territory of the European Union, remembering that for migrants we are only a transit country en route to Germany and then on to the west of Europe (Wprost 2021).

Błaszczak added to this that the violent acts from the border will appear in Polish cities if the country fails to defend its territory. The tough stance on Lukashenko's provocation was presented as the only way to stop it, to avoid bigger numbers of 'illegal' migration from Belarus in the near future. This tough stance included blocking the legal possibilities for claiming asylum in Poland. The migrants were regarded as a 'living weapon' of the Belarusian ruler, used by him as an act of revenge on the EU and Poland for their criticism of rigged presidential elections in 2020, and for their support of the Belarusian opposition with the policy of sanctions against Lukashenko's regime.



## Hostipitable border: between securitization and humanitarianism

Government reports and media stories showed that Belarusian secret services organized a transfer grid of migrants to Belarus by promising them the legal possibility to enter the EU. The aim of ‘operation Floodgate’ (Polskieradio24.pl 2021) — as it was supposedly called by the Belarusian secret services — was to destabilize the EU, uncover the non-humanitarian logic of its border policies once more, and create conditions for a successful campaign of disinformation in the Western media. Not all people who were transferred to Belarus came from regions torn by war and, clearly, not all of them faced in their countries of origin the persecution which would legitimize their claims for asylum. What’s more, Polish politicians argued that these people should apply for it in Belarus, which was the first safe country on their route. “Belarus is a signatory to the Refugee Convention [1951 Refugee Geneva Convention]”, said Morawiecki, “therefore, those who would like to declare their status must declare it in accordance with international law on the territory of Belarus” (Sobczak 2021). These arguments were manipulative, because the Geneva Convention does not state that it is the responsibility of migrants to claim asylum in the first safe country, but it was the responsibility of Poland to abide by the non-refoulement principle and give migrants the possibility to apply for protection. The Polish Prime Minister also forgot that the European Court of Human Rights had ruled in July 2021 — directly before the crisis — that Belarus is not a safe country for refugees, because it lacks a proper system of granting asylum (Górczyńska 2021, 11).

All these security and legal arguments were put forward not only to prevent migrants from accessing to the right of claiming asylum in Poland but also to justify the inhumane treatment of these people: illegal push-backs to Belarus (where the migrants were beaten by Belarusian border guards), refusal of medical assistance, and denial of access of journalists and NGOs activists to the border zone under the policy of the state of exception. On 2nd September Polish President Andrzej Duda announced the introduction of the state of exception in the border zone with Belarus (formally it lasted until 30th November, but in practice the securitization remained in force after that date). The emergency measures prohibited organizing public assemblies and mass events, entering the zone from outside (except residents and laborers), or conducting media relations. These measures were adopted in order to make the support of migrant crossing much more uncomfortable, to make

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the operations of border guards, army and police much easier, and to make the government's handling of the crisis more resistant to critique from the side of media and civil society. The only possible assistance to migrants was from residents of the border zone and informal activist groups supported by a couple of opposition MPs who risked fines for helping in 'illegal' border crossing, facilitating 'illegal' stays in the country, or even smuggling people — which was in accordance with the wider tendency to criminalize solidarity towards migrants in the EU (Amnesty International 2020). On the other hand, humanitarian acts could be legally justified as saving life and health in a state of necessity (Nazaruk and Pacewicz 2021). The tension between the logics of securitization and humanitarianism created a grey zone of legal ambiguity. This grey zone was occupied by practices of mobile commoning — organizing rescue interventions, giving shelter, preparing transit — which had to remain in the shadows.

The assistance to clandestine migrants took place under conditions of public fear and support for securitization. Apparently, the activists had no majority support for their actions. For example, two surveys conducted in October 2021 showed that more than 70% of Poles were against receiving migrants from the Belarusian border (77% responded with "no" when asked if Poland should give asylum to all the people who cross the border 'illegally'; 72% were against giving refuge to migrants coming from Belarus [Bodalska 2021]). The peak of the crisis was reached in November when Belarusian secret services forced thousands of migrants to storm the border and Poland responded with huge mobilization of the military, border guards and police to fight them off. In the meantime, the Polish government decided to start the construction of a 5.5 metre border fence with cameras, sensors, and barbed wire. In the survey conducted in the middle of November — at the height of confrontation on the border — 57% of respondents declared their support for the fence, with only 23% being against it (Rzeczpospolita 2021b).

On the other hand, also in October 2021 the majority of the public declared that they support the idea allowing humanitarian organizations (60%) and journalists (51%) access to the border (Rzeczpospolita 2021c). The shanty camps of migrants, their massive storming of border fences, and the cynical attitude of Lukashenko's regime were part of a media-tized 'border spectacle' (De Genova 2002) which legitimizes — by images and manufactured emotionality — the protective actions of the sovereign power and contributes to permanent marginalization and illegalization of migrants after their arrival in the recipient country. But the reports on people dying from cold, hunger and thirst, deprived of

medicines, lost in the forests, pushed-back to Belarus where they suffered beating from the border guards and were forced to cross the border once again, countered the logic of securitization with humanitarian instincts and gave rise to concern about the ruthless position of the Polish government and the hypocrisy of the EU's discourse on human rights and freedom of movement.

That's why the support for sending back 'illegal' migrants and building border fences co-existed in Poland with general approval of human rights activists and local residents helping migrants in Polish forests: in December 2021 as many as 72% respondents declared their support for such actions (Ambroziak 2022). Up to 33% expressed 'definite support' for it, with only 12% being 'definitely against'. Although the humanitarian attitude largely prevailed in opposition voters (over 90% were positive) — probably coinciding with their criticism of the government in general — also the majority of supporters of the ruling party were in favor of helping migrants in need (52% were supportive, 37% were against). Interestingly, among the voters of the far-right and openly Islamophobic Confederation (Konfederacja) the supporters of humanitarian activism prevailed over its opponents (47% vs. 45%). How to explain this dual stance: the militarization of the border zone with the approval of saving life? As a paradox? As contradiction? As remorse? As double morality? Or shameless cynicism? We can adhere to the view expressed by Nick Vaughan-Williams (2015) in his work on the 'biopolitical character' of the EU's border regime, which struggles to be both about saving human life and guaranteeing security against 'illegal' migration. The structural limitations of the EU's migration policy and system of asylum provoke paradoxes of 'hostipitality' (Derrida 2000a) — hospitality mixed with hostility — in which migrants become either dangerous and vicious intruders who we have to stop and/or helpless refugees who we need to save (from ourselves and our border policies). We feel that we should help, not *despite* the fact we support securitization of borders, but — however ridiculous it might sound — we feel that we should help *because* we support the securitization of borders. This paradox of the securitization of borders was recently noted in the complex research on citizens' narratives on Europe's 'migration crisis': the support for border enforcement often goes hand in hand with humanitarian impulses and remorse (Vaughan-Williams 2021).

The effects of such a dual stance on migration are clear: the hardline stance of the Polish government contributed to more 'illegal' border crossings and dangerous passages of tired and neglected migrants deprived of water, food, shelter, heating, and medicines, and it created

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a demand for humanitarian action which — in turn — was officially condemned, but in practice to some extent tolerated. This split between “defending your country” and “saving lives” was also visible in the attitudes of residents of the border zone and public functionaries, according to the sociologists Przemysław Sadura and Sylwia Urbańska (2021), who conducted fieldwork during the crisis.

But the social costs paid by migrants because of the politics of the state of emergency were very high. It seems that since the vast majority of migrants planned to reach Western Europe, they were not interested in claiming asylum in Poland (even if it were possible for them). In this way, their journeys became more desperate and riskier. Those migrants who were unable to cross the border zone were turned back to Belarus and had to start their efforts once again. According to the report prepared by Grupa Granica (Border Group) (2021) — a coalition of migrant activists’ organizations from Poland, which was published in December 2021, migrants experienced regular violence both from Belarusian border guards (e.g. beatings, harassment, forced border crossings) and their Polish counterparts (e.g. push-backs, ignoring of asylum claims, rejection of medical support). The activists stated that most people on the move came from regions plagued by military violence and human rights violations, which made their asylum claims legitimate for processing in the EU countries. But the possibilities for legal migration to the EU are so limited — and the asylum system is so inhospitable for refugees — that it makes it possible for the Belarusian government to organize the transit and destabilize EU-ropo politically by means of the migrant issue. At the same time, Poland tried to legalize push-backs. In October 2021, the Polish Sejm adopted the so-called Removal act (*Amending the act on foreigners and certain other acts*, passed in Sejm on October 14, 2021). The new law was negatively reviewed by institutions such as *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights*, and was criticized by human rights organizations. But in the EU the Polish ‘Removal act’ — though conflicting with the European law — was acknowledged with understanding, showing that it served as a test site for the further reform of the asylum system in the EU (Mikulska 2021).

Fugitive commoning: against the ‘crime of solidarity’

The social consequences for migrants were disastrous. According to the report by Grupa Granica (2021), 5370 people on the move made con-

tact with activists from the coalition — they asked for food, water, medicines, warm clothes, shelter, and help with legal proceedings. The number does not include support provided by independent activists and local residents. Eight migrants were found dead on the Polish side of the border (until November 12), and media stories regularly reported on desperate, hungry, sick and frozen people who needed help. From the data presented by Polish Border Guard, we know that from August to November 1st there were over 28,500 “attempts to cross the border illegally” from Belarus. The reports mentioned also almost 28,000 “thwarted attempts to cross the border illegally” (1400 people were detained). The relation between the two numbers — illegal crossings and thwarted illegal crossings — is unclear, so we don’t know exactly how many people were noticed by border guards during the crisis. What we know for sure is that restrictive border measures were not fully effective because almost 9000 people tried to cross the Polish-German border ‘illegally’ in 2021, and over 5000 attempted to do so in October alone. We will never know how many people successfully reached Western Europe. These migrants became imperceptible, staying off the radar. Those who were detained remain in closed Border Guard’s centers and were kept under constant supervision. The Polish Ombudsman described the humanitarian conditions in these centers as overcrowded, unsafe, and militarized, which contributed to mutinies and hunger strikes by the migrant-detainees (Rozbrat 2022). The acts of solidarity and publicizing the abuses and ill-treatment of these people might also be considered as manifestations of mobile commoning, or ‘communities in transit’ (Wheatley and Gomberg-Muñoz 2017) — overcoming the fenced, enclosed exclusion by exposing the struggle of detainees.

Although the state of exception mobilized unprecedented security measures, and although this policy was supported both by the majority of the Polish population and by the partners from EU, the networks of support from the bottom up were quite successful in giving migrants basic humanitarian help and sustaining their efforts to travel to Western Europe. Even the criminalization of solidarity was not enough to break the grassroots organizing for migrants and to take back the support of the public for the humanitarian actions of citizens.

These forms of transnational solidarity with people on the move, being a bottom-up alternative to restrictive EU migration policies, were conceptualized by critical migration scholars and activists as ‘mobile commons’ and ‘mobile commoning’. It seems that three characteristics make mobile commons distinctive phenomena in comparison with traditional (or im-mobile) commons such as collectively governed fishe-

Mobile commoning seeks to open and transgress communitarian or citizenship loyalties in order to make place for those who live as commoners without community — as dispossessed, destitute, and unbelonging.

ries, forests or factories (Ostrom 2015). Firstly, mobile commons are co-created and co-sustained by subversive, unruly mobilities whose practices — or mobile commoning — remain elusive, fugitive, and hidden from the governmental gaze. That is why not only clandestine migrants but also other excluded or persecuted groups — such as maroons (Besson 2007), escaped slaves (Roane 2017), indigenous people (Coulthard 2014), squatters (Squatting Europe Kollektive 2014), or lumpenproletarians (Linebaugh and Rediker 2002) — are often theorized as mobile commoners. All those groups that are forced to live in the shadows or under the deck traditionally contributed to the creation of mobile commons. Secondly, mobile commons remain in tension with all the discourses and practices that are focused on reproducing the community understood as a bordered or enclosed entity. Mobile commoning seeks to open and transgress communitarian or citizenship loyalties in order to make place for those who live as commoners without community — as dispossessed, destitute, and unbelonging (Jørgensen and Makrygianni 2020; Nordling, Sager and Söderman 2017). Stavros Stavrides (2016, 41–44) describes the migrant structures of solidarity as the ‘expanding commoning’ which remains ready to include newcomers and constantly negotiate the terms of co-living. And thirdly, mobile commoning has the constitutive potential to create new political subjectivities and ignite new radical struggles, going beyond existing political loyalties and lines of division. This capacity is most fully described by the followers of the ‘autonomy of migration’ thesis who see in migration the social movement of overcoming border regimes and building new transnational fields of struggle (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013). Mobile commons are understood here as the constituent power for hospitable Europe generated by frenetic movements in the everyday life of migrants.

It seems that all three aspects of mobile commoning were confirmed during the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. Irrespective of its achievements and determination, practices of mobile commoning remained informal and fugitive. They were barely tolerated by the state, facing growing repression, i.e. arrests for organizing ‘illegal’ border-crossings and search of personal belongings (Rumieńczyk 2022). In these conditions, the activists had to act as the underground current of solidarity in the cracks of border controls and surveillance. Their work operated at the threshold of legality and illegality. In the face of lack of recognition and inclusion by the discourse of humanitarianism, mobile commoning was focused on building social relations between people on the move and their advocates — in the margins of both the national and EU-

-ropean community. When it is almost impossible to become EU-ropean on legal and official terms, when it becomes hard to even be recognized as human, mobile commoning contributes to the subversive attachment of commoners in the in-between zone: at the edges of legality and illegality, visibility and invisibility, inclusion and exclusion. Álvaro Ramírez March (2022) speaks here of the ‘excess of solidarity’, generated by mobile commons, which goes beyond humanitarian affection towards more universal and radical forms of politics which challenge the divisions between us and them, Europe and non-Europe, or citizen and human/refugee. Also, Sandro Mezzadra (2020) points out that the violence and stubbornness of border regimes contribute to disappointments with the discourse of human rights, and then brings migrant activism to more abolitionist positions which prioritize freedom of movement as a political stake in the struggle. And finally, in a similar way to the structures of mobile commoning already noted by scholars from other bordering countries, migrants and activists in Poland were contributing to the alternative vanishing counter-cartography of the EU (Tazzioli 2020): a network of temporary shelters, gatherings and crossings, giving people on the move the possibility to enter and wander the political space of the EU. It was an ‘alternative Europe’, a Europe in the making from below or even from the underground structures of liberation, conceptualized by Harney and Moten (2013) as ‘undercommons’.

But the recent situation in Poland also hint at a different sort of mobile commoning. Not anymore liminal and latent, but rather fundamental for overcoming a much bigger migrant challenge which started in February 2022 with the war in Ukraine. The same practices which were marginal, oppositional and criminalized during the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, became — at least for now — the basis for the Polish response to the Ukrainian fate. What might happen when mobile commoning becomes a universal phenomenon, legalized and even propagated by the authorities? It is worth following the Polish case to analyze the prospects of mobile commoning for the EU’s dysfunctional policies.

“There’s no border between Ukraine and Poland”:  
universal commoning?

The term ‘refugee’, which had been demonized from the time of the migrant crisis in 2015 and then had been linked to events at the Polish-Belarusian border in the summer of 2021, gained positive connotations

very rapidly with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The same politicians and media who created the politics of fear on account of Muslim/Asian refugees, now are eager to support Ukrainian refugees. The massive influx of victims of war — mostly women and children — found the Polish government unprepared for the scale of the refugee crisis. Hitherto, in the face of migration from the Middle East and non-European countries, the authorities had refused to build welcome centers, hotspots, and other humanitarian infrastructure — they preferred to construct border fences instead. As a result, with refugee centers already overcrowded with migrants from Belarus, and with the lack of experience in dealing with humanitarian support, the only rescue for the government came from below — from civic society and ordinary people who reacted to the war with impressive acts of hospitality. The Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, announced in his grateful address to Poland that in practice there is no real border between Poland and Ukraine anymore (Gazeta-prawna.pl 2022).

In direct response to the start of war in Ukraine — at the end of February 2022 — as many as 90% of respondents were positive about hosting refugees from Ukraine. 60% were of the opinion that all Ukrainians in need should be welcomed. When asked about concrete numbers, 35% expected millions of Ukrainians to come and 31% — hundreds of thousands (Rynek Zdrowia 2022). A friendly stance is visible also in the practical attitude of Polish society. Poles — together with Ukrainians who already lived here before the war — take refugees into their own homes, travel to the border to offer free transport, hand out food, medicines, and cleaning products, volunteer at railroad stations, and manifest their support for Ukrainian people in public spaces and workplaces. Previously stalwart anti-refugee politicians and public figures now are grateful to ordinary Poles for their generosity. The fact that Poles host refugees not in camps — as in the Western countries — but under their own roof, is stressed by politicians, time and time again, as proof of high moral standards and authentic solidarity with their Eastern neighbors. For example, the right-wing president of the country, Andrzej Duda, during his recent visit to Turkey on March 16th, praised his compatriots for providing domestic hospitality to Ukrainians. Simultaneously, Duda — who is an opponent of receiving refugees from the Middle East — thanked Turkey for giving shelter to millions of refugees from Syria — the same people which Duda didn't want to host in Poland (Pap.pl 2022).

An even more 'miraculous change' of stance towards refugees can be noted in the coverage of public television — TVP — which is famous



for its pro-government orientation. TVP repeatedly delivered biased, propagandist materials against refugees. They were depicted as dangerous, criminal thieves, rapists and terrorists who endanger Poland's security, culture and economy. For example, as recently as October 2021 — during clashes with Belarus — TVP broadcast a report stating that 'Illegal migrants paralyze Europe', in which gunshots and acts of terrorism were presented as an everyday reality in Western cities. As 'proof' of this phenomenon the state television channel used... a fragment from Netflix's TV series *Snabba Cash* (Jakubowski 2021). A little earlier, in September, TVP claimed that there are clues that terrorists were hiding among migrants from Belarus. During a public conference on the subject the Minister of the Interior and Administration, Mariusz Kamiński, showed a video that was supposed to have been found on the telephone of one of the migrants. According to the minister, it presented sexual intercourse between a migrant and a cow. 'He raped a cow and wanted to come to Poland? Details on migrants at the border' — informed TVP, clearly appealing to the racist stereotype of the Muslim-zoophile. In fact, the video was quickly recognized as old material which was accessible on the internet (and what's more, the alleged 'cow' was — in reality — a mare) (Sitnicka 2021). But since February 2022 the same TVP has used the word 'refugee' in the radically opposite sense. Now, these people need our help, the high numbers of people hosted in Poland are presented with national pride, and all the facilities and benefits for Ukrainians are regarded as acts of justice.

The over two million Ukrainians received by Polish society within the first month of the war are not even — strictly speaking, from the legal point of view — refugees. They were admitted on the basis of special act passed by Polish parliament — 'On the help to Ukrainian citizens in connection with an armed conflict in the territory of that country' (issued on March 12th, but in legal force from February 24th, the start of the invasion). The new law gave Ukrainian citizens — but only to those who came to Poland directly from the territory of Ukraine after February 24th — the possibility staying legally, access to labor market, education, health care, and other public services. No wonder that, given the creation of new status for Ukrainians escaping the armed conflict to Poland, on March 7th — two weeks after the beginning of the war — the Office for Foreigners declared that there were merely 450 asylum claims from Ukrainians. In the article which gave this information to the public, the expert on refugee policy stated that the Polish system of asylum is capable of processing between 5000 and 8000 asylum requests during a year, which is ridiculously low efficiency in com-

parison with the actual demands (Kacprzak 2022). Thus, although Ukrainians who escape from the war zone are refugees in the sociological meaning of this term, they don't have formal refugee status from the perspective of international law.

A comparison between the Belarusian and Ukrainian cases is instructive. In the case of the former, the right to claim asylum was massively refused by Polish authorities — these people were turned back and acts of everyday solidarity were criminalized. In the case of the latter, the right to claim asylum is regarded as not obligatory in order to seek hospitality in Poland and — in practice — as impossible for technical consideration by officials. The Polish government prefers to welcome Ukrainian refugees and help them not as refugees, but as Ukrainians, neighbors, citizens, allies etc. This symptomatic distinction between 'brothers' and 'the others' appeared in President's Duda speech at the Polish-Ukrainian border crossing:

In recent days, we have received refugees from Ukraine who come from 170 countries around the world. (...) As president, I would like to thank all those who offer their help on a daily basis to the newcomers, to our brothers from Ukraine, *but also* to all others who come to us, fleeing the war, from death, from wounds, from fear (Rzeczpospolita 2022d).

And this time acts of solidarity are encouraged, praised and rewarded by the authorities. It seems that mobile commoning ceased to be a fugitive activity. Now it constitutes the essential approach to supporting Ukrainians.

It has to be acknowledged that public assistance followed civic mobilization. A raft of supportive migrant policies was adopted: the right to legal stay for Ukrainian citizens for 18 months, and during the stay they will have free access to the labor market, public education, and health care, a one-time allowance for newcomers, and monthly child benefits (Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji 2022). The government also guaranteed subsidies for households who give shelter to refugees for sixty days. But what is crucial here is that the recipients of these policies are not refugees in general, but only Ukrainian citizens who crossed the Ukrainian-Polish border after February 24th. This limitation should make us aware that even now the impressive scale of mobile commoning in Poland — and its assistance by the government — is far from universal.

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## The limits of hospitality: differential commoning

Three examples should be enough to demonstrate the limits of the universality which remain at play here. Firstly, war refugees who fled to Poland from Ukraine, but who are not Ukrainian citizens, are deprived of the rights which were offered to Polish neighbors. It is estimated that around 120-130 thousand war refugees from Ukraine are non-Ukrainians (6% of the whole) (Chrzczonowicz 2022b). The lack of a border, celebrated by president Zelenskyy, might be a reality for Ukrainians, but not for all refugees escaping the war in Ukraine. We see here the phenomenon of the 'polysemy of borders', which means that borders are experienced differently by people of different statuses (Balibar 2022). People who lived in Ukraine as migrants, foreign students, and even Ukrainians who came to Poland before February 24th or who first crossed the border with other neighboring countries and only then traveled to Poland, are not recognized as 'legitimate' recipients of solidarity (Wandas 2022). This limit is strengthened by the mechanism of the 'racialization of borders' (Tazzioli 2021) in the case of people whose appearance or cultural identity seems, "at first glance", to be non-Ukrainian. The everyday racism was noted by the media even among humanitarian activities at the border crossing with Ukraine: the needs of people of color were neglected, they were not recognized as 'authentic' refugees, and the nationalists organized patrols against them (Boczek 2022). The same barriers to solidarity that were at work in the case of the Belarusian crisis and the same prejudices and stereotypes reemerged in a different context. On the other hand, a recent survey showed that 67% of Polish respondents are against the differentiation of refugees based on origin (Chrzczonowicz 2022b).

Secondly, we would be mistaken if we diagnosed the current situation in terms of a shift from fugitive mobile commoning (in 2021 on the Belarusian border) to the universal one (in 2022 on the Ukrainian border). The crisis on the Belarusian border might be less significant than it was a couple of months ago, but it is far from over. People still try to enter Poland there, and their situation is not any better than the previous year. On the contrary, we might expect that the dramatic challenge posed by the numbers of Ukrainians coming to Poland and the rising political tensions between Poland/EU and Belarus/Russia will make their situation even worse than before. We can speak here of double standards in the treatment of refugees (Chrzczonowicz 2022) and even of 'differential commoning' when the feeling of commonness with some categories of people co-exists with exclusion of other subjectivities as uncommon and

strange, resulting in limitations being imposed on the scope of commoning. What needs to be underlined here is that sometimes this feeling of commonness can transgress ‘cultural differences’ and discourses of exclusion (such as Islamophobia). A good manifestation of this phenomenon can be found in the Polish stance towards Chechens. In the 1990s, during the first war between Russia and Chechnya, the public opinion clearly sympathized with the fate Chechens as the victims of Russian imperialism, seeing their struggle for national liberation as echoing Polish history. At that time, Poland became a hospitable country for refugees from Chechnya, giving asylum to tens of thousands people, despite their Muslim confession. But following the internationally significant terrorist attacks by Islamist terrorists in 2000–2002, the acceptance for giving hospitality to Chechens began to wane, and prepared the ground for anti-Islamic moral panic (Boćkowski 2020). Thus, differential commoning testifies to its ‘hostipitable’ character: the inclusion and hospitality of one category of the people may co-exist with the exclusion and hostility towards the Other. What’s more, the deepening of social bonds with the guest is filled with some positive meaning of attachment and affiliation. If the newcomer fails to demonstrate that he/she deserves to be treated as our guest, then the barriers of solidarity might be even higher, provoking hostility towards the ‘otherized’ stranger.

And finally, the difference between fugitive and universal mobile commoning is far from obvious in the case of solidarity with Ukrainians. The fact that this time commoning is supported by the government does not change the fact that it is still very much a bottom-up and fragile phenomenon with an uncertain future. We cannot know how long, to what extent and by which forms mobile commoning with Ukrainians will be supported in the future. It depends on the current interests of the state and the situation in which the cooperation between citizens and politicians will end up is not hard to imagine. The type of hospitality offered to Ukrainians can be conceptualized — following Derrida (2000b) — as ‘conditional’ one, that is, a hospitality which is restricted to some categories of the (domesticated) Other and limited by the interests of the welcoming state. These interests — in the case of the war in Ukraine — are clearly visible. Allies such as Poland use the conflict and the fate of war refugees to gain new guarantees of security from NATO and especially the USA, to weaken the ties between the West and Russia, or rise to prominence on the international stage. Thus, the *raison d’être* of the state and the motives for commoning from the bottom-up are not necessarily in agreement. Another possible divergence between the two is related to practical concerns. The coordination of commoning

by the public sector is by definition limited — this phenomenon can flourish as long as there is enough civic enthusiasm and capacity to organize it. In her study on care commoning in radical Spanish municipalities, Manuela Zechner (2021) showed that even in the case of progressivist politicians it is very challenging to find a common ground between the point of view of the public sector and the perspectives of commoners. The logic of the state is simply to a large extent irreconcilable with the logic of social movements' experimentations. We might even look at commoning in a more skeptical and suspicious way — as another form of the neoliberal retreat of the state and privatization of public responsibility in the hands of ordinary people. In this case, crucial questions are raised: how long will Poles be eager and able to host Ukrainians in their own homes? What public assistance can prolong grassroots hospitality? Are refugee camps the unavoidable scenario that will appear on the stage after the initial phase of domestic solidarity? It's hard to predict. But it seems that even in the unique conditions of (more) universal commoning, its character remains to a high degree fugitive and autonomous.

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Conclusion: what prospects for mobile commoning?

The events in Poland between the summer of 2021 and spring 2022 provide a valuable case for analysing prospects of mobile commoning in the context of the migration issue in EU-rop. In Poland, the activities which were normally regarded as marginal and subversive became domesticated and normalized — if only for a while — with the beginning of the war in Ukraine and an unprecedented flow of refugees. But even then mobile commoning remains the set of practices that take place mostly in the everyday life, revolutionizing social relations between both hosts and guests. As it was theorized by Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos (2008), mobile commoning blurs and goes beyond stable categories of representation, such as Us and Them, citizens and migrants, Europeans and non-Europeans. The material social fabric in which people weave their social belonging in an elastic and precarious way seems to exceed juridical categories like refugee or citizen which — in the face of massive migration challenge — become inoperative.

But at the same time, the Polish case troubles the overtly optimistic view of mobile commoning as a phenomenon that almost necessarily and mechanically transcends all particular identities and loyalties — as in the well-known counter-empire thesis by Hardt and Negri (2000).

As the mobilization for Ukrainians demonstrates, the much-celebrated molecular excess of solidarity is certainly there (Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, and Tsianos 2015), but it is not free of some visible and troubling limits. Instead of truly universal commoning in which singularities co-operate in an undisturbed way, what we have is rather a ‘differential commoning’, where ‘individual commoners engage with shared resources and each other in differing ways and to varying degrees’ (Noterman 2016). Being a commoner in one dimension and with some people is not necessarily in contradiction with refusal to be a commoner in something else and with somebody else. Thus, the mechanisms of differential inclusion — which are typical for contemporary borders (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) — are reproduced in the realm of instituting the common. We see it in the drastically opposite treatment of migrants from Ukraine and Belarus, and the essentialist or even racialized depiction of ‘fake refugees’ from Asia and Africa.

The described situation is also a good example of flawed humanitarian discourses on migration. Approaching the migrant as a helpless victim, bare life, or — simply — a human, in practice gives him/her a little protection from inhumane treatment. Following political philosophers like Giorgio Agamben (1998), Jacques Rancière (2014), or Alain Badiou (2020), we could say that the depoliticized ‘human’ or the otherized ‘Other’ is not an obvious subject for the politics of universality (Moll 2021). That’s why humanitarianism is criticized by critical migration scholars as an apolitical or even anti-political strategy which makes it almost impossible to regard migrants, not in terms of paternalistic concern, but with authentic solidarity, as your brother/sister, comrade, or commoner (Benhabib 2014; De Genova, Garelli and Tazzioli 2018; Fassin 2012). The discourse of humanitarianism offers the EU a convenient alibi for the policies of securitization — protecting borders by militarization and saving lives from the same militarization results in the depoliticization of the migrant’s agency and its reduction to biological life that has to be rescued by EU-ropean saviors. Mobile commoning offers the a perspective for transgressing the humanitarian stance towards forms of politics of universality from the bottom up, but the recent Polish case should make us aware of its limitations.

What we can note from the example of Poland in 2021-2022 is the paradoxical situation in which people who run away from war or other forms of persecution and injustice are either something less than a refugee or something more than such an entity. They are treated as ‘less than human’ — as bare, almost animal life — when their asylum claims are unrecognized, their bodies are discarded in the forests, and their visibi-

lity is banned. And they are treated as ‘all too human’ — as in the case of Ukrainians — when they are neighbors, allies, friends, mates from work, brothers/sisters, enemies of our enemy, (temporary) citizens, (aspiring) Europeans. From this perspective, we adhere to the view expressed by Balibar (2020), namely that the politics of universalism is never a pure negation of particularisms or identities, but is mediated and articulated through some — often negated or oppressed — particular, a part of a non-part. No wonder that over two million Ukrainians were welcomed in Poland and obtained their rights not as formal refugees, but simply as commoners in a common cause which is regarded as a universal struggle. The demand for universalism — of which the Ukrainians are now the carrier — and mobile commoning — which is the practical, concrete project of establishing and maintaining this universalism — helps to transgress the apolitical humanitarian reason, but this kind of universality is also not without its limits. The affective and caring impulses that Polish society exhibits towards Ukrainians are not at work in the case of those who are otherized, racialized, and ultimately excluded as people without ‘the right to have rights’ (De Gooyer, Hunt, and Maxwell 2018). These people stand at the threshold of universalism, and fugitive, shadowy commoning at the margins remains the only possible politics for those who cannot come to the fore and stand in the light of day.

It was not the aim of this article to give prognoses about the future outcomes of mobile commoning. It seems obvious that emergency situations have their own logic and temporality, and we would be naïve to believe that the sudden mobilization of solidarity from the bottom-up might be sustained for a long period. We might expect that some networks of mobile commoning will tend to institutionalization, risking the loss of autonomy and more radical potential to subvert border regimes. Some of them will vanish with possible stabilization on war fronts. And the others will still remain underground, first of all, serving the needs of those people on the move who are not welcomed by state policies and public opinion. But one of the possible scenarios that is worth examining in the near future is the eventuality of transforming mobile commoning into more sustained and diversified collective effort towards a solidary society. Angelos Varvarousis (2022), in his study of commoning in Greece, noted that many structures and practices of grassroots support that flourished in the country in the context of multidimensional crisis (after 2008), played the role of ‘liminal commons’. The author understood this term to denote

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transitional — yet not elusive — forms of temporary commons that despite their short lifespan are capable and marking new realities that were previously unthinkable. They often start as the results of a specific crisis but also can spark generative processes of more stable commoning practices in their wake (Varvarousis 2022, 5).

Occupations of public squares, makeshift open kitchens or libraries, and autonomous shelter centers for migrants, proved to be bridging institutions and experiences, paving the way for social centers, enterprises, clinics, squats etc. In this case, the crisis was not just a short-lived and exceptional moment of eruption of social energy, but rather a transitional and emergent trigger of desire to live differently. It remains to be seen what the energy of mobile commoning might bring for Poland, and whether it could transform the boundaries of European universalism.

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ŁUKASZ MOLL – sociologist, philosopher, the Assistant Professor at the Institute of Sociology, University of Wrocław (Poland). Member of the editorial board of *Praktyka Teoretyczna* journal. The author of the monograph on nomadic European identity and the limits of the European universalism (*Nomadyczna Europa. Poststrukturalistyczne granice europejskiego uniwersalizmu*, Toruń 2021). His current research is focused on the plebeian commons as alternatives to capitalism.

**Address:**

Institute of Sociology  
University of Wrocław  
ul. Koszarowa 3  
52-007 Wrocław

**email:** lukasz.moll@uwr.edu.pl

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**Autor:** Łukasz Moll

**Tytuł:** Mobilne uwspólnianie z marginesu na przód? Wrogość na granicy polsko-białoruskiej i polsko-ukraińskiej (2021-2022)

**Abstrakt:** Artykuł powstał jako tekst interwencyjny w obliczu bezprecedensowego wychodźstwa wojennego do Polski w pierwszych czterech tygodnia wojny w Ukrainie (między 24 lutego a 24 marca 2022 roku). Jego celem jest zmapowanie i podanie dyskusji warunków oddolnego gościnnosci (i niegościnnosci) w Polsce między jesienią 2021 a wiosną 2022 roku. Był to okres zmieniającego się kontekstu dla polityki nie/gościnnosci: od stanu wyjątkowego, stosowanych wobec migrantów tzw. push-backów i grodzenia granicy z Białorusią, po politykę solidarności z uchodźcami wojennymi, usankcjonowany humanitaryzm i otwartą granicę z Ukrainą. Na przestrzeni półroczu warunki brzegowe oddolnej gościnnosci na wschodnich granicach Polski zmieniły się nagle i diametralnie. Kiedy kilka tysięcy migrantów z Bliższego Wschodu i nie tylko obozowało w strefie granicznej między Białorusią a Polską, ponieważ odmówiono im możliwości składania wniosków uchodźczych w Unii Europejskiej, praktyki oddolnej solidarnosci były ledwo tolerowane przez państwo polskie, jeśli nie wprost kryminalizowane i potępiane. Ale wraz z rosyjską inwazją na Ukrainę 24 lutego 2022 roku, Polska otworzyła swoją granicę dla bezpreceden-

sowego przyjazdu ponad dwóch milionów uchodźców (podczas pierwszego miesiąca wojny) i oddolna solidarność stanowiła masową odpowiedź polskiego społeczeństwa na tę sytuację, które zaczęło organizować miejsca schronienia, środki transportu, żywność i leki. Ci sami politycy i media, które zwalczały dotąd gościnność wobec migrantów na granicy z Białorusią – traktując ją jako „przestępstwo z solidarności” – tym razem powitały przybyszy z entuzjazmem i wsparciem. Artykuł proponuje, by spojrzeć na wzrastającą oddolną gościnność z ukraińskimi migrantami w perspektywie „mobilnego uwspólniania”: prekarnych, prowizorycznych i autonomicznych praktyk solidarnościowych z ludźmi pozostającymi w drodze. Mobilne uwspólnianie rozpatrzone zostało jako potencjalny fundament dla odmiennej polityki migracyjnej w UE. Jednocześnie polskie studium przypadku zostało poddane analizie jako pouczający przykład barier politycznego uniwersalizmu, które konstruowane są na granicach i poprzez granice.

**Słowa kluczowe:** mobilne uwspólnianie, granice Polski, granice Unii Europejskiej, zarządzanie migracjami, uchodźcy, uniwersalizm