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Department of Sociology
BIDS

Living with Contradiction: Helping Migrants in the Securitised Borderland.

Author: Majki Kasprzyk
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Supervisor: Sam Fraser

Abstract

This thesis investigates how residents of the Pogranicze region, specifically Hajnówka County in north-eastern Poland, experience and interpret the act of helping migrants crossing the Polish-Belarusian border under conditions of hybrid war. Starting in 2021, the region has become the site of a humanitarian crisis, as the Belarusian state has instrumentalised migration as a geopolitical weapon, to which Poland responded with securitisation, military deployment, and the criminalisation of humanitarian assistance. While existing scholarship addresses the structural and geopolitical dimensions of this crisis, the subjective, emotional, and identity-based experiences of borderland residents constitutes a gap in research. Drawing on three theoretical frameworks – securitisation theory (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006), Ahmed's Cultural Politics of Emotion (2014), and Anzaldúa'mds La Frontera (2007) – this thesis examines how state-imposed security narratives interact with emotions and borderland identity. The study is grounded in two weeks of short-term intensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted in March 2026 and incorporates eleven semi-structured interviews with residents of Hajnówka County. Findings reveal a universal humanitarian response to help: every resident affirms that a person in immediate physical distress cannot be left without basic care. Beyond this, understandings and practices of help fracture along relational, procedural, fatalistic, and institutional lines. Findings show that securitisation has not eliminated solidarity but reorganised it by visibility. Observed emotions toward the crisis differ and are negotiated rather than determined by state discourse, ranging from affective numbing to compassion fatigue to legal rationalisation. Borderland identity is historically shaped by coexistence, ambiguity, and the navigation of contradiction. It is a terrain on which both securitisation and affect operate and cannot be reduced to either.

Key words:
migration, help, Pogranicze, Polish-Belarusian borderland, hybrid war, mestiza consciousness, securitisation, affective economy, borderland identity,

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ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

SG (Straż Graniczna) –Border guards in polish

People on the move – General term including migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and people who continue their journeys to other countries (Czarnota et al., 2021).

Hybrid warfare – a form of low-intensity conflict which can be waged by state and state-like actors. It presupposes that one side in the conflict operates within the grey zone through coercively engineered migration, while maintaining plausible deniability (Bekić, 2022). This approach allows the hybrid actor to achieve strategic goals, in which migratory waves have become a tool, a weapon against neighbours, to the detriment of his adversaries, while avoiding attribution and remaining below the threshold of full-scale war, as defined by Bekić (2022) and integrated with the EU's narratives, given by its representatives (Bekić, 2022; European Council, September 23, 2015).

Help – term used loosely in research that incorporates any forms of aiding or supporting migrants on the move, with no imposed definition to enable the participants to share their own perspective on what *help* means in the context of the situation on the border.

Pushback – the forced return of migrants to the border line or compelling them to leave Polish territory without proper examination of their individual circumstances, regardless of whether they received return decisions, and even if they explicitly expressed their intention to apply for international protection in Poland. (Czarnota et al., 2021). Experts monitoring human rights violations at the EU's external borders note that pushbacks constitute a form of violence per se and are commonly accompanied by additional physical or verbal violence (Czarnota et al., 2021).

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose and Question

In 'Frames of War' Judith Butler (2009, cited in Straczuk, 2024) notes that whether and how we respond to other people's suffering, how we formulate moral criticism, as well as how we conduct political analyses, depend on a pre-established field of perception of reality (Butler 2009, in Straczuk 2024). This study explores how residents of the *Pogranicze*[1] region, focusing on Hajnówka County, Poland, perceive and experience the act of helping migrants[2] crossing the Polish–Belarusian border in the context of hybrid war[3]. It examines the emotional, moral, and identity-based dimensions of help[4] within a setting marked by securitisation, militarisation, and political polarisation.

[1] Border region Poland, Podlasie Voivodship; a land that encompasses multiple dimensions of culture, languages and traditions.
[2] People crossing the Polish-Belarusian border outside border crossings.
[3] Here, a low-intensity, grey-zone strategy whereby state actors deliberately engineer and weaponise migratory flows against a neighbouring state to exert coercive pressure, destabilise border security, and achieve strategic goals, while maintaining plausible deniability and remaining below the threshold of full-scale war (Bekić, 2022; European Council, 2015).
[4]Type of support extended to migrants on the move, performed and understood by the residents of Pogrniacze.

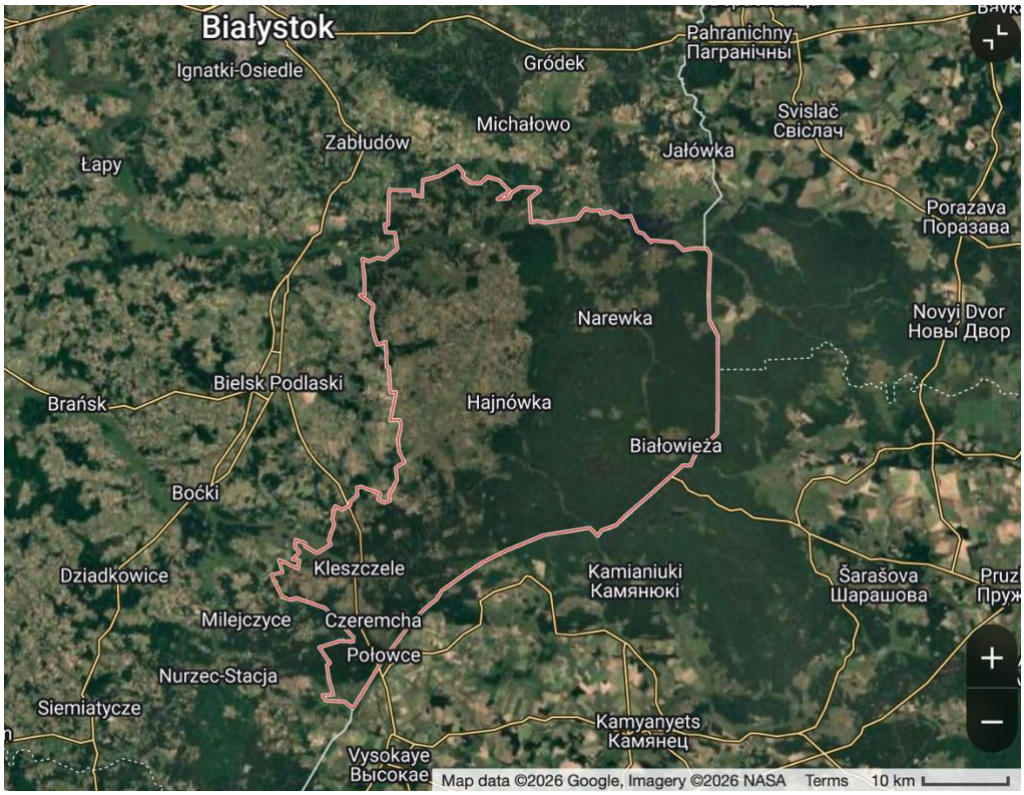


Figure 1 Hajnówka County map (Google Maps, 2026). Map data ©2026 Google.

The study distinguishes two dimensions of the problem:

1. The empirical part of the research enquiry concerns agency and perception of the people of Pogranicze regarding helping migrants. It captures data about lived experience, emotions, and personal perceptions to document the specifics of the Polish-Belarusian humanitarian crisis, here referred to as “hybrid war” to situate it within the European and Polish state narrative.

2. The second part of the enquiry concerns the theoretical investigation that deepens the understanding of the lived experiences of residents, particularly the interplay between local identity, emotions, and state narratives about migration.

Research Questions:

- Empirical Question: How do the residents of Pogranicze, from Hajnówka County, experience and interpret the act of helping migrants crossing the Polish-Belarusian border under the condition of hybrid war?

- Theoretical Question: What does this reveal about the interplay between emotional coping, borderland identity and state-imposed securitisation?

By connecting two analytical categories, the study seeks to reveal the interplay between structural forces and the affective, locally embedded responses of those living within them in a borderland under pressure. Using the act of helping migrants as its empirical lens, it aims to bridge the gap between geopolitical interpretations of hybrid war and the human, emotional narratives of those whose lives and identities are directly affected by it.

1.2 Significance

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the human side of hybrid warfare. While current research focuses on how states behave at borders (Bekić, 2022; Halemba, 2022; Straczuk, 2024), it often overlooks the communities living there (Anzaldúa, 2007; Barwiński 2004). By revealing the personal cost of navigating moral duties, legal risks, and emotional pressure in a conflict zone, this study advances scholarship in border studies (Agier, 2017; Anzaldúa, 2007; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013), critical security studies (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006), and the sociology of migration.

The study offers a conceptual translation of Anzaldúa's *La Frontera* into an Eastern European context, contributing to comparative border studies beyond its original US-Mexico scope (Anzaldúa, 2007).

2. BACKGROUND

This chapter sets a backdrop for this research by telling the far-reaching events leading to the studied phenomena on the Polish-Belarusian border until today. It begins by introducing Hajnówka County and the broader Podlasie region, outlining its distinctive multicultural heritage and history of cross-border coexistence of the so-called *Pogranicze* (Babiński, 1994). It then traces the emergence of the humanitarian crisis that unfolded from 2021 onwards, documenting the conditions faced by migrants and the grassroots responses that arose among local communities (Czarnota et al., 2021).

Finally, it examines the hybrid warfare framework through which the crisis has been politically framed, exploring how Belarus' instrumentalisation of migration (Bekić, 2022; Halemba, 2022) and Poland's subsequent securitisation measures have transformed the borderland into a heavily contested space (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Straczuk, 2024).

2.1 Characteristic of the region

Hajnówka County is located near the border with Belarus in north-eastern Poland in the region of the Białowieża Primeval Forest, in Podlasie Voivodship (Portal gov.pl, 2026). It is a part of Poland, commonly called *Pogranicze* (Bordelrand) that refers to an area located near the border of two countries, regions or cultural zones, characterised by an intense interpenetration of cultures, languages and traditions (Babiński,1994). The region is defined as a historical and geographical site that has functioned for centuries as a multidimensional borderland, encompassing political, religious, and socio-cultural dimensions (Babiński,1994; Barwiński, 2004). The convergence of Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian ethnicities has fostered a resilient zone of cultural and linguistic overlap (Barwiński, 2004). It concerns the religious and ethic diversity with a predominance of Roman Catholic and Orthodox believers and Polish-Belarusian-Ukrainian people (Barwiński 2014). There are centuries-old traditions of living together in diverse communities, characterised by national assimilation among the East Slavic population inhabiting Podlasie and the resulting prevalence of the „Polish-Orthodox" identity type (Barwiński 2004, cited in Barwiński, 2014). However, the idyllic perception of Podlasie borderland has been challenged by a series of xenophobic incidents,

including the vandalism of bilingual signs, the desecration of religious sites, and racist violence against immigrants in Białystok (Barwiński, 2014).

In the summer of 2021, newcomers[5] appeared in the border villages of Podlasie (Badacze I Badaczki na Granicy, 2026). At first, they simply walked along the roads, passed through the villages, sat at bus stops, and sometimes asked for water or something to eat (Badacze I Badaczki na Granicy, 2026).

The human scale of this movement was acutely felt in Hajnówka County, where towns like Czeremcha, Białowieża, Zubucze and Narewka became central sites of arrival, as reflected in the high frequency of border crossings recorded that year (Szczepańska, 2022; Figure 2).

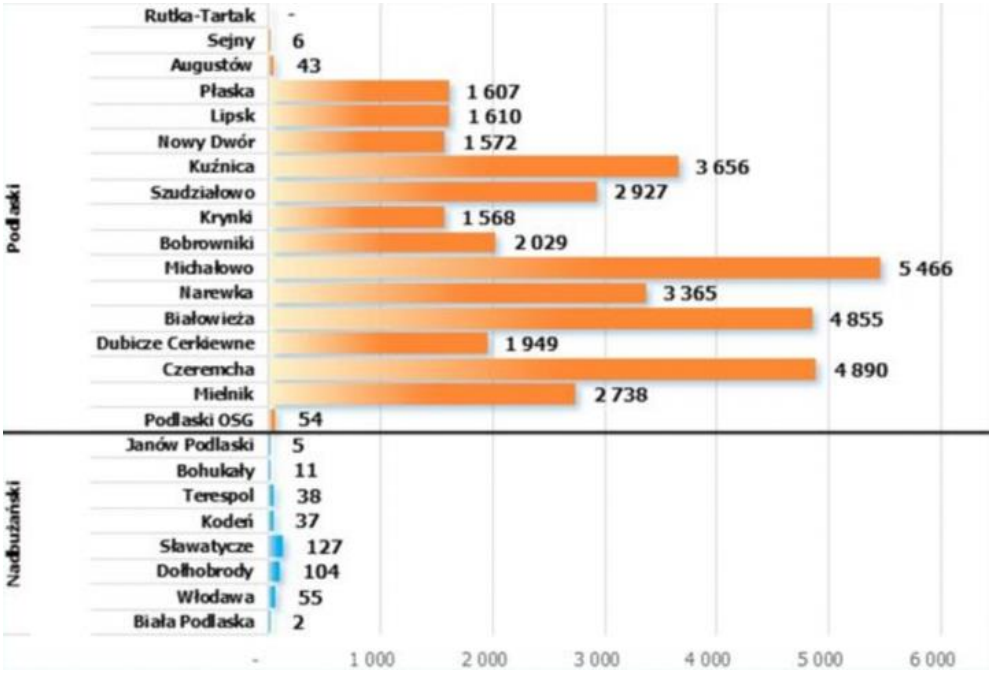


Figure 2 2 Crossing the state border contrary to the regulations on the section with Belarus Podlaski Branch of the Border Guard and the Bug River Branch of the Border Guard 2021 (Straż Graniczna, 2021).

[5] Migrants, here referred to as newcomers, from the perspective of Podlasie locals.

2.2 Humanitarian Crisis

Starting at 2021 Pogranicze has become a site of a humanitarian crisis, following deaths and critical conditions, the migrants are finding themselves in (Czarnota et al., 2021). It began when the Belarusian authorities began to facilitate the issuance of visas to nationals of Western Asian, African, and some of Asian countries, and encourage and even force them to continue travelling to European Union through Poland (Czarnota et al., 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2024). The people often find themselves unable to enter a territory or return to their country of origin, trapped in "waiting zones" (Agier, 2017, p.7; Czarnota et al., 2021). According to reports of migrants and members of Grupa Granica[6], Belarusian officers have subjected people to severe physical abuse (Czarnota et al., 2021). Theft of documents, phones, alongside extortion for necessities were also widely reported (Czarnota et al., 2021). Upon crossing the border into Poland, migrants face more violence and immediate pushbacks regardless of their legal right to seek asylum (Czarnota et al., 2021). A Syrian family recounted: "Polish people call the police. Then we get pushed over the fence and beaten up. During one attempt, we lost our passports. We do not know what will happen to us" (Czarnota et al., 2021, p.15). Back in 2021, beyond direct violence, the environmental conditions themselves proved life-threatening. Four teenage boys from the Democratic Republic of Congo captured the desperation in a text message: "We are hungry, we are cold, we are going to die" (Czarnota et al., 2021, p.13).

A network of Pogranicze residents, activists, and civil society has self-organised to provide essential food, medicine, and legal support to help people on the move (Czarnota et al., 2021). These volunteers often face criminal prosecution, intimidation, and aggressive military tactics for their efforts, as their actions are often seen as acting against national security (Czarnota et al., 2021).

Moreover, the largest city in the poviat- Hajnówka has recently become a site of trial for activists helping the migrants, potentially influential for the locals' perceptions (Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, 2026).

[6] A grassroots initiative created in response to the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border.

2.3 Hybrid War and EU Narratives

In recent years, Belarus' borders with Latvia, Lithuania and Poland have gained European attention as a crossing point along migration toward the European Union—developments framed as part of a 'hybrid war' initiated by the Belarusian state (Straczuk, 2024). In response to Belarusian machinations, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki of the national-conservative Law and Justice party said that allowing migrants to enter Poland would be giving in to "blackmail" from Lukashenko (Bekić, 2022). On September 2nd 2021 Warsaw declared a state of emergency, deploying thousands of troops to fortify its border and transforming the borderland into a heavily securitised and politically charged space with migrants trapped between countries (Bekić, 2022; Czarnota et al., 2021). By emphasising the need to protect Poland, since at least early August 2021 The Border Guards practice pushbacks- the illegal, forced return of migrants beyond the state's external borders that was given a veneer of legality in Poland through two legal acts (We Are Monitoring Association, 2024; K. Augustová & Sapoch, 2020). Asylum requests are not accepted (Bekić, 2022).

Moreover, in 2022 Poland finished building a physical border barrier[7] (Portal Gov.pl, 2022). As stated by the official government site– Portal Gov.pl, it is designed to deter unauthorised crossings and provide Border Guard units with response time, with full operational capacity pending the installation of motion sensors and surveillance cameras (Portal Gov.pl 2022).

Furthermore, in 2025, Poland issued an ordinance on the temporary restriction of the right to submit an application for international protection, therefore refusing people the right to protection from being returned to danger (non-refoulement law), permission to remain in the asylum country, humane treatment, and access to durable solutions (We Are Monitoring Association, 2024; UNHCR, 2026).

[7] a fortification located on Polish territory several to several-teen meters from the border with Belarus, in the form of a steel fence topped with coils of razor wire, with additional entanglements of concertina razor wire positioned alongside it.

3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

This chapter will cover key theoretical sources into each subsection to ground this study within current research, constructing a foundation that will guide the thesis (Punch, 2013, p.154).
The review first outlines the Pogranicze identity and its multicultural, peripheral character, then examines how residents of various European countries perceive and practice help amid growing securitisation. Lastly, it considers how the logic of hybrid warfare shapes local realities, and how migrants are framed and Othered within political discourse.
Overall, the literature exposes a persistent gap between state-level narratives of security and the individual experiences of empathy, moral conflict, and belonging that define everyday life in the borderland.

3.1 The identity of Pogranicze (Borderland) Residents

In research from Poland, Barwiński (2014), argued that the "Pogranicze Person" as an individual is characterised by tolerance, multiculturalism, and the cognitive flexibility to navigate divergent value systems (Barwiński, 2014). Babiński (1994) uses the concept of Pogranicze in a broader geographical and cultural sense, applying it to borderlands as a general phenomenon rather than a single specific region, arguing it is a space of mutual cultural penetration and symbolic overlap, not reducible to physical borders (Babiński, 1994). Furthermore, study shows that approximately 70% of people from the region have experience with international migration, particularly dating back to the 1980s (Dziekońska, 2021). Together, these studies suggest that 'borderland identity' is far more than a geographical phenomena; it is a sophisticated psychological and sociological state defined by fluidity, cognitive resilience, and the rejection of rigid binaries (Babiński, 1994; Barwiński, 2014; Dziekońska, 2021).

As opposed to Barwiński's (2014) claim, empirical research from Białystok, the capital of the Podlaskie region, indicates that inhabitants are deeply aware of the "issue of tolerance", regarding recent xenohpbic incidents; however, rather than viewing it as a social pathology, they perceive it as a fundamental regional characteristic (Barwiński, 2021; Poleszczuk et al., 2013). This internal awareness fosters a communal self-understanding as members of an inherently multicultural society, which in turn creates an openness to adopt educational

initiatives that reinforce this pluralistic identity (Poleszczuk et al., 2013). This link between identity and action is further illuminated by comparative studies in Riace, Italy, which suggest that a robust local identity can actively stimulate the reception of refugees, if the identity is anchored in a historical narrative of hospitality (Driel & Verkuyten, 2020). When hospitality is viewed as part of a community's "cultural DNA," aid becomes a vehicle for enacting and maintaining local identity (Driel & Verkuyten, 2020).

However, the nature of this hospitality is nuanced; Pisarek (2014) notes that Polish hospitality is fundamentally relational and conditional, based on a logic of reciprocity where a "guest" often requires a "patron"– someone known to the family who "vouchsafes" for the stranger (Pisarek, 2014).

Other studies from Western Balkans have concluded that the identity of the borderland community is fundamentally shaped by its positioning on the geopolitical periphery of the European Union (Isakjee et al., 2020; Driel & Verkuyten, 2020). This peripheral status transforms the region into a site of 'structural violence', a form of governance where the state deploys both direct and indirect force to secure its borders while simultaneously professing a commitment to human rights and 'European values' (Isakjee et al., 2020). Interestingly, previous research in Białowieża, Podlaskie region, found that inhabitants generally evaluate Poland's border protection measures negatively, with only 53% supporting the government's approach (Kazak, 2025). Though while residents criticise the government's efforts as 'inadequate', often citing insufficient support for local entrepreneurs, public trust in the military continues to grow (Kazak, 2025).

Together, this body of literature presents a Pogranicze identity that is neither uniform nor static. Rooted in centuries of cultural coexistence and cognitive flexibility (Babiński, 1994; Barwiński, 2021; Dziekońska, 2021), it is an identity historically practised in navigating contradiction, yet one simultaneously exposed to the pressures of securitisation, peripheral marginalisation, and the conditional logic of hospitality (Isakjee et al., 2020; Pisarek, 2014). While a communal self-understanding as an inherently multicultural society can foster openness toward migrants (Driel & Verkuyten, 2020; Poleszczuk et al., 2013), this does not translate into uniform support for helping, as evidenced by the growing trust in the military even among those critical of state border policy (Kazak, 2025). This tension between an identity rooted in openness and the structural forces that constrain it forms the foundation for understanding how borderland residents relate to the act of helping migrants today

3.2 Perception and Practice of Help

Data from the CBOS survey (Głowacki, 2024) shows that a significant majority of Poles (71%) believe in the necessity of helping others, with 61% actively providing aid within their communities or through external centres (Głowacki, 2024). This inclination toward aid may also be tied to social hierarchy; traditionally, charity is a form of care offered by those in "stronger" positions, as shown in the tendency of individuals with higher social capital often demonstrating greater activity in unpaid work for people in need (Głowacki, 2024). However, these studies focus on helping within organisations and undefined persons deemed "in need of help"(Głowacki, 2024).

Furthermoe, studies reveal that in Białowieża, Hajnówka County, approximately 20.75% of residents report participating in searching for or providing aid to migrants (Kazak, 2025). Kazak identified the following kinds of aid: "Search for refugees in the field; providing help (water, food, warm clothing, etc.) to people who have met in the field; refusal to inform the services about the meeting of a refugee in or near Białowieża; participation in the collection of humanitarian aid, airdrops, etc. and expanding information on the need for assistance to migrants" (Kazak, 2025, pp.96-97). This support is primarily categorised as 'informal helping'– civic engagement provided without the mediation of formal institutions (Cao et al., 2021; Celdrán & Chacur-Kiss, 2025).

Studies on helping behaviour predictors conducted in Poland find that it is often mediated by perceived social and cultural closeness (Kossowska, 2023). Residents are significantly more likely to assist those they feel culturally or emotionally aligned with, a phenomenon that explains the high mobilisation for Ukrainian refugees compared to the perceived distance of migrants on the Belarusian border (Kossowska, 2023). Furthermore, this helping behaviour is socially driven; individuals are more likely to provide aid if they perceive support within their immediate social networks (Kossowska, 2023). Research from regions such as Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that this ethical reasoning is often rooted in shared historical experiences of displacement, fostering a sense of 'everyday humanitarianism'(Beznec et al., 2020).

However, the willingness to help is also dictated by the specific framing of the individual in need (Wyszynski et al., 2020). Research from Germany demonstrates that the labels 'refugee'

versus ‘economic migrant’ significantly shape helping orientations (Wyszynski et al., 2020). While the ‘refugee’ label often evokes paternalistic, dependency-oriented help rooted in pity, the ‘economic migrant’ label can trigger envious stereotypes and active opposition to assistance (Wyszynski et al., 2020).

This opposition is not merely an individual preference but is often facilitated by broader systemic frameworks (Agier, 2017; Morera-Bello et al., 2026). Recent research by Morera-Bello et al. (2026) in European hotspots[8] like the Canary Islands suggests that opposition to migrant-friendly policies is often driven by ‘moral indifference’ - a lack of perceived responsibility for the outgroup, rather than explicit hatred (Agier, 2017; Morera-Bello et al., 2026). Those politics of indifference that defend territory, bodies and goods against the ‘wretched and intrusive’ (Agier, 2017, p.3) facilitate the moral exclusion of individuals perceived as a ‘symbolic threat’ to social cohesion (Agier, 2017; Morera-Bello et al., 2026).

This environment creates ‘affective governance’- the management of migration through the manipulation of public emotions to suppress empathy while encouraging hostility (Halemba, 2022; Lampredi, 2024). In Poland, the act of providing humanitarian assistance has led to deep polarisation within local communities, including those in the Pogranicze region (Halemba, 2022). Activists and people who help are frequently categorised by the state and opposing neighbors as ‘national traitors’ or ‘useful idiots’ (Halemba, 2022).

Collectively, this literature suggest that humanitarian aid in securitised border zones has shifted from a private moral choice to a deeply polarised political act (Agier, 2017; Halemba, 2022; Lampredi, 2024; Morera-Bello et al., 2026). The literature highlights how the ‘will to help’ is mediated by psychological labels, cultural closeness, and a state-driven approach that actively suppresses empathy through ‘affective governance.’ (Kossowska, 2023; Wyszynski et al., 2020; Halemba, 2022; Lampredi, 2024). This environment forces local inhabitants to navigate in an environment where the cost of humanitarian activism is often social alienation or legal repercussion (Halemba, 2022; Lampredi, 2024). While current research effectively identifies these systemic drivers and barriers, it often overlooks the subjective, internal processes of the helpers themselves.

[8] Designated frontline facilities at borders used for the swift arrival, identification, registration, and fingerprinting of asylum seekers (Luyten and Orav, 2020).

3.3 Hybrid War and the Epistemic Friction

The concept of 'hybrid war' is described as a low-intensity conflict operating in the 'gray zone' (Bekić, 2022) between conventional and unconventional warfare (Bekić, 2022). In the case relevant for this study, scholars describe the Belarusian regime as using 'coercive engineered migrations' and 'demographic weapons' to destabilise the eastern flank of NATO, or the eastern European border (Baziur, 2023; Bekić, 2022).

This narrative redefines a humanitarian situation as a military 'assault,' framing border defence as a patriotic duty (Straczuk, 2024). Pro-government slogans such as 'Murem za Polskim Mundurem*'* ('As wall behind the Polish uniform') imply that humanitarian aid is counter-productive or even complicit in the enemy's tactics (Halemba, 2022; Straczuk, 2024).

Straczuk (2024) argues that the government's emphasis on the necessity of border protection may constitute the deliberate cultivation of fear (Straczuk, 2024). Those practices are designed to deny, conceal, or undermine knowledge about the violence of borders (Davies et al., 2023; Straczuk, 2024). Such behaviors described by the *borderwork* concept, commonly used throughout critical border studies literature to highlight the active ways that borders are reproduced (Davies 2023; Straczuk, 2024).

Furthermore, Straczuk (2024) argues that residents of Pogranicze experience 'epistemic friction,' where the official version of reality (the military as a humanitarian 'shield' and labelling repression as 'heroism') conflicts with the grassroots experience of finding emaciated individuals in the woods. (Davies et al., 2023 Strarczuk, 2024).

Together, the literature suggests that the framing of the border situation as 'hybrid warfare' serves a dual purpose: it legitimises the use of extraordinary state power while simultaneously delegitimising the humanitarian impulses of the local population, (Straczuk ,2024). By transforming the borderland into a 'gray zone' of conflict, the state effectively weaponises fear to redefine empathy as a security threat (Bekić, 2022; Davies et al,. 2023). This transition from humanitarian to military logic forces residents to navigate the divide between the state's narrative and the reality of the 'people on the move' (Bekić, 2022; Straczuk, 2024; Halemba, 2022) As the literature suggests, this 'epistemic friction' does not merely reflect a disagreement over policy, but a fundamental struggle over the nature of truth and the value of human life in a securitized landscape (Bekić, 2022; Davies et al., 2023; Straczuk, 2024).

3.4 Framing the Migrant

Attitudes toward migration are increasingly becoming a pivotal point of contention in European politics (Morera-Bello et al., 2026). The construction of a "crimmigrant Other" identity (Franko, 2019) is marked by distrust, where individuals are categorised in a manner that facilitates separation and rejection (Agier, 2017; Franko, 2019). Grundler (2024) reveals an unprincipled distinction in EU law between "trafficked" and "smuggled" persons, where the latter are perceived not as victims, but as subjects of criminal conduct (Grundler, 2024). This framing justifies dehumanising policies and transforms migrants from human beings into instruments of conflict, an objectification that delegitimises their status as asylum seekers (Halemba, 2022; Franko, 2019; Morera-Bello et al., 2026; Starczuk, 2024).

This exclusion is rooted in the broader process of "othering," through which a group is rendered fundamentally different and "lesser" than the dominant "Us" (Agier, 2017; Said 1978 cited in Davies et al., 2023).

A unique dynamic emerges when migrants are perceived as 'illegal' actors emerging from liminal spaces, such as the Białowieża forest (Agier, 2017; Davies et al., 2023; Pietrusińska, 2022). The colloquialism "person from the forest" serves as a generalising descriptor that obscures diverse identities, further complicating the moral landscape for the residents of the Pogranicze (Pietrusinska, 2022).

Together, these sections reveal how the framing of migration as hybrid warfare and the othering of migrants as criminal or liminal figures serve a shared political function: the delegitimisation of both the migrants themselves and those who would help them (Agier, 2017; Bekić, 2022; Davies et al., 2023; Franko, 2019; Straczuk, 2024). By transforming a humanitarian situation into a security emergency, the state not only justifies extraordinary measures but actively reshapes the moral landscape in which borderland residents must act (Baziur, 2023; Bekić, 2022; Halemba, 2022; Straczuk, 2024). The "epistemic friction" experienced by Pogranicze residents – caught between official narratives and the emaciated bodies they encounter in the forest – is not incidental but structurally produced (Davies et al., 2023; Straczuk, 2024). What emerges from this literature is a picture of a community whose capacity for empathy is being deliberately constrained by the language of war, threat, and criminality (Franko, 2019; Grundler, 2024; Morera-Bello et al., 2026; Pietrusińska, 2022).

3.5 Filling the gap

Existing scholarship on migration, aid, borderland identity, and hybrid warfare offers a comprehensive foundation for understanding systemic drivers and societal impacts within Pogranicze. However, several critical gaps remain.

Most notably, the emotional and psychological dimensions of providing aid under hybrid warfare conditions is underexplored (Bekić, 2022; Halemba, 2022; Straczuk, 2024). While research identifies *what* help is given and by whom, it rarely addresses *why* , at a subjective level - how individuals reconcile their moral compass with the social costs of activism, navigate cognitive dissonance between lived reality and state narratives, or emotionally evolve in their attitudes over time (Głowacki, 2024; Kazak, 2025). This represents a significant gap between the lived experience of borderland residents.

Similarly, the 'patron-guest' dynamic and its potential extension to migrant-resident relations remain underdeveloped (Pisarek, 2014). Existing literature tends to treat these groups as separate subjects rather than examining their coexistence, leaving the human dimensions of their intertwined realities largely unaddressed.

Methodologically, the field's reliance on surveys limits its ability to capture nuanced lived experience (Kazak, 2025). Phenomenological or narrative-driven approaches are needed – particularly to explore whether Pogranicze's multicultural identity is strengthened or fractured by modern securitisation, and how that identity shapes attitudes toward helping migrants (Creswell, 2013).

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This thesis uses three theories that offer an analytical lens for understanding the intersection of identity, personal affect, and securitsation.

4.1 Securitisation Theory

Securitisation theory serves as the analytical foundation of this thesis, explaining the political reality confronting borderland residents under the state-imposed construction of threat inherent to hybrid war – and, in this context, the artificially organised migration flows framed as a disruption to systemic order. By deploying securitisation theory, this thesis illuminates the state-level mechanics of the case: namely, how migration becomes rhetorically and institutionally transformed into an existential threat requiring emergency response.

Drawing from the Copenhagen School (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998), this thesis partly understands security not as a condition but as a discursive act – a process in which political actors label certain phenomena as existential threats, legitimising extraordinary state measures (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998). In the studied case of the Polish borderland, government narratives have framed humanitarian aid as a security risk**,** transforming migrants into tools of "hybrid warfare" (Bekić, 2022; Halemba, 2022; Straczuk, 2024).

This process, as Didier Bigo (2002) and Jef Huysmans (2006) argue, extends beyond speech and surpasses the discursive dimension of understanding securitisation. It manifests through networks of professionals of (in)security, encompassing border guards, bureaucrats, and media institutions that together generate an infrastructure of fear (Bigo ,2002; Huysmans, 2006). Securitisation theory provides an understanding of how the state's discourse is directly embedded into Pogranicze's community life, that is how migration is discursively transformed into a threat and helping becomes coded as disloyal or dangerous.

Securitisation theory explains the conditions under which people of Pogrnicze act; however, alone, it cannot account for the lived dimensions of this process. Theories introduced in the next subsections will be applied to address how residents receive, negotiate, or partially resist securitising moves at the level of daily life.

4.2 The Cultural Politics of Emotion

Ahmed's (2014) Cultural Politics of Emotion theorises how emotions circulate socially, adhere to bodies, and shape perception – not by reducing individuals to passive recipients of state discourse, but by emphasising the relational and interpretive character of affect (Ahmed, 2014). Applied to the micro-level of this case, Ahmed's (2014) framework centres the emotional experience of Hajnówka county residents, allowing this thesis to argue that acts of solidarity with migrants are not merely political gestures but affective interpretations of a situation shaped, though not determined, by securitisation (Ahmed, 2014; Bigo, 2002; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Huysmans, 2006).

Central to this framework is the concept of affective economies: emotions do not reside in subjects or objects but are produced through circulation (Ahmed, 2014, p. 8). It is this understanding that allows the thesis to examine what emotions *do* – and how they manifest – under the conditions of state-constructed hybrid war (Ahmed, 2014; Czarnota et al., 2021; Straczuk, 2024). Through repeated circulation, feelings adhere to particular objects, making what is in fact a social construction appear as a natural or inherent quality (Ahmed, 2014, p. 8). The concept of "stickiness" is applied here to analyse how threat is constructed, and how fear and hostility shape residents' relationship to the act of helping migrants (Ahmed, 2014, p.11).

Ahmed's (2014) politics of fear is particularly relevant in this regard. Fear operates differently depending on scale: distant objects tend to be feared more intensely, while proximity can be seen as dangerous to the nation (Ahmed, 2014 pp.63-80)

The framework thus positions securitisation as a force that structures the conditions under which affect circulates, while affect itself remains negotiated and irreducible to state logic (Ahmed, 2014, p.8; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998). In doing so, it both contextualises individual experience within Pogranicze and opens space for thinking about the broader sociality of emotion (Ahmed, 2014, p. 8).

4.3 Critical Border Theory/ La Frontera

Securitisation and affective politics, however, do not unfold in a neutral space – the ground in which they meet is itself analytically significant. Critical border studies, with central attention given to Anzaldúa's (2007) "Borderlands/La Frontera", is employed in this theoretical framework not as a third analytical layer intervening between securitisation and affect, but as a conceptual background that establishes the character of the terrain in which both operate. Rather than viewing borders as fixed territorial lines, critical border scholars understand borderlands as sites that enable those living there to negotiate the contradictions and tensions found in diverse cultural, class, and other settings (Anzaldúa, 2007; Naples, 2010; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Walters, 2011). Anzaldúa's (2007) account of borderland subjectivity – shaped by ambiguity, proximity, liminality, and a historically constituted identity that predates and exceeds contemporary state action - provides the contextual ground on which the interplay of securitisation and affect is read (Ahmed, 2014; Anzaldúa, 2007; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Huysmans, 2006). The Pogranicze region is not a neutral site; it is inhabited by a population whose relationship to borders, state authority, and collective identity is historically layered (Barwiński, 2004). Using La Frontera makes this legible without asserting that borderland identity analytically mediates between the two theories – rather, it conditions the environment in which they meet (Ahmed, 2014; Anzaldúa, 2007; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Huysmans, 2006).

It should be acknowledged that Anzaldúa's (2007) framework was developed from the specific experience of the US-Mexico borderland and Chicana feminist identity, and therefore carries an inherent geographical and cultural distance from the context of Podlasie. The theory is deployed here not as a direct parallel but as a conceptual resource - its analytical vocabulary of liminality, ambiguity, and historically constituted border subjectivity offers a language for dynamics that existing Central and Eastern European border scholarship has not yet adequately theorised. A theory created in a land where two or more cultures edge each other is used to translate into Pogranicze, where similarly, it is "/…/an area of merging, a space in which the mutual penetration and interweaving of various human communities and cultures occurs" (Babiński, 1994, p.6). The border is a place "/…/ where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (Anzaldúa, 2007, p.25) that translates into the studied case of Polish-Belarusian humanitarian crisis, where the migrating people encounter suffering (Anzaldúa, 2007; Czarnota et al. 2021).

Within this background, several of Anzaldúa's concepts illuminate the specific conditions of Pogranicze without being applied as formal analytical tools. The concept of "nepantla" - a suspended state of being in-between, in which old beliefs have been destabilised but new ones have not yet taken hold – captures the position of residents navigating the current crisis (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, in Zygadło, 2017, p. 214). Living between the state's securitisation apparatus and the humanitarian reality at their doorstep, between legal obligation and moral instinct, between official Polish national identity and a locally rooted borderland subjectivity that fits neatly into neither, many respondents inhabit precisely this unresolved threshold (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, in Zygadło, 2017, p. 214; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Straczuk, 2024).

This suspension is further illuminated by "mestiza consciousness" – Anzaldúa's account of the capacity to hold contradictory identities and realities simultaneously without demanding resolution (Anzaldúa, 2007, pp. 100–105). For Pogranicze residents, the coexistence of opposing orientations is not hypocrisy but a consciousness long practised in living with ambiguity (Anzaldúa, 2007). Mestiza consciousness also opens space for understanding how migrants themselves may be perceived not as external intruders but as part of border reality: figures who belong, in some sense, to the same liminal terrain as those who encounter them (Agier, 2017; Anzaldúa, 2007; pp.100-105).

Where that sustained pressure becomes unresolvable, the "Coatlicue" state offers a further conceptual resource (Anzaldúa, 2007; pp.68-70). Anzaldúa (2007) describes this as a condition of psychic paralysis, numbness, and resistance to knowing that precedes transformation – a defence mechanism characteristic of people under sustained, irresolvable pressure (Anzaldúa, 2007, pp. 68–70). Translated into the Pogranicze context, it offers a way of reading residents' emotional withdrawal not as indifference, but as a psychic survival strategy in response to pressures that never fully resolve (Anzaldúa, 2007, pp. 68–70).

4.4 Conclusion

These three frameworks operate at distinct scales: securitisation exposes the structural conditions, under which residents act (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006), while affect theory explains the emotional mechanisms of those actions at the level of individual experience (Ahmed, 2014). Crucially, Anzaldúa's (2007) La Frontera framework provides the necessary background, terrain that predates the current humanitarian crisis and serves as a ground on which both operate (Anzaldúa, 2007).

5. METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative, ethnographically grounded investigation, informed by semi-structured interviews that seek to reveal how residents of Pogranicze, from Hajnówka county, experience and interpret the act of helping migrants in a securitised borderland.

5.1 Fieldwork ethnographic methods

This study employed a short-term intensive ethnographic approach (Pink & Morgan, 2013), focusing on the immediate affective and social rhythms of residents in the Hajnówka County. This approach was chosen as it prioritises intensity over duration, an adequate route to knowing, considering my shared nationality (Polish) and familiarity with the region (Pink & Morgan, 2013). Partial insider position facilitated trust among participants, eased communication, and enabled a deeper understanding of local cultural references and social dynamics.

The data collection lasted two weeks in *Pogranicze*, Podlaskie Voivodeship, from mid-March to the end of the month in 2026, in the town of Czeremcha, where I lived in the Culture House - a vital place for observation as it acts as a social crossroads for the town. During this period, I conducted 11 interviews with people from the villages and towns of Bobrówka, Czeremcha,

Białowieża, Hajnówka and Kleszczele. In selecting participants, I sought to include a range of ages, genders, and occupations. Of particular interest were people living near the border, with direct or indirect experience of helping migrants.

Contacts were established through snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). Initial access to the community was gained through "Hope & Humanity" organisation, which I contacted before the start of my fieldwork with, and who connected me with the principal of the Culture House in Czeremcha. The principal, who served as a primary gatekeeper to the community, referred me to individuals willing to share their experiences. Field immersion allowed me to meet further participants through established contacts, often while wandering through the village alongside familiar locals.

Interviews were audio-recorded in 6 cases; the remaining 5 were not recorded either because they took place in loud public spaces, arose spontaneously on the street or in interviewees' workplaces, or because the interviewee did not consent to recording, and were instead transcribed from notes. All participants provided consent either verbally on the record or wrote down confirmation of their contact details. The interviews were conducted in Polish, with occasional use of local dialect, with selected quotes translated into English through a combination of translation software and manual editing. The interviews were analysed in my native language, as this allowed for a more accurate interpretation of meaning and helped prevent the loss of nuance in translation.

5.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were considered fit for the purpose of my thesis because I wanted to analyse personal reasoning, beliefs, and emotional triggers driving a participant's statement. The interviews followed a set of precise and standardised questions that were primarily open-ended and led to a discovery-oriented approach, while some remained close-ended accompanied by follow-up why or how questions (Panke, 2018 ; Rutledge 2020). As the thesis does not aim to generalise, the depth of engagement with each participant matters more than the breadth of the sample. Spending around one hour with each participant employing a conversational format allows to analyse the specific participant with care and attention, rather than extracting surface-level patterns.

Interviews generally began with an account of their perceived identity as a Pogranicze person, followed by an inquiry about their occupation and lifestyle. Later, the conversation shifted towards the topic of helping migrants, personal opinions on them, the state's action and morals

To avoid researcher bias, this study introduced the topic using the neutral phrase "helping migrants," allowing participants to choose their own terminology. Then linguistic mimicry was implemented, mirroring the specific words used by each interviewee (e.g., refugees, immigrants, people on the move). This approach reduced social desirability bias (Nederhof, 1985) by creating a comfortable conversational space, while serving as a tool to uncover the participants' underlying moral hierarchies and political views.

5.3 Investigating *Help*

Help serves as the central concept of inquiry because it provides a concrete, observable practice through which the theoretical framework becomes empirically accessible. Asking residents about help allows the study to trace how the macro-level securitisation of migration is received and negotiated at the level of everyday life – and how affect circulates around that negotiation in ways neither fully determined by state discourse nor reducible to individual psychology.

Rather than imposing a fixed definition, help is treated as an open, participant-defined concept. This allows the study to surface how residents understand what it means to assist a person encountered at the border, and in doing so, to access the emotional coping strategies, moral reasoning, and affective orientations that Ahmed's (2014) framework theorises as socially circulated. Acts of help – or decisions not to help - become the sites where securitisation and affect visibly intersect, worked out in practice against the background of a borderland community with its own historically embedded relationship to borders and state authority.

5.4 Analysis

The chosen analytical method for this project mainly consists of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This involved manual coding through the identification of relevant content and recurring patterns of meaning across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Working

inductively, similarities and differences across the data were identified and organised into themes, with the understanding that this process was not a neutral uncovering of pre-existing meaning, but an active and interpretive construction of it (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This process ultimately yielded several themes centred around a single overarching concept: help, and specifically how perceptions of helping migrants are formed and negotiated among those living in the borderland.

5.5 Limitations

A number of things were left unsaid, as participants were cautious about being judged for their political views. This can be attributed to the fear of sharing an opinion different to the generally accepted version of events, opposing the state narrative (Ahmed, 2014; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006). Assuming I was involved in migrant activism, some interviewees questioned my positionality, which resulted in distrust and consequently deepened the reluctance. These assumed silences, too, deserve reflection and should be understood within the broader context of conducting research in such a sensitive setting.

Furthermore, inquiring into sensitive topics risks further troubling a community already fatigued by a sustained period of crisis and state scrutiny, encouraging surface-level answers and reluctance to elaborate among the participants. The effect is visible in the analysis: some participants appear more frequently and in greater depth, while others feature only occasionally - a reflection not of their relevance to the study but of the limits of what they were willing or able to share.

5.7 Ethical Considerations

Reflexivity and Positionality

My personal biases and social location are central to this research. Although I am Polish, the cultural and linguistic practices of the Pogranicze residents differ significantly from those of my own upbringing; thus, a shared national identity does not guarantee an inherent understanding of their lived experiences. Furthermore, my affiliation with a foreign academic

institution may invite specific assumptions regarding my ideological leanings, potentially fostering mistrust or influencing the nature of participant responses, I made sure to be fully transparent about my purpose to collect data that will reveal the complexity of local voices, not judge them against any checklist. I suppose that my understanding of Pogranicze is also rooted in stereotypes, and its effects are, in most cases, unpredictable. Therefore, I dedicate equal analytical time to data that contradicts my expectations.

Epistemology And Attempted Neutrality

Knowledge production is never politically neutral (Davies et al., 2023). Drawing on Black Feminist Thought, power relations dictate "who is believed and why" (Collins, 2000 cited in Davies et al., 2023), and epistemic violence occurs when the truth claims of marginalised or othered groups are silenced by hegemonic power (Davies et al., 2023). This is directly relevant to a study conducted in the context of a state-managed information flow.

I attempt to mitigate this by avoiding reproduction of state narratives – while still using the term 'hybrid war' as it is defined and deployed by both scholars and politicians, since that framing is itself the object of critical scrutiny in this thesis rather than an uncritical starting point.

6. FINDINGS

The empirical findings presented in this section explore how residents experience, enact, and interpret providing help to migrants against the backdrop of "hybrid war," revealing not a unified community voice but a wide spectrum of responses.

6.1 The Act of Helping

1. The ultimate nature of help

Helping at a basic level of needs among all interviews has reached a point of saturation. Every respondent, without exception, affirms that a human body in immediate distress cannot be left

without basic care. Feeding a hungry person, giving water to someone dehydrated, covering someone who is freezing – these acts are described in remarkably similar language across the sample: as a "reflex," a "duty," something that "has to be done." This finding is consistent.

The 23-year-old interviewee, Kacper, identifies this as an "ultimate and universal" principle – the kind of moral certainty that requires no justification because it precedes political reasoning.

Wanda (c.75[9]) , the longest residing person in Pogranicze from the participants, who lives just next to the border barrier, demonstrates it in practice: despite opposing large-scale asylum and on structural grounds, exemplifying distrust towards migrants, she shares with a man hiding behind her fence water, soup, and sausage because something in her simply tell to act on "human reflex" (Wanda, c.75).

Ola (c.40) pragmatically expresses herself, framing help as self-evident:

> *"If they turn up somewhere, it's worth giving them something to eat, giving them some water."* (Ola, c.40)

Asia (c.40), present during the interview with Ola, adds an anecdote about her lumberjack husband instinctively offering sandwiches to a person on the move that he has met in the forest.

Kacper identifies water and food as an "ultimate and universal" obligation.

Even Jan (c.60), a man who moved to Podlasie years ago in search of peace and solitude, acknowledges he would help someone injured in the forest, despite holding a deeply legalistic view that strongly supports the state action.

However, there is a nuance, perhaps most clearly articulated from a philosophical standpoint by Martyna (c.35), a middle-aged respondent whose background lies in creative work:

> *"There is a moral obligation to help... it depends on how much capacity we have, how much strength. And to whom."* (Martyna, c.35)

[9] Circa 70 years old.

In this view, she places practical boundaries around the duty to assist without altogether dismissing its ethical weight and suggests there is a quality to the helped person.

2. Where Consensus Ends: The Question of What Happens After

The moral consensus around the sandwich and the glass of water dissolves once the question shifts from *whether* to help to *what help means* and *what it entails*. The ultimate moral reflex ends, and it maps onto fundamentally different understandings of what the act of helping is *for*.

Szymon (15), in the presence of his mom, Ola (c.45) who live together near the border, confesses that they would occasionally call the guards in case the migrating person entered their property, otherwise they let them pass– a pragmatic threshold shaped less by hostility than by a fundamental absence of threat. Szymon adds: "They just keep going, looking for a place to stay" (Szymon, 15). For this family, such occurrences have become a normalised feature of daily life. Zosia (18), Szymon's sister, reinforces this with a similarly matter-of-fact observation – "refugees don't want anything from us" (Zosia, 18). Ola, suggests that those in genuine need are helped by activist organisations, implying that not every person passing through requires or expects assistance. Help, based on these statements, is neither refused nor actively offered; it is simply not always necessary.

For Jan, help is a legally bound procedure. As a person with a background in legal training, he draws a sharp line between "humanitarian assistance in a state of higher necessity" (Jan, c.60) – which he accepts as both a moral and legal obligation – and what he calls "facilitating illegal border crossing," (Jan, c.60), which mimics the language used by Border Guards. In his view, the procedural endpoint of any act of help is non-negotiable: the person must be handed over to state services. He articulates this with precision:

> *"I would help, but after providing assistance, I would certainly call the services."* (Jan, c.60)

An interview with a Białowieża National Park worker, Hela (c. 50) revealed a similar dynamic. She said it is her duty to notify the Border guards, despite claiming she would of course, help someone hungry.

While on duty, Marek (c.60), a former border guard officer, operated within exactly the framework Jan describes. But in retirement, he admits that if he were to encounter a migrant in the forest today, he would *not* call the services:

> *"I certainly wouldn't call any services; I would point him toward the West and share some food... international protection applications are suspended, so there is only one direction. Back."* (Marek, c.60)

A man who spent his professional life enforcing the border now declares that the most humane act is to quietly assist someone. His reasoning is not primarily driven by morals, but it is fatalistic: the system is so "senseless," (Marek, c.60), so thoroughly incapable of producing dignified outcomes for migrants, as he says – "asylum applications suspended, only one direction possible - back, a pushback" (Marek, c.60), that feeding them and sending them onward is the only act that has any relationship to reality. Here, help is redefined as non-harm, as an act of omission rather than active rescue. Not calling the services is itself the help. This is a quietly radical position from a man who otherwise remains institutionally loyal to the border guard as a formation.

Beata (c.55) reflects negatively on activists, suggesting they are motivated by financial gain rather than genuine concern – revealing an implicit definition of help as an act of pure, disinterested will, untainted by formal organisation or opposition to the state. This sentiment is echoed by Radek (c.55), who speaks dismissively of a self-described activist from a nearby village, portraying her as eccentric and not taken seriously by the local community. Together, these accounts point to a broader pattern of suspicion toward organised, visible solidarity in the borderland context. This is further supported by a respondent[10] who actively assists migrants yet deliberately refuses the label of activist - perhaps out of a calculated desire to avoid the social stratification that the term carries locally. For this person, helping is something one simply does; to name it as activism is to invite the very distance from the community that securitisation has made so affectively costly [11].

For Martyna, help is morally obligatory but structurally "senseless" – and she holds both of these truths simultaneously without resolving the tension. She describes activist work in the

[10] The respondent was not officially interviewed and the topic emerged in a spontaneous conversation but became included as part of a fieldwork observation upon consent.
[11] See Ahmed (2014) as introduced in theoretical framework.

forest as “Sisyphean labour”(Martyna, c.40) and “chwilówka”(Martyna, c.40) (a short-term fix, like a payday loan) - urgent, necessary, and ultimately unable to address the political machine that produces the suffering it temporarily relieves. She does not sentimentalise the helper or the act of helping. Help is what you do because people are suffering in front of you; it is not a solution and should not be mistaken for one, deeply criticising the system. She explicitly refuses to align herself with either the official “dangerous migrants” narrative or the counter-narrative.

Crucially, she also relativises the *obligation* to help through the lens of the helper's own resources: “It depends how much capacity we have.” (Martyna, c.40) This is not a retreat from solidarity but an acknowledgment that helpers are not unlimited, that witnessing suffering produces a kind of exhaustion.

For Kinga (24), who works at the local Culture Centre, helping is a legitimate and visible act, and this institutionalisation is both a source of legitimacy and a limit. By operating through a state-funded organisation, her help is legal, visible, and deniable as radical. The Culture Centre sends care packages to detention centres - socks, underwear, warm jackets - responding to written requests from migrants already inside the system. This is help that operates *within* state rather than against it, and Kinga frames it as such. Yet this form of help is followed by her suspicion: she mentions that packages may be confiscated by the detention centre staff before they reach recipients. This suggests that even help that fully complies with state structures cannot escape state control.

For Wanda, help is a face-to-face, spontaneous act – but one she immediately constrains and retreats from. The moment of feeding the man behind her fence is described almost as something that happened *to* her, involuntarily:

> *“it just triggers a human reflex.”* (Wanda, c.75)

She brought him food. But she also draws a sharp boundary:

> *“I won't get too deeply involved because I don't know who he is.” (Wanda, c.75)*

The man is perceived as a stranger “other”, therefore not trusted. Wanda restraint is not primarily political - it seems relational, influenced by fearing the stranger.

For Zosia, Szymon, Ola, and Asia, help is quiet, pre-procedural, and specifically designed not to trigger the state apparatus. They stated they would not call the guards for no reason. Yet, the decision is not presented as civil disobedience or activism, but simply as the obvious thing a human does in the current reality of living in Pogranicze. It suggests that for some borderland residents, the criminalisation of assistance has been adopted subconsciously but not morally accepted - they know calling could be legally required; they simply do not do it, quietly and without drama.

3. The Criminalisation of Help

Several respondents explicitly name the legal risk of assisting border crossers, citing provisions in Polish law around, in Jan's words: "facilitating illegal border crossing" (Jan, c.60) - provisions used to prosecute activists, most famously in the case of the "Hajnówka Five". Reactions to the acquittal of the "Hajnówka Five" divided the respondents. Martyna expressed deep respect for the verdict and personal admiration for one of the activists while Jan called it a scandal, describing the defendants as having run a "stationary canteen for migrants" (Jan, c.60) and arguing they should have been convicted. Several respondents were unaware of the case, suggesting that for some residents, local events connected to the humanitarian crisis remain of marginal interest.

Moreover, Marek points out that locals are reluctant to help, not because they are unwilling, but because they do not know where the legal boundary is. It seems like the criminalisation of assistance has not stopped residents from helping but has shaped the forms it takes.

6.2 Emotional Coping Mechanisms

1. Affective numbing ("Water off a Duck's Back")

Both Kinga and Ola exemplify what can be viewed as affective numbing. When exposed to an overwhelming crisis, narratives from both state security organs and human rights groups, these participants might choose to practice intentional emotional containment to protect their mental

health. Possible response to the voices of securitisation that emphasise the security need. Kinga describes this coping mechanism using a vivid metaphor:

> *"I don't have any strong opinions on this subject... this information rolls right off me like water off a duck's back. I feel like I already have such a strong distance from all these negative pieces of information flowing from the world..."(Kinga, 24)*

Her disengagement seems like a refusal of the emotional urgency.

Similarly, during the conversation with Ola and Asia, Ola echoed this stance, stating, "We don't interest ourselves in such things... I ignored you guys for a moment because you're just chatting away." This emotional numbing is not a sign of moral ignorance or a lack of basic empathy. Rather, it is a strategy not to become consumed by daily structural distress.

2. Compassion Fatigue and Frustration with Absurdity

In sharp contrast to those practising emotional detachment, Martyna embodies intense empathy frequently expressed through deep frustration and compassion fatigue. Because she refuses to adopt an informational blackout or a distant stance, her proximity to human suffering during freezing winter conditions – "down to minus 30 degrees" (Martyna, c.35)– manifests as an explicit, vulgar rejection of the entire border infrastructure.

> *"What do I think about the situation?... Well, it's fucked up [chujowo]... Because it's unresolvable. It's completely pointless. It's inhumane. It's very harmful... It's just stupid."* (Martyna, c.35)

Martyna's use of raw, expressive language underscores the severe psychological burden borne by residents who refuse to dissociate their moral code from the realities of the crisis. She experiences a sense of absurdity: performing what she views as a basic, non-negotiable moral obligation within a state-imposed environment that actively criminalises and punishes that very act.

3. Legal Rationalisation and Ironic Detachment

A third emotional modality is represented by Jan, an educated resident with a legal background. Jan experiences no fear or compassion fatigue. Instead, he maintains a highly relaxed, ironical distance from the crisis, lightheartedly joking and anthropomorphising his dog during the recorded interview.

Jan fully subordinates his humanitarian reflexes to strict state legalism. As described in the help section, he insists that this act of helping must terminate in an official report to the authorities. His emotional calmness is entirely sustained by his faith in the state's legal sovereignty and its control over legitimate physical violence.

4. Fear

Zosia recounts that her neighbours packed their belongings and left after encountering migrants hiding in their wheat field - a response that speaks to the depth of fear that media representations of the crisis had produced in the community. Zosia herself, however, is critical of that coverage, arguing that it fails to portray what is actually happening at the border. Ola states that some reporting was subject to manipulation, constructing a version of events that depicted migrants as violent and dangerous - a portrayal that, in their view, bears no resemblance to reality.

Beata (c.55) states that she is not afraid of refugees, and illustrates this with a story of neighbours who helped a person on the move by charging their powerbank and giving them gloves. She draws a clear distinction between those whose fear leads them to call the border guards and her own position - she would not call. This is not merely a personal preference but an informed one: she is aware that migrants actively ask locals not to alert the authorities, and she understands and respects that request. It seems that for some residents, knowledge of migrants' actual fears - rather than the state's construction of them as threatening - has become the framework for decision-making, quietly shifting the securitisation logic without openly confronting it.

6.3. Borderland Identity and the State-Imposed Securitisation

1. The Radicalisation Paradox and Hybrid Identities

One of the interesting findings is formulated by Martyna, who identifies a paradox in the borderland. She observes that direct, sustained contact with cultural diversity and a geopolitical crisis, rather than fostering openness, frequently drives local populations toward nationalist entrenchment:

> *"This intersection of different cultures... instead of people becoming more tolerant, they become more radical. Instead of opening up, they close themselves off and fight fiercely for this 'Polishness', as if someone wanted to steal it." (Martyna c.35)*

Crucially, Martyna traces this nationalism back to families with mixed, non-homogenous ethnic roots, suggesting, tentatively, that for those individuals, negative emotions might be rooted in individuals' own experience of social exclusion.

2. Faith and protection

Findings show that religiosity does not necessarily collide with state action, but rather can support its action.

Wanda, who practices orthodox Christianity, expressed that "the government is from God," (Wanda, c.75) She rationalises state-sanctioned actions while simultaneously maintaining that "helping another human being is never a crime." (Wanda, c.75)

Furthermore, Marek shares a similar sentiment as he explains that many border guards are believers. He claims that they didn't experience any dissonance as they were doing "what the formation was called to do." (Marek, c.60)

3. The Alienation of the Border Space and the Defence of the Uniform

It seems that the state narrative has disturbed the local community's relationship with its own space. For some, the massive influx of anonymous soldiers and border guards deployed from outside regions has changed the traditional, familiar trust that once characterised Hajnówka County. Ola also notes that now they do not know the people, suggesting a loss of familiarity with Pogranicze's community. Kinga explicitly notes this spatial alienation, stating:

> *"I feel more threatened by the services that move around the streets all the time... They have a very strong opinion of themselves." (Kinga, 24)*

Conversely, from Beata's perspective, the military and border guard presence is neutral, not special in the region, even though their presence is more apparent now. She adds that they do not bother her. For conservative residents like Jan, the physical border barrier is celebrated as a symbol of protection, and the state uniform is fiercely defended. In these accounts, any critique of the military or the Border Guard is treated as a direct social assault on the local community itself.

4. Borderland censorship

The mural at the Culture Centre in Czeremcha- a collaborative project involving local youth and hired artists- is a portrayal of the current situation at the border, envisioned though solidarity and hospitality, as Kinga mentioned earlier is "ours" i.e characteristic for the region. It brings together children's art, scenes of helping in the forest, Orthodox imagery, rainbow symbolism, and anti-militarist slogans in a single shared space, reflecting the ideological heterogeneity of the community that produced it.

That significance is confirmed by what happened to it. The rainbow-shirted figure was deemed controversial, and an illustration of a popular anti-military slogan, "Take off your uniform, apologise to your mother" was painted over. The targeting of these two specific elements is telling. Both represent forms of expression that challenge the region's standards: one by introducing LGBTQ visibility into a space where issues of tolerance (Poleszczuk et al., 2013) are seen as a "value", the other by directing explicit criticism at the security apparatus the state has deployed at the border. Kinga adds that the Culture House and its principal received a lot

of hate online. Their removal was not random censorship but a politically legible act – a signal about which voices are permitted to exist in the borderland's public space and which are not. What the community built as a heterogeneous, contested record of living through the crisis, the local authority partially erased. The mural's incompleteness is itself a finding.



Figure 3 Mural on Czeremcha Culture House (Rodowicz 2024)

6.4 Summary

The findings reveal that among Pogranicze residents, a universal humanitarian ground exists across the entire sample as every respondent, regardless of political orientation, affirms that a person in immediate physical distress cannot be left without basic care. This consensus, however, is the only one. Beyond sharing the sandwich and giving the glass of water, understandings of help differ along relational, procedural, fatalistic, and institutional orientations, reflecting a community whose relationship to the crisis varies rather than is unified.

The criminalisation of assistance shapes how help is practised across the community. Legal provisions around facilitating border crossing have not turned residents against migrants – but they have made people afraid to act on the compassion they continue to hold. The result is that help takes different forms depending on how visible it is: small, private acts go unnoticed;

institutionally embedded help operates safely within the system; but organised, visible solidarity risks prosecution. This is not only a legal distinction – it also determines which acts of help feel permissible and which feel dangerous.

Residents have developed distinct emotional coping mechanisms in response to sustained crisis. Affective numbing and deliberate detachment protect some from being overwhelmed; compassion fatigue and frustration characterise those who remain empathetic to the suffering; and legal rationalisation allows others to remain calm by subordinating humanitarian instinct to state authority. Fear circulates unevenly - most powerfully among those whose knowledge of migrants is mediated through state and media narratives, and least among those with direct experience with the migrants.

At the level of borderland identity, the findings reveal a paradox. Rather than fostering openness, sustained exposure to cultural diversity and crisis has pushed some residents – particularly those with mixed ethnic backgroundds – toward nationalist behaviors. Furthermore, the presence of external security forces has divided the community: some feel alienated in their own space, others feel protected. The partial censorship of the Culture Centre mural confirms that the silencing of dissenting voices reaches into the community's own cultural life.

What the findings collectively suggest is that in Pogranicze, the act of helping migrants is never simply humanitarian. It is a site where fear, moral obligation, legal risk, borderland identity, and state power visibly collide. How residents understand, practice, and feel about help gives an insight into what living under securitisation in a borderland community means.

7. DISCUSSION

This discussion explores what findings about helping reveal about the interplay between emotional coping, borderland identity and state-imposed securitisation. It will also address each of the identified gaps in the literature.

7.1 The moral ground and its limits

The study's key theoretical finding is the existence of a universal 'moral ground': every respondent, regardless of political orientation, affirmed that a person in immediate physical distress must receive basic care. CBOS survey data showing that 71% of Poles believe in the necessity of helping others corresponds to this finding (Głowacki, 2024), and complements it by revealing that this impulse persists even among those who oppose migration at the structural level. Ahmed's (2014) framework of affective economies helps explain this. While the state's securitisation of migration has successfully circulated fear around the abstract figure of the migrant-as-weapon, this circulation loses its grip when faced with a suffering body in proximity (Ahmed, 2014; Bekić, 2022; Bigo, 2002; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Huysmans, 2006). At the fence or in the forest, the dehumanising 'stickiness' of the state's narrative is deactivated – the migrant becomes a specific person asking for water, and compassion functions as an ethical residue that survives ideological capture (Ahmed, 2014; Morera-Bello et al., 2026).

The findings thus distinguish two affective orientations: a *mediated* one, produced through the repetition of fear at a distance, where securitisation successfully attaches fear to the sign of "the migrant"; and a *relational* one, activated by direct encounter, where the distressed body becomes sticky with compassion rather than threat (Ahmed, 2014; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006).

Beyond this ground, however, affect is shaped by securitisation's conditions (Ahmed, 2014; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006). Once the question shifts from *whether* to help to *what* help means, affective consensus dissolves – diverging into relational, procedural, fatalistic, and institutional orientations (Ahmed, 2014). These reflect not simply different values but different affective economies structured by the securitisation of Pogranicze (Ahmed, 2014; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006). This finding begins to fill the gap between structural accounts of hybrid warfare and the

subjective experience of borderland residents, offering a micro-level account of why people help that macro-level geopolitical analysis has not been able to provide.

Martyna's reflection, "It depends on how much capacity we have and how much strength. And to whom" suggests that the universal human impulse is not entirely without condition, pointing to deservingness of the person in need as the underlying factor. This is where the state's construction of migrants as threats becomes prominent, shaping humanitarian responses (Ahmed, 2014; Wyszyński et al., 2020).

7.2 Securitisation and the stratification of solidarity

The findings reveal that securitisation operates in Pogranicze not as a response to an objective threat but as a discursive act that transforms migration into an emergency and encodes helping as dangerous (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998). What the empirical material adds, through investigating help, is a local account of what that construction does to people living within it.

Securitisation has not eliminated solidarity – it has reorganised it by visibility. Small, private acts survive; institutionally embedded help persists within legitimate structures; visible, organised solidarity attracts prosecution (Czarnota et al., 2021). This is the direct empirical trace of what Bigo (2002) and Huysmans (2006) describe as the infrastructure of fear: legal instruments and enforcement networks that do not need to be consistently applied to be effective (Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006). They produce uncertainty that residents regulate themselves, which is precisely what Marek observes when he notes that locals were reluctant to help, not because they did not want to, but because they did not know if it is legal. Similarly, Halemba's (2022) observes that humanitarian aid in the Pogranicze region has become a site of deep polarisation. The presented study adds that the polarisation works not only between pro- and anti-helping residents, but within individuals themselves, between what they know is legally required and what they feel is morally right.

Yet the findings also reveal what macro-level securitisation theory cannot account for alone. The normalised non-reporting of Szymon's family and other participants – letting people pass, not calling the guards, without framing this as resistance – shows that the state's legal architecture has been absorbed procedurally without being accepted morally (Ahmed, 2014

Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006). This gap between legal internalisation and moral rejection is what the geopolitical scholarship on hybrid warfare has missed by remaining at the structural level (Bekić, 2022; Halemba, 2022; Straczuk, 2024; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998). The stratification of solidarity is a macro-level outcome, but the decisions that produce it are made in the immediate proximity – at a scale only close attention to individual experience can reach.

7.3 Affected as negotiated, not determined

The emotional coping mechanisms documented across the participants provide an empirical demonstration that affect circulates socially but remains interpretive and irreducible to any single determining force (Ahmed, 2014). The same securitisation pressure produces radically different emotional responses, and that variation is precisely what Ahmed's (2014) framework predicts (Ahmed, 2014; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006).

Kinga's deliberate detachment and Ola's indifference are not failures of empathy but affective strategies – ways of refusing the emotional urgency that securitisation demands of its audience (Ahmed, 2014; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998). The state's infrastructure of fear requires a responsive public; these residents withdraw that responsiveness, quietly resisting the affective economy securitisation attempts to produce (Ahmed, 2014; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006). Adopting Morera-Bello et al.'s (2026) concept of moral indifference, through which they identify indifference as a product of lacking perceived responsibility, the findings from Pogranicze suggest it can be a conscious protective strategy rather than just a passive absence of care.

Martyna represents the opposite position, yet she too resists the state's framing – from the other direction. Her compassion fatigue and raw frustration are the accumulation of emotions that have 'stuck', through sustained proximity, to the figure of the migrant as suffering person rather than threat (Ahmed, 2014). Stickiness works here against securitisation: repeated encounter has produced an affect so dense it spills into a rejection of the entire border infrastructure (Ahmed, 2014; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006).

Jan represents a third response: someone whose emotions are fully organised by the state's logic (Ahmed, 2014; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006). He feels no moral tension because the legal framework has resolved it for him – fear and discomfort have been replaced by procedural certainty. His calm is not indifference; it is the emotional result of completely accepting the state's position that humanitarian help and border security are incompatible (Halemba, 2022; Ahmed, 2014).

The fear findings confirm Ahmed's (2014) argument about scale. The neighbours who fled after encountering migrants in their wheat field show fear produced through mediated circulation – threat attached to the migrant figure before any direct encounter (Ahmed, 2014). Ula's account shows the opposite: relational knowledge of migrants' own fears has displaced the state's construction as her own way to make decisions. Proximity disrupts what distance constructs (Ahmed, 2014). However, Ahmed (2014) also notes that proximity can work in the opposite direction – it can intensify rather than dissolve fear when the encounter is unexpected, unwanted, or occurs on territory the person experiences as their own, just like in the case of the neighbours who fled after people on the move hid in their wheat field (Ahmed, 2014). This poses a limitation to this interpretation, which can be explored in further studies on the effect of direct encounters.

Together, the findings show that securitisation structures the conditions under which affect circulates but does not determine its outcomes (Ahmed, 2014; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006). The emotional diversity of the participants is itself the evidence that affect remains negotiated, locally embedded, and resistant to uniform production by state discourse (Anzaldúa, 2007; Ahmed, 2014; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998).

7.4 Borderland Identity as a context

Securitisation theory explains the structural conditions under which residents act, and Ahmed illuminates how emotions circulate within them (Ahmed, 2014; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006). What neither can fully account for is why this particular population responds the way it does – why contradictions are tolerated rather than resolved, why normalised non-reporting feels unremarkable, why the same community produces both nationalism and quiet solidarity (Ahmed, 2014; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 2002;

Huysmans, 2006). This is where Anzaldúa's borderland background becomes vital (Anzaldúa, 2007, Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, in Zygadło, 2017)

Pogranicze has a long history of inhabiting contradiction – between languages, religions, and state systems – and that history shapes how the current crisis is received (Babiński,1994; Barwiński, 2004). Mestiza consciousness, understood here as background context, makes legible what might otherwise appear as inconsistency: Wanda accepting state authority while feeding someone at her fence; Marek defending the Border Guard while privately refusing to report migrants (Anzaldúa, 2007, pp. 100–105). These are not contradictions to be resolved but a way of living that has long required holding opposing demands simultaneously (Anzaldúa, 2007, pp. 100–105).

The findings suggest that securitisation has neither straightforwardly strengthened nor fractured borderland identity – it has rearranged it (Anzaldúa, 2007; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006) . Martyna's statement about radicalisation is relevant: some residents, particularly those with mixed ethnic backgrounds, have responded to crisis with nationalist entrenchment rather than openness. Anzaldúa's background makes this legible as a historically rooted response – the most defensive attachments to homogenous identity emerging not from confidence but from a long experience of marginalisation (Anzaldúa, 2007).

The mural's censorship brings all three frameworks together most concisely (Anzaldúa, 2007; Ahmed, 2014; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006). Securitisation explains why dissenting voices are regulated; Ahmed (2014) explains the affective hostility directed at the Culture Centre; and Anzaldúa's (2007) background explains what was being silenced – a community's heterogeneous, historically layered account of its own reality, which the state's securitisation logic cannot accommodate (Anzaldúa, 2007; Ahmed, 2014; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006). The mural's story is not only a finding about censorship; it is a finding about what borderland identity looks like from the inside (Anzaldúa, 2007; Ahmed, 2014; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006).

7.5 The human dimensions of Migrant-resident coexistence

Existing scholarship tends to treat migrants and borderland residents as separate subjects, leaving the human texture of their coexistence largely untheorised. The findings suggest this separation is empirically false.

What emerges across multiple responses is not a community encountering migrants as external disruption but one that has absorbed their presence into daily life. For Szymon's family, people crossing their land have become unremarkable – neither a crisis nor a cause. Szymon's description of migrants as people who " /…/ just keep going, looking for a place to stay" reflects quiet recognition rather than indifference: these are people with a destination, asking for nothing. Their normalised non-reporting is not civil disobedience; it is the common response of people for whom coexistence has become habitual (Anzaldúa, 2007; Babiński, 1994).

What the findings reveal is a form of coexistence that existing literature has not theorised - quiet, non-political, affectively grounded, and historically enabled (Anzaldúa, 2007; Ahmed, 2014). Not organised solidarity, not hostility. Something more mundane and perhaps more durable: the normalisation of shared presence in a place defined by the meeting of difference (Anzaldúa, 2007; Babiński, 1994). This is what Beznec et al. (2020) reffer to as "everyday humanitarianism", rooted in shared historical experience of displacement and coexistence, not always in political commitments.

8. CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored how residents of Pogranicze experience and interpret the act of helping migrants under conditions of hybrid war by documenting the reasoning, emotional responses and everyday decisions of a community that navigates tensiosn between humanitarian instinct and state criminalisation of help. Findings reveal that help in Pogranicze is neither uniform nor simply politically determined. The existence of universal humanitarian ground is observed among all the participants – every resident affirms that a body in immediate distress cannot be

left without care. Beyond that ground, however, help differs along relational, procedural, fatalistic, and institutional orientations. Some help because they encounter a person in need and cannot do otherwise. Others hand the person to the state, interpreting help as acting within legal boundaries. Others redefine help as non-harm – not reporting, "pointing west", staying silent. What connects these differing practices is that none of them are politically neutral: each is a negotiated response to a state that has made solidarity dangerous (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006). Findings from Pogranicze align with previous literature suggesting that humanitarian aid in securitised border zones has shifted from a private moral choice to a deeply polarised political act (Agier, 2017; Bigo, 2002; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Halemba, 2022; Huysmans, 2006; Lampredi, 2024; Morera-Bello et al., 2026).

The interplay is neither linear nor predictable. Securitisation structures the conditions under which residents act - criminalising visibility, producing legal uncertainty, stratifying solidarity (Ahmed, 2014; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006). But it does not determine how residents feel or what they do (Ahmed, 2014). Affect remains negotiated: the same pressure produces numbing in some, compassion fatigue in others, and legal rationalisation in others (Ahmed, 2014). Borderland identity – historically constituted, ambiguity-tolerant, practised in contradiction – provides the ground on which both securitisation and affect operate, explaining why coexistence feels unremarkable to some, why contradictions go unresolved, and why quiet solidarity persists without needing to name itself (Anzaldúa, 2007, Ahmed, 2014; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006). Together, the three frameworks reveal that Pogranicze residents are not passive recipients of state-imposed crisis but a community actively navigating its contradictions through resources, that is affective, moral and identity-based, that the "hybrid war" narrative can constrain but cannot fully capture (Ahmed, 2014; Anzaldúa, 2007; Bekić, 2022; Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006).

9. APPENDIX

Use of AI

AI tools were used to support several stages of this thesis. Interviews were transcribed into English, and fieldwork notes tidied using AI assistance. At an early stage, NotebookLM was used to summarise and organise literature gathered for the review. Claude was used to systematically organising analytical notes and sorting quotes into tables according to themes emerging from the interviews, as well as pointing out repetitions in my writing. Importantly, the software was used to enhance my vocabulary and find better ways to phrase sentences. Grammarly was used to improve academic language, grammar, and punctuation. Finally, Claude was used to format the bibliography according to the Lusem referencing style.

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