

A year ago, I would not expect receiving an award for defending basic human rights such as the right to life and dignity. Not in Poland, not in the European Union, not in the XXI century.

Receiving the Human Rights Award from ProAsyl foundation is a great honour for me personally and for Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights. We perceive it as a sign of a great solidarity in the dark times of intensified attempts of the Polish government to criminalise those aiding at the border. But it is also a sad reminder that the struggle for borders free from suffering continues.

When Russia invaded Ukraine, it took only a few hours for civil society actors, NGOs and regular people, to arrive at the Polish-Ukrainian border in order to help those fleeing the war. Driven by nothing but compassion and empathy, they offered shelter, food, and transport for those who had to leave everything behind. The whole world, not without a reason, was praising Poland for this unprecedentedly warm welcome of refugees.

But after the first wave of enthusiasm, a lot of people started asking: how is it possible that Poland is so open to hosting refugees fleeing Ukraine while at the same time applying inhumane policies at its other border: the border with Belarus? The border where since August 2021 people from destabilised or war-torn African and Middle Eastern countries, lured by the Belarusian regime under the false promise of a safe passage to Europe, keep trying to enter Poland seeking for protection.

It was exactly a year ago when Polish government introduced the state of emergency along the border with Belarus. The justification was “a threat to national security and public order resulting from the increased numbers of irregular border crossings”. The aim was to restrict access to the border area for media, independent monitors and organisations providing legal or humanitarian help to migrants and asylum-seekers. The level of human rights violations that started taking place at that border over a year ago is hardly described. People, including the whole families, who fled atrocities of war in Syria, Afghanistan, or Yemen, being taken to military trucks, driven to the border, and forced to cross the razor-wire fence or rivers back to Belarus. With no access to asylum or any other legal proceedings, no individual assessment, and no identification of their vulnerabilities. People hiding in the forests, full of swamps and wildlife, with no access to food, shelter or drinking water, hoping not to get pushed-back again. Families getting separated, unaccompanied children wandering alone in the woods, people freezing to death, sick men and women not being able to receive medical aid. Not only the right to asylum was undermined, but also very fundamental rights like the right to life, freedom from inhuman treatment and torture, right to dignity, or rights of children. Also, the freedom of media was under threat with journalists not being authorised to enter the border zone.

There are two different stories that can be told about the humanitarian crisis unfolding at the Polish-Belarusian border. One story is of the state’s response to the crisis: militarisation of the border, erection of the wall, violent push-backs, criminalisation of humanitarian aid and anti-immigrant narrative. But the other story and the whole different one is of the people’s reaction to the crisis. And this is what I would like to share with you because it is truly inspiring. Despite the difficult circumstances and governmental strict policies, there was a great social mobilisation to help those stranded in the Polish-Belarusian forests. In the fall of last year, thousands or maybe hundreds of thousands of people in Poland strongly voiced their disagreement for the policy which led to suffering and numerous deaths.

And we still see many forms of resistance against the unjust policies at the Poland's borders. Providing legal assistance to both migrants and criminalised activists, as done by Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, is only one of them. Being a part of informal coalition "Grupa Granica", together with other NGOs we managed to set a legal helpline for migrants and activists, built an anti-repression system capable of providing legal counsel to every person facing harassment or criminalisation, set an effective monitoring system, collect evidence of human rights violations and obtain, so far, over 80 interim measures granted by the European Court of Human Rights obliging Polish authorities not to remove people to Belarus.

But there are also other ways and other people undertaking incredible effort to resist the inhumane border policies: volunteer doctors providing first aid in the dark forests, activists devoting their spare time to provide humanitarian assistance at the border, psychologists, interpreters, celebrities raising their voice publicly, people fundraising money, collecting sleeping bags and warm clothes, cooking soups, and shipping them to the border. A lot of help came from the German civil society as well.

What is, sadly, still missing at the Polish-Belarusian border are the professional humanitarian organisations. I want to stress it clearly: the whole humanitarian effort at the Polish-Belarusian border in the last year has been done solely by the grassroots initiatives and people who prior to the crisis had no experience in saving people's lives. By people who underwent urgent first aid trainings, packed their heavy backpacks with food and blankets and went to the forests, risking not only criminalisation but also long-term consequences like PTSD and damage to their family life. The absence of professional humanitarian organisations on the ground is especially striking now when you see how many of them set their offices and send their staff to work at the Polish-Ukrainian border.

As both Polish state and professional humanitarian actors failed to provide protection to those who need it, the underground network of assistance emerged. Without this network many more people would have died in the Polish forests. A lot were rescued by local inhabitants who used self-made stretchers to take them out of the forests. By doctors who treated their wounds and set their broken bones. By volunteers who fed them and gave them warm blankets. By lawyers who successfully filed for interim measures to the European Court of Human Rights. It is exactly what happened on so many other borders before: where states fail, social resistance emerge.

After the year of the crisis, I have very little hope in the change of the policy of the current government. I have very little hope in other EU governments condemning push-backs happening at the Poland's border. I have also very little hope in the European Union pushing member states to respect the EU law at their external borders. But I do have a lot of hope in the people who want to change this world and keep reminding the governments that there will always be resistance when the policies are unjust.

XXI century is a century of migration. The numbers of people moving from one place to another or being forcibly displaced have never been as high in the human's history. With the whole mix of reasons, people decide to leave their home countries and move. Obviously, we tend to think primarily about people from poorer regions of the world trying to reach the wealthier countries: on foot, on boats, in semitrailers. But that's only a part of the picture. With the eruption of cheap flights right before the pandemic, the migration was on a rise also the other way around. The reasons are plenty: tourism, education, work, love, adventure. But also: natural disasters, war, and

persecution. People migrate simply because they want to live a good life. And that's what they've always been doing.

However, with the nowadays strict visa and border regimes, it is more and more difficult for most of the people in the world to do it safely. Dense forests at the Polish-Belarusian border are not the only place where people suffer. Greek-Turkish border on the river Evros, Italian-Libyan border in the Mediterranean, razor-wire fences at the Spanish-Moroccan border, desert at the US-Mexican border, high seas around Australia. It is always a combination of natural landscape and man's actions that lead to the suffering of those travelling without authorisation. Violence is present at almost all external borders of the so-called Global North states. People who are not welcomed there are often being beaten, abused, tased, their phones are being smashed or stolen, their belongings are being taken away from them.

Governments say that this is to "keep our border safe". But I don't know how anybody could feel safe with that level of state violence towards anybody. Instead, I believe that the safe borders are the borders where nobody dies.

People who move suffer not only at the borders. They suffer in the detention facilities, deportation centres, awaiting their asylum decisions for years, struggling with access to health care or education, facing homelessness, or not being able to reunite with their loved ones who stayed behind. Obviously, this only concerns those who move from poorer to wealthier countries. When the migration goes other way around, nobody detains you. Instead, you have all the privileges as an "expat".

I have a lot of doubts whether it is fair that the burden of nowadays inequalities and climate change effects is being born mostly by people from the poorer regions of the world. Especially when you learn about the reasons behind these changes and which countries participate the most to the CO2 emission. The wealthiest ones. We are entering the era where more people would flee due to environmental reasons than wars and conflicts. Just think about recent floods in Pakistan, heat waves in India and Iraq, desertification, draughts, and famine in African countries caused by the climate change. Are we really going to let people fleeing these places die at our borders?

I truly believe that we can still shape migration and border regimes in more just and equal way. In a way that would not lead to human suffering. We should advocate for the human rights-centred approach to migration and global responsibility sharing. Because not only we are capable of providing humane treatment to people at our borders; we owe them that. And the way that Ukrainian refugees are being received and hosted in European countries prove that different asylum policies are possible.

To end, I would like to stress that I don't think I have all the right answers on how the migration policies should be shaped. Probably nobody has them and it is okay that we differ in opinions. But I am convinced to my core that border violence leading to mass suffering of human beings is not the right answer. We do not even need human rights conventions to know instinctively that this is wrong. It is not what we should accept and get used to. We should never normalise it.

Contrary to what some may think, demanding from the governments to respect fundamental rights at the borders and providing every person access to dignified and humanitarian proceedings, is not an extreme postulate. What is extreme is the level of violence and suffering people encounter when seeking for better place to live their lives.

Instead of violence, we need kindness and compassion. And that's what I think is the most significant thing that the human rights groups are bringing to the borders where the states fail. Even if we cannot help all the people in the world dying or suffering every day due to poverty, natural disasters, human rights violations, or armed conflicts, we can still break the spiral of violence and show basic human solidarity by welcoming each person arriving to our border with looking into their eyes, seeing a fellow human being in them, and asking them kindly: what is your story and how can I help you? Only as much and so much. As Mahatma Gandhi once rightly said: "If you want something really important to be done you must not merely satisfy the reason, you must move the heart also."
