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## TRANSNATIONAL ADVOCACY NETWORK AT THE POLAND-BELARUS BORDER: THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS AND THE DILUTED BOOMERANG PATTERN\*

Transnarodowa sieć rzecznicza na granicy polsko-białoruskiej:  
kryzys humanitarny i rozmyty model bumerangu

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### Abstract

This article examines the transnational advocacy network (TAN) that emerged in response to the humanitarian crisis at the Poland-Belarus border and explores why the classic “boomerang” pattern of advocacy failed to generate expected international pressure on the Polish government. Although the network was able to mobilize different actors and target international institutions – its impact was limited. We identify two core reasons for that limitation: (1) the fragmented, grassroots nature of the domestic part of TAN, composed largely of non-professional actors, and (2) the limited responsiveness of the European Union, conceptualized here as a corporate actor with internal divisions that hinder coherent action. Through empirical mapping of advocacy actions, this study advances International Relations scholarship on TANs by further reconceptualizing these networks as arenas of struggle. The findings illustrate how limited capacity, asymmetrical power, and strategic disregard limit transnational advocacy.

**Keywords:** transnational advocacy networks, “boomerang” pattern, migration, activism.

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## Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje transnarodową sieć rzeczniczą (ang. *transnational activist network*, TAN), która powstała w odpowiedzi na kryzys humanitarny na granicy polsko-białoruskiej, i bada, dlaczego klasyczny „bumerangowy” wzorzec rzecznictwa nie zdołał wyrzucić oczekiwanej presji na polski rząd. Pomimo że TAN była w stanie zmobilizować różne podmioty i dotrzeć do instytucji międzynarodowych, jej wpływ był ograniczony. Identyfikujemy dwa główne powody tego ograniczenia: (1) fragmentaryczny, oddolny charakter krajowej części TAN, składającej się w dużej mierze z niesprofesjonalizowanych aktorów, oraz (2) ograniczona zdolność reagowania Unii Europejskiej, konceptualizowanej tutaj jako podmiot korporacyjny z wewnętrznymi podziałami, które utrudniają spójne działanie. Poprzez empiryczne mapowanie działań rzeczniczych, niniejsze studium rozwija badania stosunków międzynarodowych na temat TAN poprzez rekonceptualizację tych sieci jako „aren walki”. Wyniki badań ilustrują, w jaki sposób ograniczone możliwości, asymetryczna władza i strategiczne umniejszanie znaczenia tworzą ograniczenia ponadnarodowego rzecznictwa.

**Słowa kluczowe:** transnarodowe sieci rzecznicze, model bumerangu, migracje, aktywizm.

## Introduction

In the Summer of 2021, near the village of Usnarz Górny in the thickly forested border with Belarus, a group of asylum seekers mostly Iraqi and Afghan migrants attempted to cross the border with the intention of applying for asylum on the Polish territory. The Polish border guards prevented the crossing. At the same time, the Belarusian border guards blocked parts of the group from withdrawing from the border zone into Belarus. As a result, the group of 32 men, women, and children was blocked for days in the forest in a makeshift encampment without adequate access to food, water, and shelter (PAP, 2021; Sitnicka, 2021). This was the inciting incident for a humanitarian crisis that escalated over the subsequent months. Most of these people had reported travelling from Afghanistan to Minsk on a “group visa” facilitated by Belarusian authorities, intending to claim asylum in Europe (Gall, 2021). The crisis was man-made by the Belarussian authorities that used migrants to destabilize the territory of the European Union and its Eastern external border, not only in Poland but also in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia (Bodnar & Grzelak, 2023; Dwyer, 2022). The undertaking of the means to protect the national borders were justified, especially in light of the full scale Russian aggression against Ukraine which started on 24 February 2022. The EU leaders had little doubt that the regime in Minsk, in close alliance with Moscow, was responsible for hybrid attacks against EU members (Bodnar & Grzelak, 2023) which were particularly cruel, as they used human beings as weapons. Security concerns were very serious but the migration issue became a political tool in electoral campaigns in Poland. With a clear support in the society to protect the border from breaches, the government undertook actions which led to a rapid militarization of border management as a strategy to handle irregular migrant arrivals (CBOS, 2021; Stęпка & Mazurkiewicz, 2024; Umbrasko, 2022).<sup>1</sup> Key

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<sup>1</sup> The approach of the Polish authorities towards irregular migration in the wake of the border humanitarian crisis has been consistent with what was about to be undertaken. See e.g. Klaus, 2021.

measures conducted by the government included the deployment of military forces, legal changes enabling pushbacks, and a state of emergency that restricted access to the border area (Heidrich & Nakonieczna-Bartosiewicz, 2023; Amnesty International, 2022). Humanitarian assistance was effectively criminalized, and NGOs, journalists, and lawyers were barred from operating near the border. Further law amendments were passed on 14 October 2021 (eg. in Ustawa, 2003), and, together with the previous legislative changes, they effectively criminalized the provision of medical or humanitarian assistance to migrants at the border (Halemba, 2022; Perkowska et al., 2024). That was soon followed by the introduction of laws of 26 October 2021 legalizing the pushbacks of migrants into Belarusian territory, despite human rights concerns that such acts would violate the principle of non-refoulement (Barszcz, 2022; Perkowska et al., 2024; UNHCR, 2018).<sup>2</sup> The government also proposed legislation allowing the construction of a deterrent wall, which the Parliament agreed to a few days later (Ustawa, 2021). Since then, cases of detentions of activists by police and numerous allegations of illegal smuggling have been regularly reported. (Grupa Granica, 2021; KAI, 2021)<sup>3</sup>.

These developments set the stage for the emergence of a transnational advocacy network (TAN). By August 2021, grassroots initiatives at the Polish-Belarusian border had evolved into a transnational advocacy network (TAN) aimed at defending human rights and promoting lawful responses to the emerging humanitarian crisis. Faced with legal restrictions, media blackouts, and the criminalization of aid, Polish civil society actors—often individuals or loosely organized coalitions – provided humanitarian support and medical assistance at the border and sought international intervention. They also publicly condemned the pushbacks against migrants attempting to cross from Belarus (Halemba, 2022). The European Union (EU) with European Commission (EC) have similarly been widely criticized for failing to hold Poland to account as a member

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Its beginning led to even stronger resistance not only to the phenomenon of the irregular migration per se but also to assistance to migrants and the presentation of the crisis in the media and in culture. Examples include Agnieszka Holland's movie *Green Border*. The Minister of Justice, Zbigniew Ziobro tweeted on X, denouncing the director as "anti-Polish", likening the documentary to Nazi and Soviet propaganda (Ziobro, 2023 a; 2023b; 2023c). The government officially requested that cinemas screen a short, government-sponsored video about efforts to stop hybrid operations at the border together with the *Green Border* (MSWiA, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> The cases of deaths related to irregular border crossings show the magnitude of the humanitarian crises even if they are far from the numbers of the victims of irregular crossings at the EU Southern borders. The exact number of deaths is unknown. As of early February 2025, MSF claimed that 89 migrants died at the Polish-Belarusian border since the beginning of the humanitarian crisis (MSF, 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Annex 1 to the paper presents a timeline of key events at the border, placed against the most significant actions undertaken by the Polish government and international institutions (see also: Balicki, 2022; Bartnicki & Ołędzka, 2024; Doliwa-Klepcka & Zdanowicz, 2024). It can help understand the dynamics of the events which led to the creation of the TAN and its internal developments and external actions.

of the EU and Council of Europe (CoE) and for the EU's failures under European laws to protect human rights at its borders (Bharti, Pathak, & Mathur, 2023; Bodnar & Grzelak, 2021; Erdoğan & Dora, 2022; Grzeškowiak, 2023; Halemba, 2022; Kuśmirek, 2022). However, their voice was disregarded, and the Polish government kept challenging refugee norms, both international and domestic, as well as humanitarian law and continued criminalizing humanitarian action at the border. Furthermore, international responses, particularly from the EU and its institutions, remained limited. As a result, despite fulfilling the conditions outlined in classic TAN theory (Keck & Sikkink, 1998), the anticipated "boomerang" effect failed to materialize.

This paper addresses the problem of why the "boomerang" effect failed to develop fully in the context of the Poland–Belarus border crisis, despite the formation of a transnational advocacy network and sustained efforts to generate pressure. It examines how the TAN attempted to formulate and communicative actions toward international actors, and how the network's internal characteristics, as well as the nature of its targets, shaped the effectiveness of these strategies. The principal research question guiding this inquiry is: Why did the boomerang effect not develop fully, despite the formation of a TAN and sustained advocacy efforts?

To answer this question, we explore:

1. What were the characteristics of the TAN that emerged in response to Poland's violations of human rights at the border?
2. Did international actors respond to pressure from domestic members of the TAN?

Our analysis highlights the fragmented structure of the TAN and its composition – dominated by non-professional, local actors with minimal support from INGOs. These features shaped the network's strategies and affected its ability to exert upward pressure.

Our findings suggest that the boomerang effect was diluted due to: (1) weak responses from targeted international actors (States and IGOs), and (2) the fragmented and largely grassroots nature of the domestic TAN, composed of spontaneous local initiatives with limited professional support.

This study contributes to IR and TAN literature in the following ways. First, explores the role of individuals in TANs by highlighting the present and actions of non-professional activists in TANs. Second, it joins the emerging scholarship that views TANs as arenas of struggle, marked by unequal capacities, conflicting agendas, and strategic contestation (Bob, 2009; Hadden, 2015; Steinhilper, 2018). Our case illustrates how TAN efforts can be undermined when targets – such as the EU – selectively respond or disregard advocacy campaigns due to strategic or political priorities (Bloodgood & Clough, 2017; Carpenter, 2014).

While legal, political, and security aspects of the border crisis have been well documented (Filipec, 2022; Heidrich & Nakonieczna-Bartosiewicz, 2023), the conditions and limits of civil society advocacy remain underexplored. Our analysis addresses this

gap by empirically reconstructing the actors, actions, and advocacy direction within the TAN, conceptualized as both a network and an arena of contention.

The third contribution of the paper is related to how it reformulates the boomerang model (as presented by Bassano, 2014) by proposing that “State B” may function as a corporate actor – in this case, the EU. While the EU has legal personality and formal autonomy, its decision-making is subject to divergent national interests, often hindering coherent action.

The scope of our study spans August 2021 to the Polish parliamentary elections in October 2023. This timeframe captures the formation and strategic framing of the TAN in its initial stage. The time frame is characterized by the government formed by a right-wing coalition of political parties led by Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS, Law and Justice). The analysis of the situation moving beyond October 2023 requires a separate paper. While the post-election government signaled a softer tone toward NGOs, its policy substance on migration has remained unchanged (CoE, 2024) in that sense that radical steps were undertaken (e.g. the suspension of the right to asylum), however the rhetoric on humanitarian protection was modified and activists were invited to participate in debates about the issues they advocated for. Further research is needed to assess how the TAN evolves in this shifting political context.

## **1. Conceptual framework and definitions**

### **1.1. Transnational advocacy networks**

Transnational advocacy networks (TANs) have been defined as “communicative structures of activists whose formation is related to sharing common values or ideals and who have a common discourse, as well as who densely exchange information and services” (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). These networks have long been viewed as collective actors with significant agency in shaping and contesting international norms, particularly in the field of human rights (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Sikkink, 1995). In their foundational work, Keck and Sikkink drew on sociological traditions to emphasize that TANs “embody actors and structure simultaneously” and assumed a degree of coherence among actors pursuing shared ultimate goals—such as disarmament or rights protection—even if their short-term strategies diverge.

However, more recent scholarship challenges this view of TANs as unified entities. International relations scholars increasingly conceptualize TANs as contentious and heterogeneous spaces, marked by internal disagreement and power asymmetries. Hadden (2015) introduces the idea of “networks in contention,” while Steinhilper (2018) frames them as “contentious spaces” where actors who may agree on the overarching issue often diverge in priorities, tactics, or framing. Della Porta and Tarrow (2005), Clifford (2009), and Hertel (2006) further emphasize that TANs can involve struggles over

agenda-setting, framing, and strategic direction, especially when composed of actors from different geographic, institutional, or ideological backgrounds.

Beyond internal dynamics, scholars have also problematized the relationship between TANs and their targets. Rather than treating target actors as passive recipients of advocacy pressure, recent studies stress their strategic and selective agency. Bloodgood and Clough (2017) and Carpenter (2014) show that state and institutional targets may resist, reinterpret, or ignore advocacy messages. Clifford Bob (2009) goes further, conceptualizing advocacy as a competitive arena in which causes must be marketed strategically to capture elite attention. Bloodgood and Clough (2016) also propose viewing TAN-target interactions as a complex adaptive system, in which outcomes depend on dynamic, mutual adjustments between actors, rather than linear causality.

Additionally, Müller and Whittall (2022) highlight the role of grassroots humanitarianism in European border zones, describing such networks as “temporary solidarities.” These are emotionally mobilized, informal, and often spontaneously assembled alliances that lack stable institutional foundations. While capable of rapid mobilization and moral clarity, they often struggle with sustainability, strategic coherence, and international visibility.

Our case study reflects all of these theoretical developments. Although a TAN did form around the humanitarian crisis at the Poland–Belarus border, it was highly decentralized, driven primarily by non-professional grassroots actors. Advocacy efforts, while earnest and morally grounded, encountered limited engagement from their primary target – the EU – which prioritized security and political stability over rights-based appeals. As a result, the expected boomerang effect was diluted by both weak international responsiveness and the internal fragmentation and emotional structure of the domestic advocacy network.

This paper participates in the above effort, incorporating aligned advocacy actors in the TAN and adjacent actors involved in the “boomerang” effect, such as the Polish authorities, intergovernmental organizations, and intergovernmental organizations involved in the issue-based struggle. The advocacy network can rightly be thought of more as an “arena of struggle” comprising actors with opposing agendas and stances on the crisis than a united network working toward a singular outcome. “Advocacy” in this context is not seen as a universal agenda but as a series of actions by actors with diverse positionalities within the network. This, in turn, helps to address our key research questions. At the same time, our empirical modelling also demonstrates the network structure, encompassing not just TAN actors but their advocacy actions and the directionality of advocacy. This exercise advances TAN theory and IR by pushing the analysis towards empirical modelling not just of actors and relationships but also of how actors target specific audiences through their actions and how the targets (for instance, the sources of the blockage in the TAN, e.g. the Polish authorities) act and react to the common issue. By

modelling the TAN and adjacent actors in the “boomerang” pattern – including the Polish Government – we demonstrate the struggle within and between actors.

## 1.2. The “boomerang” pattern

The “boomerang” pattern, presented initially in a seminal work *Activists Beyond Borders* by Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998), is a conceptual framework used in International Relations to demonstrate the interaction between domestic and other NGOs in countries with abusive governments and their allies in the international sphere (Bassano, 2014). TANs are essential to the changes and adaptations within the “boomerang” pattern. They are expected to act in cases where a change in states’ policies and actions is needed due to serious violations of basic human rights norms. The ultimate effect of the “boomerang” model is to drive states which violate norms to change their official policies and actions and cease these violations.

Scholars from international relations and other fields have developed numerous critiques, “adaptations,” and extensions of Keck and Sikkink’s “boomerang” pattern. Critiques from postcolonial and queer critical theory perspectives (Waite, 2019), complex adaptive system and “systems thinking” (Bloodgood & Clough, 2017), and “inverse boomerangs” of North-South-North advocacy patterns (Cheng, et al., 2021; Pallas, 2017) challenge and extend the original logic.

Recent research on the boomerang model has emphasized that targets of advocacy campaigns are not passive recipients of pressure but active participants who may resist, reinterpret, or selectively respond to TAN messaging (Bloodgood & Clough, 2017; Carpenter, 2014). Building on this, Bob (2009) argues that advocacy networks operate in a competitive arena, where causes must be strategically framed to capture attention and legitimacy. Targets, in turn, often prioritize issues that align with their political interests, selectively engaging with some campaigns while disregarding others.

Similarly, Bloodgood and Clough (2016) conceptualize TAN-target dynamics as a complex adaptive system in which actors continuously adjust their strategies in response to each other. This challenges linear assumptions of the boomerang effect and emphasizes contingency, fluidity, and systemic interaction.

Our case study reflects these dynamics: while TAN actors directed advocacy toward the EU and its institutions, these bodies prioritized geopolitical and security concerns, effectively filtering out humanitarian appeals and weakening the intended boomerang effect.

For the sake of our analysis, we focus on Bassano’s modification of Keck and Sikkink’s “boomerang” pattern (see: Figure 1), because of its problematization of the original model. Bassano, basing the research findings on empirical evidence from the 1980 Nicaragua and Salvador human rights campaigns, claims that:

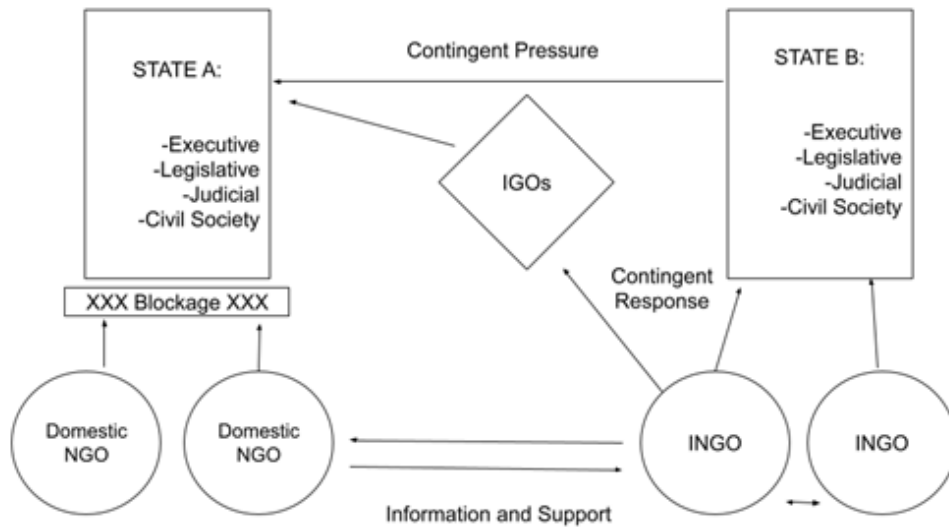
1. International non-governmental organization (INGO) actions to pressure inter-governmental actors for these organizations to exert pressure on State B directly and through IGOs can only be perceived as a “contingent response” as it is not always entirely certain that the aims and goals of INGOs will be aligned with these of domestic NGOs (Stroup & Murdie, 2012).
2. State A and State B can rarely be perceived as unitary actors because State A will not necessarily entirely block domestic actors from organizing campaigns. State B’s response, in turn, will not necessarily have a unitary character (or any response whatsoever) from State B, as contradictory opinions on the feasibility, necessity or possibility of action may appear.

Both modifications construe a more diverse environment for TANs and the “boomerang” pattern and speak to our empirical findings. At the same time, we problematize the model even more by focusing on the roles of actions of individuals and coalitions at the domestic level, alongside local NGOs and civil society. These domestic actors often have different methods and ways of action; ultimately, their goals will be shared, aligning with Keck and Sikkink’s contention. Yet the diversity and fragmentation within the TAN is only one part of the explanation. Equally important are the characteristics of the international target of advocacy – particularly the European Union – and how they shaped the outcome of the boomerang mechanism.

The limited effectiveness of the boomerang mechanism in this case stems not from insufficient advocacy, but from the nature of the international target itself. Although the transnational advocacy network succeeded in mobilizing across borders and directing pressure toward the European Union, the expected escalation of contingent pressure failed to occur. This outcome reflects the institutional character of the EU – not as a unitary actor, but as a complex and fragmented corporate entity composed of member states with divergent interests and political priorities. Consequently, the boomerang effect was diluted, not due to weak mobilization, but because of the EU’s structural and political incoherence as a target of transnational advocacy. In the case examined here, the EU – as the primary international target of Polish civil society’s advocacy – did not exert meaningful pressure on the Polish government to alter its border practices that violated international human rights norms. Instead, it maintained a unified “Team Europe” posture with Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, while redirecting pressure toward Belarus and countries of migrant origin, thereby sidestepping the core human rights concerns raised by the TAN.

**Figure 1**

*Bassano's (2014) modified "boomerang" pattern adapted for the analysis of the Poland-Belarus border crisis and TAN's actions in it*



## 2. Methodology

Based on the communiques on the crisis at the border published by governmental and non-governmental sources, we reconstructed a timeline of events and organized a list of actors involved in advocacy efforts. The search for communiques was conducted in major Polish dailies (“Gazeta Wyborcza”, “Rzeczpospolita”, “W polityce”). We then traced the websites and social media pages of Polish non-governmental organizations, activist groups, and individuals who had reported on the crisis development and violations at the border. The next step was looking into the reactions of governmental actors, IGOs and INGOs, including the Polish authorities and the Border Guard, EU institutions, and the Council of Europe. Primary sources such as open letters, interviews with activists, reports on violations, publicly available testimonies of violations and activist actions first had reports were analyzed as well.

As a result, we obtained a database of 129 organizations involved in the border crisis and 170 communication activities from TAN members and the targeted state (Poland), as well as INGO and IGOs called to react. On this basis, we created an empirical model of the actors involved in the boomerang pattern with the following categories:

Polish civil society (local NGOs), individuals, European civil society (INGOs), Governments and IGOs (EU, CE, UN institutions).

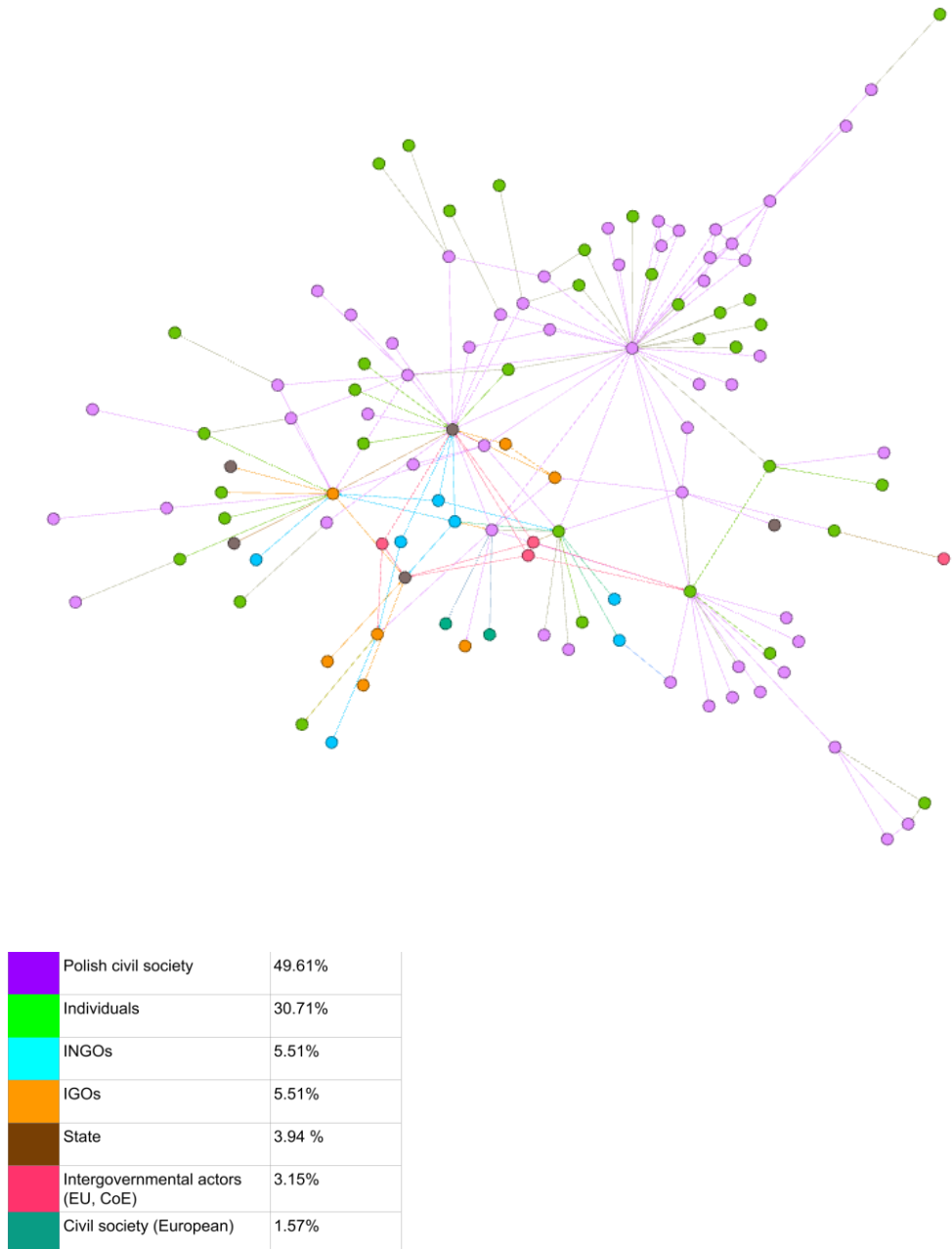
Our research methodology and results have limitations predominantly related to the fact that we could not create an exhaustive list of all the actors involved in the crisis. Another challenge in the course of research was to determine how to place particular individuals in our model of the TAN: some of them acted both as independent individuals and – at the same time – represented organizations or loosely connected collectives (frequently more than one). The third limitation of the research results is the inability to include various types of communication activities that were not publicly announced (official websites of the organizations/individuals or the media). From the accounts of activists, we have learnt that many activities of communicational character were conducted face to face and were not made public for fear of legal consequences (resulting from the criminalization of humanitarian assistance by the authorities). Thus, shares from different types of actors and types of actions might not directly reflect the accurate picture. These reasons ultimately led us to conclude that although we used social network analysis (SNA) methodology, the multimodal and multiplex character of the researched TAN rendered it impossible to structure the model rigorously per SNA requirements. Based on our data collection and network reconstruction, the following section presents the key empirical features of the TAN. We highlight actor types, centrality, and coalition structures, followed by a critical examination of advocacy patterns and outcomes.

### **3. The analysis of the transnational activist network**

This section presents the key empirical findings, which are presented to frame the following analysis against the subsidiary research questions. Methodology applied and results obtained are aligned with the basic assumptions and vocabulary of the SNA – identifying the nodes (actors), communities, edges (ties), and directionality of ties (links between nodes) in explored TAN. By using a Fruchterman–Reingold (1991) layout (Figure 2) we produced a symmetrical (circular) and legible graph. Colour coding was then applied through the node partition function by “type of actor” to facilitate visual and computational analysis (Keast & Brown, 2005). However our paper does not aim to make claims associated with SNA results. We rather make use of the SNA to have in place a grounded method of analysis.

**Figure 2**

*Transnational advocacy network on the Poland-Belarus border crisis (symmetrical layout – Fruchterman & Reingold, 1991)*



Its analysis has shown that the Polish civil society dominates the transnational advocacy network (TAN), accounting for 49.61 percent of nodes, which includes Polish NGOs, NGO coalitions, human rights organizations, and professional associations. Notable organizations such as Grupa Granica (The Border Group<sup>4</sup>), Fundacja Ocalenie (Ocalenie (*Salvation*) Foundation), Stowarzyszenie Interwencji Prawnej (Association for Legal Intervention), and Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights are central by eigenvector centrality.

Fundacja Ocalenie was one of the first Polish organizations to appeal directly to the European Commissioner, raising concerns about human rights violations and the Polish state's failures to respect protection standards (Fundacja Ocalenie, 2021).

The Stowarzyszenie Interwencji Prawnej, along with United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) and Save the Children, is one of three actors to directly target the European Union, calling on it to respect human rights law and international humanitarian law regarding the humanitarian crisis at the border.

Individuals and groups operating outside an organizational capacity are numerous – comprising 30.16 per cent of the network – but are weakly connected in the network. The TAN indicates the prevalence of individuals engaged in diverse collaborative actions. These individuals primarily engage in advocacy through connections with highly central (betweenness) nodes, such as Grupa Granica.

Another empirical finding is the prevalence and diversity of individuals and grassroots collectives of individuals mobilized around the border crisis within the TAN. As the role of non-professional individuals is not typically accounted for in the modified “boomerang” pattern, it is worth noting that analysis at the individual level is not exhaustive, nor is it intended to be so. It is not methodologically feasible to fully identify all individuals or actors involved in the border response, a challenge further complicated by the criminalization of humanitarian action, which imposes the need for discretion on behalf of individual activists. However, the TAN analysis does identify the prevalence of individual activists and grassroots coalitions or collectives in the network, which we argue is at least partly a function of Polish state actions preventing the international humanitarian system from engaging in the border crisis, which created a vacuum in the provision of humanitarian and medical assistance.

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<sup>4</sup> When we discuss Polish NGOs, we use their original names however, for conceptual clarity, we provide an English translation of the name. Some organizations have an official translation available, others do not. In some cases, the official translation still includes Polish names. In the latter cases, we add the English translation in italics. We claim that for non-Polish speakers these translations are necessary to fully understand the context of the civil society organizations and loosely connected associations. Their names often have a telling meaning related to the functions, composition, place of principal activity, etc. of the organisations.

The TAN indicates diverse individuals, including European Parliament politicians, Polish federal politicians, local Polish politicians (e.g. mayoral level), local residents, activists, academics, university students, and artists/ photographers in the TAN.

Humanitarian awards further confirm the recognition of individual contributions, which feature disconnected components (or structural gaps) at the periphery of the leading TAN network.

Given the criminalization of humanitarian action, individuals engaged in advocacy and action were subject to considerable personal risk. A consequence for the non-professional “citizen” and grassroots coalitions is the psychological impact of advocacy in a context where humanitarian action has been criminalized, and the government has negatively portrayed activists. This finding aligns with TAN scholarship on non-professional civilian roles (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Breen, 2024).

Another notable feature is the emergence of grassroots issues-based coalitions among identity groups, such as *Matki na Granice* (Mothers to the Borders) and *Rodziny bez Granic* (Families without Borders).

Distinctions between individuals and NGOs, however, are not static. *Grupa Granica*, for instance, is the foremost coalition in the Polish advocacy network: although, for analytical purposes, it is represented by a single node, *Grupa Granica* (2022) describes itself as “an informal coalition, supported in specific areas by NGOs, institutions, and individuals”: as such, it is better conceptualized as a nested coalition network within the TAN. Founded in August 2021 in response to the border crisis, *Grupa Granica* has the highest degree of centrality (number of ties), eigenvector centrality (influence), and betweenness (brokerage) centrality of any node within the network. By its definition, *Grupa Granica* (2022) leverages constituent members’ relative expertise and capacities to provide “mechanisms for humanitarian, legal, and medical assistance provided in challenging conditions related to the humanitarian crisis, the systematic violation of the law by state officials, and the accompanying criminalization of migration and humanitarian aid”. As a powerful broker, *Grupa Granica* connects multiple individuals (including local residents and Polish celebrities), NGOs, and private sector actors in the TAN. Information and support from numerous actors flow through *Grupa Granica*.

International NGOs (INGOs) brokerage in the TAN is minimal, comprising 5.56 per cent of the network, and they lack strong connections with Polish civil society, playing a minimal brokerage or “gatekeeping” function. In theory, international NGOs play a crucial brokerage role in the “boomerang” pattern, exchanging information and support with national civil society actors to advance the advocacy agenda in the face of State A blockages. INGOs have a low degree of centrality (influence, brokerage, or power), exhibiting minimal information or support exchanged with Polish civil society. International NGOs primarily feature as isolated actors exerting contingent pressure through advocacy actions directly targeting the Polish authorities and the European Union/ European Commission.

The TAN model and separate timeline exercise conducted for this study highlight evident yet uncoordinated efforts, particularly from seven INGOs, namely ACAPS, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Médecins Sans Frontières, Oxfam, the Norwegian Refugee Council, and Save the Children. These INGOs all display a low degree of centrality in the network, both in terms of being minimally connected to other nodes (e.g. an absence of the exchange of information and support presumed in the “boomerang” pattern) and in terms of not acting as brokers or gatekeepers to bring additional actors into the network.

Instead, these INGOs function in isolation from Polish civil society actors in the network, engaging primarily in three types of advocacy action: i) press releases and appeals to the Polish and Belarusian authorities; ii) unilateral responses to high-level decisions, for instance, Human Rights Watch and Oxfam condemning European Commission proposal of 1/12/2021 to allow Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania derogate. However, most of these international NGOs engaged in limited advocacy actions.<sup>5</sup>

There are two exceptions. First, MSF partnered with the Polish NGO Salam Lab (original name) to provide medical aid at the border (MSF left the border three months after starting work in the border zone). Similarly, reports and other documentation indicate the exchange of information demonstrated through INGOs citing Polish NGOs/coalitions (e.g., the MSF report cites Grupa Granica).<sup>6</sup> Secondly, Amnesty International was the first INGO to act, sending a delegation to Usnierz Górny on 24 August 2021 after reports of Afghan asylum seekers being detained. They issued a press release the next day, urging Poland to allow entry and provide humanitarian aid to the thirty-two asylum seekers held without adequate provisions for two weeks (25 August 2021). The release quotes Aleksandra Fertlińska from Amnesty International Poland, highlighting that violations against refugees at EU borders occur amid impunity, with push backs and fences becoming core elements of many European migration policies (Amnesty International, 2021).

The lack of INGO support for Polish civil society is corroborated by Polish NGOs expressing frustration with the international response. Grupa Granica (2022) reported that only after a year did major humanitarian organizations begin supporting their efforts. The Polish government blocked INGOs from accessing the border, creating a hostile environment for volunteers, impacting INGO operations and contributing to their absence from the crisis (NIL, 2021; MSF, 2022). Compliance with local law is a key

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<sup>5</sup> The authors could find no evidence that World Vision or Care International engaged in advocacy actions on the border crisis, either through press releases, reports, public statements, or partnerships with local organisations.

<sup>6</sup> Care International observes in the 2022 Poland report that it partnered with Polish Humanitarian Action and Ocalenie Foundation to “provide basic humanitarian assistance to asylum seekers at the Polish-Belarusian border, because we believe that every refugee should be treated equally.” However, the authors were not able to identify any publicly available reports or advocacy from Care International (2022) on the issue.

operational principle for these INGOs, both intrinsically and to not jeopardize humanitarian access and action. Further, the spontaneous and exhaustive style of humanitarian action provided by individuals who were immersed in aid presented a challenge for larger organizations. These individuals did not have the time and skills to communicate with INGOs (Rumieńczyk, 2022).

Given the role of INGOs conceptualized by the “boomerang” pattern, which is by definition in the face of such state blockages, Polish state actions do not wholly account for the absence of INGOs on the border crisis issue. Why the Poland-Belarus crisis was not high on the agenda for INGOs raises questions about agenda setting and advocacy within the global advocacy community (Carpenter, 2014).

The Polish authorities and the European Commission are the two most frequent targets of directed advocacy action (e.g. appeals, open letters, campaigns, petitions, protests) from actors in the transnational advocacy network. This is consistent with these actors' positionality within the “boomerang” pattern as the primary sources of the blockages and/or power-holders whose behaviours are a barrier to the intent of the TAN (and hence are being targeted by directed advocacy actions). One of the first open letters by organizations from Poland, Lithuania and Latvia was issued in October 2021 to the European Commission (namely to Ursula von der Leyen and Ylva Johansson) requesting the EU “to take appropriate actions to ensure the full respect of the rights of refugees and migrants stranded on the EU external border” (Stowarzyszenie, 2021). The official public statements were also issued by other international NGOs either in the form of press releases or public reports – Norwegian Refugee Council (November 2021), Save the Children (November 2021), Médecins Sans Frontières (December 2021), Amnesty International (April 2022) condemning the violations of human rights of migrants and presenting their disapproval from no firm response from the EU to abide international humanitarian law. In 2022, the coalition of environmental organizations supported the efforts of the TAN by demanding from the European Commission to protect Białowieża Primeval Forest (Pracownia, 2022).

European intergovernmental organizations (in the model: intergovernmental actors), namely the EU and the Council of Europe, were key brokers for a specific community of nodes otherwise minimally connected to the network. Three leading EU institutions were reacting to the border crisis and targeted by the TAN: the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, and the European Parliament. Each had a different role and strategy in reacting to the TAN activities. The EU institutions were actively expressing their positions in the crisis (EC, 2021). However, the stances were different depending on the institution. The European Commission directed restrictive measures, sanctions, and official visits towards the Belarusian Government and the countries of origin of migrants presenting at Europe's border (Council of the EU, 2021).

The EU did not, however, exert contingent pressure directed towards the Polish Government, with undirected edges denoting association or affiliation (for instance, statements of support) and not advocacy actions calling on a changed position.

This section contextualizes the graphic empirical evidence that: a) the European Union – represented by the European Commission and the European Parliament did not censure or exert contingent advocacy pressure on Poland to change its legislation and practices at the border, with these IGOs maintaining instead a consistent stance of "Team Europe" on the issue; and b) directed contingent pressure—in the form of diplomatic measures, sanctions, and official visits – on the Lukashenko regime and countries of origin of the migrants arriving at the border. We argue that the securitization and militarization of Poland's border—which is NATO's border, the European border, and the Schengen zone border—strongly aligned with the security interests of this IGO and member states, which accounts for their positionality on the issue and actions supporting Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, demonstrated in the TAN graph. Since the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) is applied to the EU member states and the EU has capabilities of policymaking in the area of asylum as well as of persuasion of the EU member states directly, the EU became a natural target of pressure to persuade the Polish government to change the policy at the border. The European Commission, alongside the Council of the European Union, consistently framed their engagement on the Poland-Belarus border crisis in terms of securitization—protecting security on the external borders—and the instrumentalization of migrants by Lukashenka's regime in a hybrid attack against the whole EU (EEAS, 2022; more: Bekić, 2022; Berzins, 2022; Forti, 2023; Graban, 2023; Łubiński, 2022; Glinka et al., 2024). As a deliberative body, the European Parliament played a distinct function in the EU's response to the advocacy concerns regarding the Poland-Belarus border crisis. Opinions presented by EPMs were diverse. Some focused on security, and EPMs called for EU funds to build a fence to protect the Union's external borders from irregular crossings and hybrid attacks. The others focused on the urgent need for aid organizations to directly access the Polish-Belarusian border to help the migrants stranded there (EP, 2021).

Empirical findings indicate that the Council of Europe, in contrast to the European Union, did exert direct and repeated pressure on the Polish state to adhere to human rights law in its response to and management of the border crisis (CoE, 2021a; 2021b; 2022). The main actions in the TAN referring to the Council of Europe were connected with the European Court of Human Rights – the international court of the Council of Europe to which Poland belongs. Individuals can file a complaint against Poland there (ECHR, 2021).

Intergovernmental organizations – including the UN, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and UNHCHR – comprise 3.17 percent of the network and are weakly connected to other actors. However, unlike intergovernmental actors (e.g. the EU, EC), these UN agencies did directly petition the Polish Government

(through directed advocacy actions calling for changes in behaviour). They arranged the visits of their envoys to investigate the situation on site (to Poland and Belarus) (UNHCR, 2022a). The UNHCHR recommended the change of the classification of Belarus in the international refugee system as officially stated that Belarus cannot be perceived as a safe country (UNHCR, 2022b). From the point of international refugee regulations, this statement challenges the argument that the pushbacks of asylum seekers do not violate principles because non-refoulement refers to the countries where the rights of asylum seekers are endangered.

In International Relations theory, the conditions for the “boomerang” pattern of advocacy are precipitated by state human rights violations and a lack of receptivity to domestic human rights NGOs’ advocacy. In this configuration, the violating government is subject to contingent pressure both domestically and from the international community.

Another key finding from the analysis above is that the Polish authorities – conceptualized here as the government in general, the Prime Minister, cabinet ministers (e.g. Minister of Interior), and the Border Guard – were the target of the most significant proportion of directed advocacy actions, such as open letters, protests, reports, and press releases calling for a change of stance on the border crisis. This empirical finding is indicative that the Polish government was perceived by TAN actors as the primary source of the “blockage” on the issue, as theorized in the “boomerang” pattern.

The specific regulatory and legislative actions that the Polish Government took precipitated this transnational advocacy network response, which are covered above. These include the legalization of pushbacks, criminalization of aid, and militarization of border management.

The findings presented above reveal the fragmented and constrained nature of advocacy in this case. In the concluding section, we reflect on the broader implications for TAN theory and the limits of transnational pressure when corporate or composite actors, like the EU, act as primary targets.

## **Conclusions**

The characteristics of the TAN described in this paper provide legitimate grounds for the emergence of a “boomerang” pattern on the issue of the border crisis, as far as various actors are concerned. However, despite applying classical tactics (information, symbolic, leverage, accountability policies), the TAN has not achieved its goal: to create an effective transnational pressure coalition that changes State A (Poland) behaviour. The empirical and contextual analysis above demonstrates deviations from this case’s presumed functioning of the “boomerang” pattern.

The interests of actors in the TAN were not aligned. An apparent discrepancy is observable between the interests of the domestic part of the TAN and international actors, both of non-governmental and governmental character. That results from the following facts:

1. International NGOs were not eager and ready to challenge the legal constraints imposed on the actions of TAN members at the border. It was easier for individuals and their coalitions to act in breach of the regulation than for INGOs that preferred to keep their standing rather than enter into conflict with the Polish authorities.
2. Intergovernmental organizations, especially the EU (the integrated IGO par excellence), are usually constrained by the interest of their member states: in the given case, these interests were to halt the massive migratory flow at one of the EU's external borders. The securitization of migration, coupled with the anxiety among the EU and its member states' leaders related to the possible instability in the wake of the war in Ukraine, practically blocked the EU from acting on behalf of the norms enshrined in the EU Treaties, as well as in the details of the CEAS. Other IGOs significant for the case could not play a role without consent from the Polish authorities (that also applies to the EU, the absence of Frontex actions being one of the pieces of evidence to support this claim). Therefore, the impediments imposed by the Polish authorities effectively blocked them from contingent actions.
3. The international actors of the TAN did not react to the calls from the domestic part of the TAN. Ultimately the "boomerang" effect occurred only to a slight degree.

To answer the principal research question posed in the Introduction, which asked why the "boomerang" effect failed to bring about change in the Polish authorities' actions, although activists and organizations developed the TAN and undertook numerous pressure actions, we conclude by arguing that despite conditions suggestive that the "boomerang" pattern would emerge, it is not observable in the case of the Poland-Belarus border crisis. Actions undertaken by the Polish Government – including criminalization of solidarity, etc. – imposed blockages on the issue in domestic advocacy. However, we demonstrated empirically that additional blockages not accounted for in the "boomerang" pattern were ultimately imposed by the European Union and European Commission (as plausible State B actors, petitioned by the TAN). The EU and EC deflected efforts from the TAN. They maintained a unitary stance of "Team Europe" with Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania while directing restrictive measures (sanctions) and diplomatic pressure on Belarus and the countries of origin of people seeking asylum in Europe (Doliwa-Klepcka & Zdanowicz, 2024). We further demonstrated the breakdown in the "boomerang" pattern through the negligible brokerage of INGOs, which operated with minimal connection to or support for Polish civil society organizations.

In contrast, the TAN is essentially connected through Polish organizations and coalitions, including Grupa Granica, Fundacja Ocalenie, and Stowarzyszenie Interwencji Prawnej.

Finally, in the investigated case, we observed that the domestic part of the TAN was the initiator of the action. We claim that the failure of the “boomerang” pattern is due to the character of the TAN, which had little internal structure and was not led by organized entities (NGOs) but rather by local individuals, small coalitions of activists, and Polish NGOs that had little chance to exert pressure on international actors, which in turn did not provide the domestic component of the TAN with necessary support. Without substantial INGO involvement, State A’s domestic policy change could not occur. The specific features of the initiator of TAN weaken relations in the TAN, which is crucial for the “boomerang” pattern to work.

Acknowledging SNA’s limitations and complications in this case, the authors hope to have demonstrated its overall analytic power in investigating the positionality, relationships, and power of multiple actors within the investigated transnational advocacy network as a means of testing the “boomerang” pattern in an empirical case study in which the pattern would be reasonably expected to occur. This methodological approach will be open to criticism and debate, further advancing the application of SNA in international relations, humanitarian studies, and related fields grappling with power and networks.

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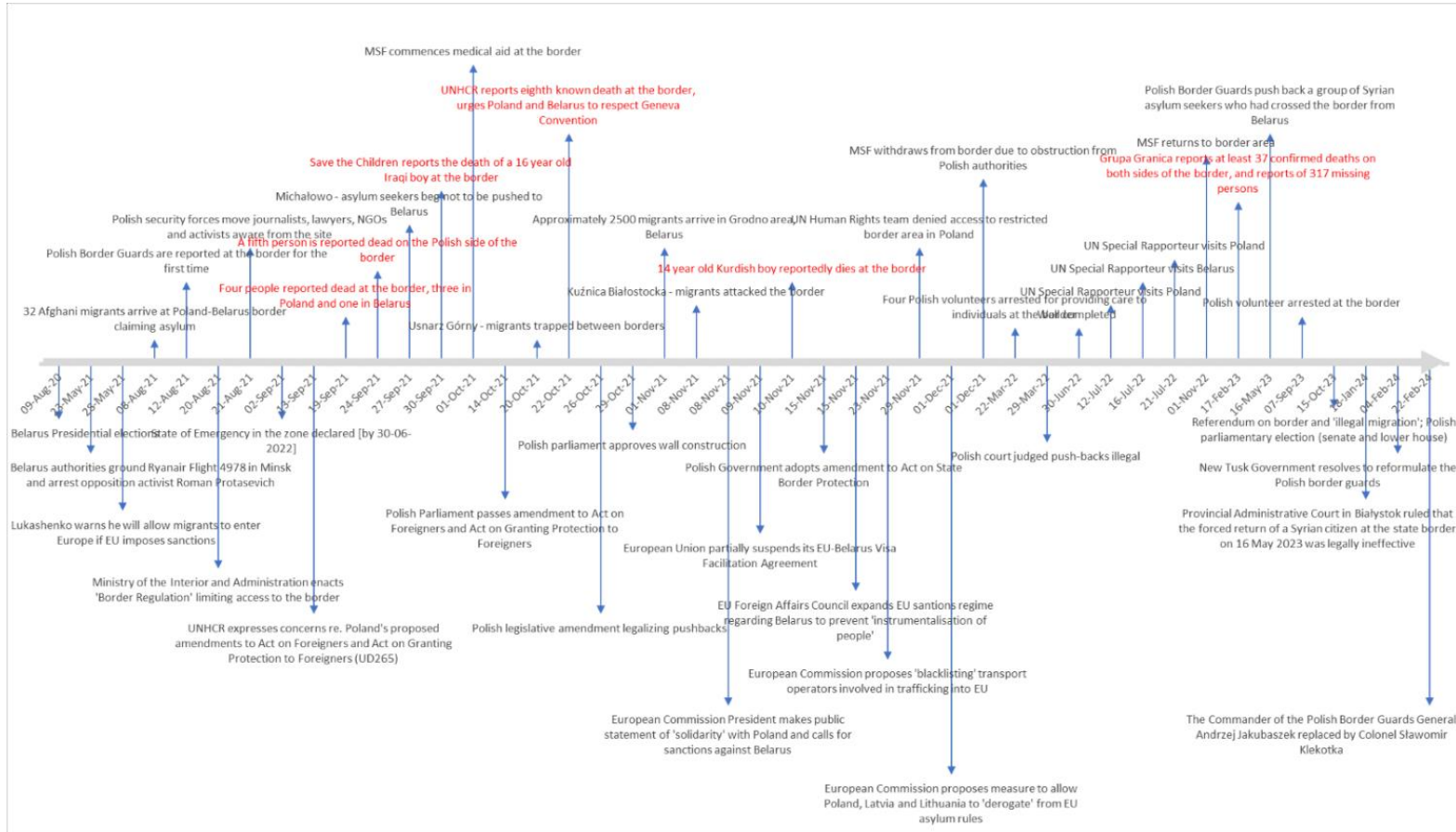
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## Annex 1.

Events at the border (above the timeline axis) and state actions (below the timeline axis)



Source: Authors' own elaboration.