

A view from its eastern border



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European attention to the ongoing crisis of migration is mostly focused on the Mediterranean. The terrible plight of refugees stranded there is well known to the general public and activists. Meanwhile, for years the European Union is experiencing yet another, far less known refugee crisis on its eastern border, an issue which barely gets any attention. Admittedly far smaller than the one experienced by countries such as Italy, Greece or France, it also is a humanitarian crisis.

The refugees trying to enter the safety of the European Union from its eastern border are mostly fleeing repressive regime of Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya, with some coming from Caucasus republics of Kyrgyzstan, Dagestan, and Ingushetia.



Chechen refugees. Photo: Jędrzej Nowicki

Although the Chechen war is long over, the country is by no means a safe place to live. With the Kremlin's blessing, Ramzan Kadyrov has been running Chechnya for almost a decade as his own fiefdom, eradicating all forms of dissent. Abduction-style detentions of political opposition members, gay people and others, enforced disappearances and torture are common place in Chechnya. According to human rights activists, those fleeing Chechnya include opponents of the regime and their relatives, torture victims, people fleeing local blood feuds, women and children under the threat of persecution, and would-be conscripts who refuse to fight in Syria or Ukraine.

In 2013, **40,000** Chechens applied for asylum in Europe

Due to Kadyrow Russian-backed rule, the number of Chechen refugees trying to make their way to the EU steadily rose in recent years. In 2013, 40,000 Chechens applied for asylum in Europe.

Until couple of years ago, Chechen refugees experienced far less trouble receiving visa and travelling to Germany via Poland. That changed with the intensification of refugee crisis in Southern Europe and change of government in Poland in 2015. The new, openly anti refugee, and, frankly speaking, racist (examples [here](#) and [here](#)) administration, stopped accepting Chechen refugees, claiming that there is currently no war in Chechnya, and therefore the people fleeing from it are nothing more but "economical migrants". The situation was made worse by German government decision from the same time to stop accepting Chechen refugees entering Germany from Poland. As a result of those two factors, in 2015, Polish border services blocked 53,000 entries of Chechens to Poland, while in 2016 the number grew to 118,000.

To make the situation even worse, in February 2017, the Polish Ministry of the

Interior and Administration announced changes in regulations concerning admittance of refugees. New regulations simplify deportation process and create the legal basis for denying entry to potential refugees. Polish government also expressed its interest to cooperate with Belarus in order to create special facilities for the refugees on Belarusian territory, forcing asylum seekers to await decision on their application from outside of Poland, in a country which does not have a border with the regime they are fleeing from.

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Since 2016, a small-scale refugee crisis has been unfolding at the Belarusian-Polish border near the town of Brest, from where many Chechens and citizens of other Caucasus republics attempt to make their way into Poland. Their plight briefly made news last Winter, when numerous media outlets reported on hundreds of people, many of whom were children, camping at Brest train station, but otherwise it seems to be one of those shameful issues nobody wants to talk about, and is, more often than not, swept under the carpet.



Train journey to Poland. Photo: Jędrzej Nowicki

The majority of Chechens do not consider Belarus safe, fearing its open border with Russia. Many fear repressions from its pro-Russian authorities. What's more, not a single Russian citizen has ever been granted asylum in Belarus. As Russian citizens, Chechens are allowed to stay in Belarus for up to 90 days. If they overstay their visa, they face deportation back to Russia. The activists who are present in Brest, in interview for Freedom News, said that in many cases, people who fell victim to deportation by Belarusian state are unaccounted for: they did not respond to activists attempting contact with them, nor did they get in touch with their families back home.

By late Summer 2016, between 1,000 and 3,000 Russian citizens from Chechnya and other parts of the North Caucasus were stuck in Brest, seeking asylum in the EU as political refugees. Entire Chechen families were living at the railway station in Brest. Those courageous or desperate enough to

remain in Brest during Winter moved to overcrowded rental apartments in the vicinity of the station, from where they would continue to try their luck until money ran out. This Winter, the number of asylum seekers had gone down, but many Chechens still remain in Brest. Their unofficial number is estimated on between 200 even to 700, and is likely to grow again when the weather gets better.

Some of refugees trying
pass the border up to
80 times

Every day, dozens of people board the train to Polish border in hope of obtaining refugee status in Poland. However, only very few have been successful. Others return to Brest, only to repeat the attempt the next day, with some trying their luck up to 80 times. The activists working with refugees on the ground point out that the process resembles of a roulette: there are no clear rules on who will be allowed to cross. Moreover, many Chechens report that they were mistreated by border guards, apparently in attempt to discourage them from trying to cross the border again. Many were subjected to racism or verbal insults. They are also routinely denied translator, interviews with them are conducted with no regard to

privacy (eg on the corridor and with third parties present), the reasons given for fleeing Chechnya are often not written down in official documents, or blatantly derided. The activists working in Brest report that Polish border control treats refugees with contempt, accusing them of being economic migrants or terrorists. Officers often spend less than a minute with potential refugees and force them to board the return train before they can even plead their case. The Chechens, denied translator or legal assistance, feel disoriented and frustrated.



A child sleeping at Brest station. Photo: J.Nowicki

One of the activists present in Brest in an interview for Freedom News said: The refugees, upon arrival in Brest, are often very tired or require medical attention. Those who don't have the funds necessary to rent some accommodation, resort to sleeping at the train station, using whatever money they have for train tickets and food. During our visit to Brest in December 2017, we distributed some cash among refugees

Every attempt to cross the border by train costs a family about €50

wanting to travel to Poland in order to claim asylum. Some money also went towards helping refugees with medical care and housing costs. One of the people we met was Ahmed, who already spent 2 months in Brest, and slept at the train station for a month. During this time, he attempted to cross the border with Poland 32 times. We gave him money for hostel, ensuring that for next two weeks he will sleep indoors. Due to freezing temperatures, it is essential to provide accommodation for refugees in Brest.

The Chechens, forced to stay in Brest for weeks on end, experience very difficult living and housing conditions. Every attempt to cross the border by train costs a family about €50, including tickets and daily expenses. Brest landlords also profit from renting apartments and rooms to Chechen families, usually on a day to day terms, and for astonishing prices. Many refugee families have no choice but to pay up, and often resort to staying in overcrowded flats with 2-3 families inside. The Chechens receive some support from families, informal support groups formed by Chechen diaspora in the



Train tickets belonging to a Chechen family who, up to date, unsuccessfully tried to cross the border with the EU a dozen or so times, spending 48 Euro for each journey.

West, and some activist groups.

Those who can no longer afford to put a roof over their heads, have no other choice but to go back to the train station. That however became even more unbearable due to measures to discourage Chechens from staying there. The electricity in station's plugs was shut off, the Chechens are also required to pay for toilet and water. Last winter, the refugees were allowed to sleep at the station, but only provided they sleep while sitting instead of laying down. That measure, resembling of torture, was enforced even on children.

The actions of Polish border guards are illegal by international law: refugees are entitled to enter the first country safe for them regardless of their visa status. Polish border force often ignore evidence of repression such as documents conforming

that a person was sentenced to prison by Kadyrow regime, or was subjected to torture or other atrocities. Some of the refugees bear visible signs of being subjected to torture, but that does not help their case either.

The mistreatment of Chechen refugees was challenged in courts. On 14th December, Polish Administrative Court ruled that the actions of border guards are illegal. The case was brought to court on behalf of a Chechen family who was refused asylum in Brest by a group of lawyers working pro bono in March 2017. The court ruled that prior to making decision to deny entry to Poland, border guards were supposed to conduct investigation regarding the circumstances of the applicants, and provide them with documents in a language they understand. It was not the first time the lawyers defend Chechen families in Polish courts: in recent months, several other cases were considered by courts, usually in favour of Chechen refugees.

The European Court of Human Rights also ruled against the policy of denying Chechens safe passage to the EU on its eastern border. In June 2017, it stopped the deportation of one Chechen family back to Belarus. The case, concerning a family fleeing repressions in their home country, was dealt by the Tribunal in record speed: the decision was ready within hours of claim being brought to court. The reason for courts speedy

reaction was that the family in question was denied entry to Poland 16 times, and should that happen again, they faced inevitable deportation back to Russia.

The courts however seem to be unable to put a stop to mistreatment of Chechens by Border Guards. They may be effective in individual cases, but otherwise are unable to change the Polish government's policy towards refugees.

Meanwhile, the Chechens stuck in Brest grow disillusioned and distant from not-too-numerous NGO's providing them with interim aid. They would much rather receive help with crossing the border, bringing Polish Authorities to justice for their illegal actions, and the possibility of passage to a country which will be safe for them.

Or, as the activists put it: The European emergency state, in which governments excuse breaking of international rules in order to prevent refugees from exercising their basic human rights became a norm.

We need less humanitarian actions, and more direct action against the ever-increasing idea of fortress Europe.

written by Zofia Brom



Solidarity beyond borders!

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