

Poland's Tusk government intensifies its attacks on refugees

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Donald Tusk's government in Poland plans to take tougher action against refugees, both those from Ukraine who enjoy special status and refugees from the Middle East who cross the border from Belarus.

At the beginning of the year, 101 organisations and 550 intellectuals, artists, lawyers and activists had already appealed to the government to stop the illegal pushbacks to Belarus. These include Amnesty International Poland, the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation, the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, and refugee organisations such as Grupa Granica.

Individual supporters include personalities such as Wanda Traczyk-Stawska and Anna Przedpe?ska-Trzeciakowska, who took part in the Warsaw Uprising against the Nazis in 1944, as well as award-winning artists such as actress Maja Komorowska and director Agnieszka Holland.

The previous PiS-led government had organised an unprecedented smear campaign against Holland for denouncing the devastating conditions at the border in her film *Zielona Granica* (Green Border). Former EU Council President Tusk won the Polish elections last October, not least because he presented himself as a democratic alternative to the authoritarian PiS.

The tightening of the country's anti-refugee policies shows that this is not the case. The attack on defenceless refugees serves governments around the world to stir up chauvinist sentiments, strengthen right-wing forces and attack the democratic and social rights of the entire working class. Tusk is no exception. He proves once again that the pro-war policy—which he pursues just as aggressively as the PiS—is not compatible with democracy.

Expansion of Fortress Europe

When an increasing number of refugees crossed the EU's external border from Belarus to Poland in 2021, ruling circles from Warsaw to Brussels unleashed a hysterical smear campaign. They claimed that Belarus and Russia were waging a “hybrid war” against the EU, justifying the deprivation of rights and dehumanisation of asylum seekers. Tusk had already supported this from the opposition at the time and is now seamlessly continuing this propaganda.

The appeal to the Polish government states:

We Europeans know what it leads to when we allow people to be deprived of their dignity and fundamental rights because of their affiliation to a national, ethnic, or religious group. No human being should be treated like a “weapon.”

The appeal bitterly refers to Tusk's election campaign promise to restore the rule of law:

Pushbacks must be stopped immediately. If this is delayed, the Polish authorities are condoning human rights violations. We had a different idea of the legality we were promised.

But the government does not want to stop the human rights violations, it wants to expand them. Interior Minister Marcin Kierwi?ski had already called for the borders to be “one hundred percent impermeable.” In February, he and Tusk announced a “modernisation” of the border protection facilities.

The 5.5 metre high and 186 kilometre long steel fence, which is secured with cameras, drones and patrols, is already unrivalled in Europe—at least since the dismantling of the “Iron Curtain” between West and East in the 1990s. On top of that, the military barriers are destroying the Bia?owie?a Forest nature reserve. The last primeval forest in Europe is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

According to NGOs such as Grupa Granica and Pro Asyl, 5,000 border guards, supported by 10,000 soldiers who were deployed to the border under the PiS government, ensured 3,346 pushbacks could be carried out between May and August 2023 alone. Since the beginning of 2024, the border guard has officially reported 2,300 attempted border crossings and 1,771 pushbacks.

At least 60 deaths have been confirmed since 2021 and a further 300 people are considered to have “disappeared.” The number of unreported cases is likely to be dramatically higher. Many have been seriously injured trying to cross the fence. The restricted zone along the border is also notorious for human rights violations in detention centres and attacks on journalists and volunteers.

In November, Polish border officials shot a 22-year-old man from Syria in the back as he tried to cross the fence. He survived after an operation in hospital. The public prosecutor's office stated

that it was an “unfortunate accident” and that the soldier had “stumbled.” Such statements also make clear that the Tusk government’s promise to legally investigate the violations of the law at the border under the previous government are absolutely worthless.

A few weeks ago, a woman with a newborn baby was apprehended by Polish border guards. As Grupa Granica reports, the heavily pregnant woman had already been turned back twice by the officials. She had then given birth to her child in life-threatening conditions in no man’s land.

At a press conference at the beginning of April, Tusk declared that as Polish head of government, he was obliged to ensure the effective defence of the Polish border. He was of the opinion that “even strict methods of protection against illegal migration can be more or less humane.”

The Polish government’s “humane” plan envisages sealing the border so hermetically that not a single refugee can get past the border fence. According to the repugnant and cynical logic of the Tusk government, if no one can get in, there will be no illegal pushbacks.

Tusk said he was aware “that some people were disappointed by this,” but that he had never hidden his position. In fact, Tusk had supported the PiS government’s measures from the outset and engaged in racist agitation against immigrants during the election campaign.

Tusk has also attacked the new EU immigration pact (GEAS), which provides for the detention of refugees in deportation camps similar to concentration camps and effectively abolishes the right to asylum, because it contains a means for the distribution of refugees. “We will protect Poland against the redistribution mechanism,” he declared.

Tusk is supported by an alliance of parties ranging from the extreme right-wing Polish People’s Party (PSL) and the Greens to the social democratic SLD and the pseudo-left Razem. The latter is particularly dishonest. After the coalition negotiations, it announced it would not join the new government, but would support it, obviously realising it would be tantamount to political suicide if it openly supported Tusk’s extreme right-wing agenda.

Ukrainian refugees

Ukrainian refugees, who still enjoy a special status, are also increasingly becoming the target of attacks. To this day, Polish government representatives like to boast that over 3 million Ukrainians fled the war to neighbouring Poland. In fact, it was mainly the civilian population who helped the refugees on their own initiative and looked after them. The government, on the other hand, cut their social benefits after just a few months in order to force the refugees, some of whom were traumatised, into work. Many have therefore moved on or commute back and forth regularly.

A week ago, Defence Minister Kosiniak-Kamysz (PSL) defamed Ukrainians as “shirkers” who had fled because they did not want

to go to war. “I think that many of our compatriots were and are outraged when they see young Ukrainian men in hotels and cafés and when they hear how much effort it costs to help Ukraine,” he told *Polast News*.

Kosiniak-Kamysz promised that the government would support Ukraine in the repatriation of men fit for military service. The far-right Zelensky government is trying to recruit more men with the new mobilisation law and the suspension of consular services in order to send them to the front as cannon fodder.

“We as Poles have long suggested to the Ukrainian side that we can help identify those who are militarily obligated and should go to Ukraine. This is a civic duty,” the Polish minister of defence said. The ministry’s press office added that “support for the return/repatriation of Ukrainian citizens of military age” required “bilateral agreements” and Poland was “ready for such talks.”

The government has already taken the first step. It has extended subsidiary protection only until June 31, 2024 for all those who came to Poland after the start of the war, but not for Ukrainians who were already in Poland before then. The deadline has also raised eyebrows. The European Council decided to extend the protection until March 4, 2025. The Polish government reportedly wants to extend the deadline by a further year after June.

As this short extension alone will cost the state coffers almost 2 billion zlotys (€450 million), the government is working on abolishing subsidies for accommodation and meals (40 zlotys/€9.3 per day). These had already been restricted in June 2022 and only applied to senior citizens, disabled people and women with children. Now they too are to receive nothing.

Of the just over 1 million Ukrainians who came to Poland in 2022, around 90 percent are women, children and elderly people. However, at least another million Ukrainians were already living and working in Poland on a regular basis. There is now a growing fear among them that they will also be sent to the front.

The Tusk government’s attacks on refugees go hand in hand with its own preparations for war. All Poland’s parties are supporting an insane rearmament programme, and Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski has repeatedly declared his willingness to send his own troops to Ukraine. At the same time, the government is cultivating the fascistic dregs of society with its agitation against immigrants, which it needs to suppress opposition from the left in its own country. The fight for democratic rights is therefore inextricably linked to the fight against war.



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