Humanity Suspended: A Brief History of How Poland Suspended Asylum Rights in Pursuit of Imperial Status

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the historical trajectory culminating in Poland's 2025 suspension of asylum rights. It argues that the current border regime cannot be explained by immediate political context alone, as it is deeply rooted in enduring historical narratives shaping Polishness, national ambitions, and belonging. Adopting a *longue durée* perspective, the analysis reveals entrenched patterns of prejudice, as well as colonial and imperial dynamics. The article follows Poland's transformation from a multi-religious, multi-ethnic polity into a largely homogenized state, alongside a shift from a net negative to a net positive migration balance. The article posits that contemporary border governance is best understood through the persistence of religious racialization, which stratifies society into different levels of privilege and subjugation, building on the historical religious hierarchies that are often applied in abstract ways in the intersection of religion, race, ethnicity, and visual markers.

I. INTRODUCTION

I began to write these words at the same time that the government of my country of origin, Poland, suspended the right to asylum. As of March 27, 2025, border control agents stopped accepting any asylum claims, regardless of the reason.[1] Initially, the suspension was supposed to last 60 days, but it was extended four

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[1] Magdalena Chrzczonowicz, "Zawieszenie prawa do azylu przegłosowane w Sejmie. Kto był za, a kto przeciw?," *OKO.press*, February 21, 2025, https://oko.press/zawieszenie-prawa-do-azylu-przeglosowane-w-sejmie-kto-byl-za-a-kto-przeciw.

times by the time of writing.[2] Nothing suggests that the situation will change anytime soon, as court challenges have, so far, been unsuccessful.[3]

It might be worth considering, then, how we got here. Reading these words, you might be surprised. Perhaps you have heard about the massive effort to help countless people from Ukraine, with Poles opening their homes to families in need. Was the Polish reception of migrants not a massive success story? Or you may have heard that the right-wing government, known for its hostility to migrants, lost the last election and was replaced by a liberal coalition led by the former President of the European Council, Donald Tusk. Are things not improving since then? Or you heard that Poland is a resoundingly Catholic country, one whose population overwhelmingly affiliates with Roman Catholicism. Would they not heed the papal calls to defend people on the move?

While all three statements are more or less true, the answer to the previous questions are more complicated. The most recent history of migration to Poland is marked by a radical division, with, at least initially, a radically different approach to the borders with Ukraine and Belarus. The recent political history shows that, once introduced, systemic racism is difficult to get rid of. Recent religious history shows that Catholic affiliation is not necessarily concerned with the (social) teachings of its Magisterium. As I will argue in this draft, while biologically or phenotypically understood "race" has a relatively marginal position in the Polish political discourse, "religion" operates as the main racializing marker.

To explain what is going on in Poland today, I will divide my argument into three parts. First, I will take a closer look at the dominant historical narrative of "what is the history of Poland" and adopt a *longue*

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[2] "Sejm zgodził się na przedłużenie czasowego zawieszenia prawa do azylu," *Prawo.pl*, September 12, 2025, https://www.prawo.pl/samorzad/sejm-zgodzil-sie-na-przedluzenie-czasowego-zawieszenia-prawa-do-azylu,534891.html.

[3] "Bezprawne czy nie? Sąd wypowiedział się o zawieszeniu prawa do azylu w Polsce," *Bankier.pl*, October 7, 2025, https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Bezprawne-czy-nie-Sad-wypowiedzial-sie-o-zawieszeniu-prawa-do-azylu-w-Polsce-9020988.html.

durée perspective on the questions of coloniality and racialization. Then, I will consider the more recent history of Poland, following the fall of Communism in 1989, as a story of transformation from a country with negative to positive net migration. Finally, I will set the former against the latter, trying to address the following questions: how are historical patterns of racialization through "religion" impacting the contemporary governmental approach to the people on the move; in what way "religion" serves today as a category of racialization and exclusion; and how these differences impact the differentiation of the refugees.

II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF "POLAND"

The traditional Polish national narrative—the one that all children learn in school—dates the beginnings of Poland to April 14, 966, the day of the baptism of Mieszko, the ruling prince of Poland. However, if one scrutinizes this proposal closely, several questions follow—questions that underlie any constructed national narrative. Why do we only recognize the country under Christian rule as "Polish?"[4] And why was the conversion of the ruler so important if, for most of the population, this did not result in significant changes? Why do we consider that there was a significant continuity throughout the subsequent centuries despite vast changes in basically all aspects of what hides behind the term—political arrangements, demographics, territory, languages, to

[4] On the other side of the extreme were some nationalist movements in the interwar period, going as far as to suggest that Christianization alienated Slavs from their "true" identity, for example, Zadruga Movement, for more see: Paweł Bielawski, "Slavdom as Christendom's Colony – Slavonic Identity According to Zadruga," *Review of Nationalities* 7 (2017): 7–28.

name just a few–including 123 years when no independent entity known as "Poland" existed?[5]

These questions may seem more suitable for a conference of historians than for a special issue on migration in a law and religion journal, but they are crucial for understanding the conundrum behind contemporary ideas concerning Polish identity—and thereby the constitution of "the other" as its mirror image. Today, most people in Poland would find such questions odd, as they rather uncritically accept the assumption that being Polish means being part of such millennium-long historical community under Christian leadership—reinforced by loud public celebrations, in 2025 concerning the coronation of the first Polish king, Bolesław I the Brave (*Bolesław Chrobry*).[6] And yet, this is in stark contrast to the historical realities of the people living within what is recognized as Polish territory in such conceptualizations.

First, for much of Polish history, its territory has been populated by a diverse range of faiths, cultures, and dialects—Jews, Muslims, and Orthodox, Protestant, and Catholic Christians speaking a complex mix of predominantly Germanic, Slavic, and Baltic languages. Second, for much of that history, the local population would be rather indifferent to the rulers and accustomed to some kind of change at the upper echelons of society—and for those at the bottom

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[5] For discussion of the broader Polish history, see, for example, the multi-volume *Dzieje Polski* written by Andrzej Nowak, or Brian Porter-Szűcs, *Poland in the Modern World: Beyond Martyrdom* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014). For discussion of the processes of national meaning and history making more broadly, see, for example, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. For other examples, see, among others, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory (1996), Hugh Trevor-Roper's The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History (2008), and Nora Berend, Stephen I: The First Christian King of Hungary (2024).

[6] "1000-lecie koronacji Bolesława Chrobrego i 500-lecie hołdu pruskiego," *Ministerstwo Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego*, April 18, 2025, https://www.gov.pl/web/kultura/1000-lecie-koronacji-boleslawa-chrobrego-i-500-lecie-holdu-pruskiego.

of the feudal system, the same would probably relate to the exact state organization they belonged to.[7]

It might then be better to comprehend the earlier history of "Poland" in imperial terms: a political ideal with a center based in a given political class and urban centers, but with constantly changing peripheries. Especially between the 16th and 17th centuries, the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth constituted one of the most significant imperial actors in Europe, encompassing nearly 1 million square kilometers in 1618—about twice the size of modern France or three times the size of modern Germany. The diversity of its population was not only the result of military conquests and political alliances, but also a regime of relative religious tolerance, which accounted, among others, for the sizeable Jewish and Protestant communities. Poland was known at the time as "the country without stakes."[8]

And yet, no empire lasts forever, and such rapid geographic expansion did not last for long. Instability and disorder reached a point where, by the end of the 18th century—despite attempts at reform, including the introduction of a formal constitution in 1791—Poland had completely disappeared, partitioned among the empires of Russia, Prussia, and Austria. For 123 years, Poland functioned as an imperial periphery, as no Polish state existed (at least not fully autonomously, as there were semi-autonomous temporary replacements, such as the Duchy of Warsaw, Congress Poland, the Republic of Kraków, or the Grand Duchy of Poznań).

And yet, the disappearance of Poland did not result in the disappearance of its idea. The budding Polish nationalism manifested itself in numerous ways, opposing what some perceived as the three empires' colonial treatment of the formerly Polish population.

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[7] There is a significant movement now in Poland to reconsider the "forgotten groups" such as peasentry or urban home servants. See, for example, Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak, *Chłopki. Opowieść o naszych babkach* (Kraków: Marginesy, 2023); Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak, Służące od Wszystkiego (Kraków: Marginesy, 2018); Adam Leszczyński, *Ludowa Historia Polski* (Warszawa: W.A.B., 2020).

[8] Janusz Tazbir, *Państwo bez stosów. Szkice z dziejów tolerancji w Polsce XVI i XVII w.* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Iskry, 2009).

The efforts at forced Russification and Germanization sparked a counterreaction, resulting, among other things, in several uprisings aimed at regaining independence. While Poland would not return to the political map until 1918, a significant effort was made over the course of the 19th century to conceptualize the idea of a Polish nation and establish it on the ground.[9]

However, the fact that people shared the notion that there was such a thing as a Polish nation did not mean that there was a single vision for what, or rather who, constituted that nation. The Second Polish Republic, which lasted between 1918 and 1939, was an explosive organism full of tensions around the answers to this question. It was a multi-ethnic state, in which only about two-thirds of the population declared their identity or mother tongue as Polish, with significant Ukrainian, Jewish, Belarusian, and German presence. The dividing lines between them were not always clear, and neither was the connection to religious affiliations. For example, although there were whole Jewish shtetls that would speak only Yiddish, there were also numbers of assimilated Jews fluent in Polish. Similarly, the mere fact of having Polish as a mother tongue in the region of Upper Silesia did not immediately mean an adoption of Polish rather than, for example, German identity.[10]

For some, such as the Polish left at the time, faith affiliation was not a barrier to becoming a Polish citizen with full rights, which is why, for example, the Polish Socialist Party, led by Józef Piłsudski, had significant support from many assimilated Jews. For others, however, as for the National Democracy led by Roman Dmowski, Polishness was strictly connected to professed faith—the connection expressed by the idiom Pole-Catholic: *Polak-Katolik*.[11]

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[9] For more, see the first part of Ryszard Bobrowicz and Mattias Nowak, "Divided by the Rainbow: Culture War and Diffusion of Paleoconservative Values in Contemporary Poland," *Religions* 12, no. 3 (2021): 170.

[10] For the subjective history of the region, see, for example, Zbigniew Rokita, *Kajś. Opowieść o Górnym Śląsku* (Wołowiec: Czarne. 2020).

[11] See Krzysztof Koseła, *Polak i Katolik. Splątana Tożsamość* (Warsaw: Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii PAN, 2003).

Although this combination may seem less controversial today, it was not as obvious at the time. While Catholic parish priests often participated in nationalist efforts throughout the 19th century, local bishops were more likely to collaborate with the imperial powers, whereas the Vatican was quite hostile to Polish nationalism altogether. For example, in the encyclical letter *Cum Primum* from 1832, Pope Gregory XVI opposed Polish nationalism, arguing that it disturbed the social order by attacking legitimate authorities.[12] Instead of decreasing the allegiance of Poles to Catholicism, the mismatch between the Vatican and the local approaches resulted in the emergence of a "Polonized" Catholicism, committed to the national cause.[13]

The combination of Polishness and Catholicism became especially important after the death of Józef Piłsudski in 1935, who had ruled Poland in a semi-authoritarian fashion following a 1926 *coup d'état*. Despite the ratification of a treaty on national minorities in 1919, Polish authorities struggled with managing ethnic diversity on their territory, and the autonomy of minorities fluctuated. The National Democracy insisted on assimilatory policies of Polonization, while the political groups led by Piłsudski were more lenient—even if far from perfect. Piłsudski at least attempted to keep at bay the harshest forms of nationalism. From his death until the Second World War, the situation turned for the worse, and the internal ethnic animosities rose, alongside increasingly punitive treatment from the authorities. While biologically or phenotypically considered "race" never received any significant currency in Polish politics, "religion" prevailed as a racializing category of division, with various combinations of ethnicities and religious affiliations

[12] For more, see Janusz Gaworski, *Niepodległa bo Katolicka? O Kościele Czasu Zaborów* (Sulejówek: Muzeum Józefa Piłsudskiego w Sulejówku, 2019).
[13] See Brian Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

such as Protestant-German, Orthodox-Belarussian, Greek-Catholic-Ukrainian, alongside *Polak-Katolik*.[14]

As a result, many minorities did not view Poland as "their state," and found some relief in the pressing empires from the East and West in September 1939. For example, for many Jews, the Soviet Union seemed a better alternative, even if it did not live up to their expectations in practice. A similar dynamic existed among some residents of Upper Silesia regarding the German invasion (even though the actual support remains subject to controversy to this day). Describing his experience at the start of the Second World War, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman noted that, after experiencing sustained and systemic antisemitism as a child and a student, he experienced the marching Red Army soldiers as angels. It should not come as a surprise, then, that he became an ardent Communist, serving later as one of the youngest majors of the Polish People's Republic's army.[15]

However, the high hopes for the better treatment of minorities did not survive the test of time. After the Second World War, Poland was significantly demographically weakened and became a satellite state of the Soviet Union, with limited independence. The Soviet Union was very proactive in its combat against nationalism, executing nationalist leaders and using aggressive policies of resettlement to quash any nationalist organization. Polish borders also moved West, diminishing territories with the largest populations of Slavic minorities and expelling Germans living on the new territories. As a result, many minority members were relocated deep into the Soviet Union.[16]

At the beginning of the Polish People's Republic, nationalism endured similar treatment. Not only were

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[14] Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, *The Wheel of Polish Fortune: Myths in Polish Collective Consciousness during the First Years of Solidarity* (Lund: Lund University, 1992).

[15] Izabela Wagner, *Bauman: Biografia* (Warszawa: Czarna Owca, 2021).

[16] For more, see, for example, Terry Martin, "Stalinist Forced Relocation Policies: Patterns, Causes, Consequences," in *Demography and National Security*, ed. Myron Weiner and Sharon Stanton Russell (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001), 305–339.

the remaining nationalist partisans hunted down by the Communist government, but even the members of the Communist Polish Workers' Party who presented a "nationalist bent" were persecuted, including the highest members of the political apparatus. This led to the loss of the Party leadership of Władysław Gomułka—one of the top Polish politicians immediately after the Second World War—and his subsequent imprisonment between 1951 and 1954.

But Gomułka's fate was not sealed forever—and the same concerned nationalism. Gomułka was rehabilitated in 1956, and soon after, he was readmitted to the Party, although his political stances were still viewed critically by its leadership. Nonetheless, thanks largely to popular support, Gomułka was elected back to the leadership position before the end of the year, this time holding onto power for nearly a decade and a half. Despite hopes for the liberalization of the regime, Gomułka consolidated his power, taking a strong hold over the state apparatus and society writ large.[17]

Increasing antisemitism marked Gomułka's time in government. At first, the right to emigrate was reintroduced, leading many remaining Jews to leave for Israel. The Jewish population changed from about 3.35 million in 1939, to 240,000 in 1946, to 25,000 in 1967. As a result of the Soviet condemnation of Israel following the Six-Day War, antisemitism increased further, culminating in Gomułka's speech on June 19, 1967, in which he accused Jews of acting to the detriment of the Polish state. A purge followed, with Jews expelled from the army, public administration, and universities. This included Bauman, who lost his chair at the University of Warsaw. Afterward, many of the remaining Jews left Poland.

Poland, a historically multi-ethnic nation, emerged as a largely mono-ethnic state. The religious monolith followed. Despite the subsequent attempts at fighting Catholicism, the Communist repressions had the opposite effect. The Catholic Church in Poland was perceived as the beacon of freedom, and the election of

[17] More on the political history of Communist Poland in Jerzy Eisler, *Czterdzieści pięć lat, które wstrząsnęły Polską. Historia polityczna PRL* (Warszawa: Czerwone i Czarne, 2018).

Karol Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II only solidified this effect. By the 1980s, when the Communist government was struggling for legitimacy, the Catholic Church was stronger than ever, with the vast majority of the population declaring Catholic faith (97.5% in rural areas, 89% in urban areas).[18] Additionally, 17% and 57% of the population, respectively, participated weekly in Sunday Mass in 1982.[19] From a multi-religious country, Poland became nearly mono-religious. With it, the religio-ethnically understood Polishness prevailed over the multi-ethnic one.

The fall of Communist Poland in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union led to a radical shift towards the West. In the coming decades, Poland embraced neoliberalism, which persisted even after the post-Communist Union of Democratic Left, the direct successor of the Polish Workers' Party, returned to power. At the cost of radical cuts to the public sector and the mass destruction of numerous now-unprofitable industries, Poland emerged as a leader in economic growth in Europe.[20] But not everyone shared enthusiasm for the growing economy. According to surveys from the Centre for Public Opinion Research, by 2001, discontent peaked, with more than half of society believing that transformation brought more losses than benefits.[21] The changing economic situation had a significant impact on migration from and to Poland, as well as on societal views.

III. FROM NEGATIVE TO POSITIVE NET MIGRATION COUNTRY

As a European Union (EU) member state since 2004, contemporary Poland serves as both the external border of the EU and the Schengen area. Its capital

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[18] Henryk Słabek, "Kościół katolicki w Polsce 1945–1989: (w związku z wybranymi publikacjami)," Dzieje Najnowsze 37, no. 1 (2005): 125.

[19] *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae in Polonia* (Warszawa: Instytut Statystyki Kościoła Katolickiego SAC, 2020).

[20] For a political history of the post-Communist Poland, see Antoni Dudek, *Historia polityczna Polski 1989–2023* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2023).

[21] CBOS, *Komunikat z badań K_073/13* (Warszawa: CBOS, 2013), https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2013/K_073_13.PDF.

city, Warsaw, hosts the headquarters of Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, also founded in 2004. And yet, for the first decade of its membership, Poland was not particularly known for its hostile stance on migration. Quite the opposite, Poles were known for their significant intra-EU migration, with approximately 2 to 3 million people leaving to work in another EU country during that time—a result of the economic "shock therapy" mentioned above. However, high rates of migration had strong historical precedent, intensified by the increased opportunities EU accession provided for emigration. As a result, the Central Statistical Bureau of Poland has recorded negative net migration during all of Poland's recent history.[22] As migrant workers in the EU, Poles experienced not only discriminatory working conditions but were also subject to anti-migrant political campaigns. "Polish plumber" became the racialized image used to frighten local electorates, afraid of losing jobs and hard-won working benefits to the foreigners accepting cheaper pay.

And yet, the image did not last for long. The burst of the subprime mortgage bubble and the subsequent 2008 crisis did not affect Poland to the same extent as many other developed countries. In the eyes of many economists, Poland constituted an economic miracle, sustaining positive economic growth as a green island among its red European neighbors, who were deep in recession.[23] For instance, in 2009, the Italian newspaper *Il Giornale* published an article entitled "Polish plumber laughs at Europe. Warsaw does not experience a recession."[24] Poland's compounded economic growth continued throughout the subsequent

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[22] "Informacja o rozmiarach i kierunkach czasowej emigracji z Polski w latach 2004–2020," *Główny Urząd Statystyczny*, October 25, 2021, https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/ludnosc/migracje-zagraniczne-ludnosci/informacja-o-rozmiarach-i-kierunkach-czasowej-emigracji-z-polski-w-latach-2004-2020,2,14.html.

[23] "The Polish Economic Miracle," *Epoch Magazine*, March 1, 2024, https://www.epoch-magazine.com/post/the-polish-economic-miracle.

[24] Rolla Scolari, "L'idraulico polacco beffa l'Europa Varsavia non sente la recessione," *Il Giornale*, August 31, 2009, https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/l-idraulico-polacco-beffa-l-europa-varsavia-non-sente.html.

years, leading to a major transformation that also impacted temporary migration. In 2018, the number of people temporarily residing in another EU country reached its peak, and at about the same time, Poland experienced net positive migration for the first time in its recorded history.[25]

A sudden turn in favor of the topic of "migrants" followed this transformation. The first clashes came with the so-called "refugee crisis" of 2015-2016. Based on the solidarity mechanism, Poland was initially supposed to accept slightly under three thousand refugees from Greece and Italy. Later, the number increased to approximately ten thousand. While many countries in Eastern Europe pushed back against the European Commission's proposal regarding relocations, the government led at the time by the center-right *Civic Platform* accepted the commitment on behalf of Poland. However, the crisis coincided with two consequential election campaigns—presidential and parliamentary—which significantly reshaped the country's political scene. Right-wing *Law and Justice* instrumentalized the topic of migration, combining it with a mix of nationalist and socialist narratives, leading them to a resounding electoral success. For the first, and so far, only, time since the fall of Communism, one party (or rather, a broad right-wing coalition that stood in the election as one entity called the *United Right*) had full power, with over half of the mandates in both houses of the parliament and their "own" president.

Law and Justice quickly utilized the new possibilities, renouncing the commitment to accept refugees and instead following in the footsteps of its long-standing political ally, Hungarian *Fidesz*, even if putting its own twist on the subject.
Framing Poland more narrowly, and Europe more broadly as entities "under siege," Law and Justice presented itself as the protector of Poland and

[25] "Informacja o rozmiarach i kierunkach czasowej emigracji z Polski w latach 2004-2020," *Główny Urząd Statystyczny*, 25 October 2021, https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/ludnosc/migracje-zagraniczne-ludnosci/informacja-o-rozmiarach-i-kierunkach-czasowej-emigracji-z-polski-w-latach-2004-2020,2,14.html

Christendom, working against the colonization from the European West (while remaining uncritical of the Trump-led USA), the military threat from the East (in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the worsening political crisis in Belarus), and the internal secularist tendencies. In line with the political philosophy of Carl Schmitt, whom Jarosław Kaczyński describes as one of the influences in the conversation with the *German Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*,[26] the government of the United Right began to divide reality into friends and enemies.[27]

Just like in Hungary, the figure of a "migrant," uninterested in the portrayal of real people on the move, functioned as a vehicle for the xenophobic narratives that were supposed to create a sense of threat and entrapment.[28] Tapping into the long-standing antisemitism of many Polish nationalist circles, it now supplemented it by importing the anti-Muslim stereotypes from the West. Drawing phantasmatic pictures of what happens in the West, Law and Justice presented itself as the only political force capable of protecting Poles from experiencing the same fate.[29]

The situation escalated further following Poland's support for the political opposition in the contested 2020 Belarusian presidential elections. Despite protests and external pressures, Aleksandr Łukaszenka managed to maintain power and instead began to threaten Europe with migration. Promising safe travel to Europe to unsuspecting third-country residents in dire situations, Łukaszenka used them as live weapons, expecting that this would cause a political crisis in the neighboring countries. And

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[26] Konrad Schuller, "Kaczyński wünscht sich für Polen einen Sieg Merkels," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 7, 2017, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/kaczynski-wuenscht-sich-fuer-polen-einen-sieg-merkels-14859766.html.

[27] For more, see, for example, Bobrowicz and Nowak, "Divided by the Rainbow."

[28] "Public Narratives Poland Country Study," *ODI*, May 2023, https://media.odi.org/documents/ODI-Public_narratives_Poland_country_study_POLISH-revMay23.pdf.

[29] "Ziobro: Musimy obronić bezpieczną Polskę," *wPolityce*, August 26, 2023, https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/660055-ziobro-musimy-obronic-bezpieczna-polske-w-tle-migracja.

indeed, this resulted in significant opposition from, among others, Poland. Utilizing the opportunity, the Polish government quickly intervened, gradually escalating the situation. Instead of creating a robust asylum processing setup, the government pushed back against the mainly Iraqi and Afghan asylum seekers (a twisted turn of events considering that Poland was among the most ardent supporters, including military involvement, of the American interventions in both countries), describing the situation as a "hybrid war."[30] From military deployment to the border, through the policy of continuous pushbacks, to the development of a security wall on the Belarusian border and the creation of a special militarized zone on the border, barring relief NGOs and journalists from accessing it, the situation grew increasingly dire.[31]

Two parallel worlds emerged side by side in light of the escalation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine a year later. Along the same border line, the northern part was described as a grave threat, although it involved at most a few thousand potential asylum seekers. In contrast, the southern border observed one of the most impressive efforts in supporting people fleeing violence and war. On one side, a thousand soldiers protected the borders against approximately the same number of unarmed refugees; on the other side, Poland accepted nearly two million refugees in just a few months.

However, the governmental stance on the Belarusian border proved even more difficult to defend a year later, when the so-called "visa scandal" erupted in a widely publicized controversy. While rhetorically bashing migrants, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was among the European leaders in granting Schengen work visas to residents from a number of countries in Africa and Asia, in many cases in exchange for bribes. According to the report of the

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[30] "Mariusz Błaszczak: Na Ukrainie toczy się wojna hybrydowa," *Polskie Radio Jedynka*, November 28, 2011, https://jedynka.polskieradio.pl/artykul/2222280.

[31] Artem Graban, "Instrumentalisation of Fear and Securitisation of 'Eastern Borders Route': The Case of Poland-Belarus 'Border Crisis,'" *European Security* 33, no. 2 (2023): 236–60. The crisis has been dramatised in *Green Border*, movie directed by Agnieszka Holland.

Supreme Audit Office, 366,551 such visas were granted by the Ministry, [32] which, according to some reports, included people pushed back on the Belarusian border.[33]

However, a narrative once established was hard to overcome, and the weak justification of the situation did not translate into a change in public discourse on migration. Instead, the main opposition to the United Right picked up the anti-immigrant rhetoric, presenting themselves as the better alternative in matters of security. In 2023, Law and Justice lost parliamentary elections and was replaced by the alliance led by the *Civic Coalition* (which emerged from the merger of Civic Platform with several smaller parties). The former President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, returned as Prime Minister. A political pragmatist, Tusk did not approach the topic of migration in a principled manner, but rather responded to the social sentiments, turning towards the same antimigrant rhetoric as Law and Justice during his campaign.[34] After winning the elections, his government doubled down on anti-migrant policies. The formal suspension of the asylum admission process described at the beginning of this paper was just another chapter in the process. Similarly, the good example of the Ukrainian border began to slowly wane over time. While initially, Poles were incredibly eager to help their struggling neighbors, over time, compassion fatigue increased. Together with the post-pandemic inflation crisis, the Ukrainian refugees began to be seen as a convenient scapegoat, and the

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[32] "Nadzór MSZ nad działalnością konsularną," *Najwyższa Izba Kontroli*, October 10, 2024, https://www.nik.gov.pl/aktualnosci/nadzor-msz-nad-dzialalnoscia-konsularna.html.

[33] "Pushbacki napędzały handel wizami?," *Bankier.pl*, September 18, 2023, https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Pushbacki-napedzaly-handel-wizami-Posrednicy-z-MSZ-zarejestrowani-w-Moskwie-8612986.html

[34] For more, see Marcin Kosman, "The (Il)Liberal Shift in Polish Migration Discourse: A Multimodal Analysis of Civic Platform's Portrayal of Immigrants," *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies* 24, no. 4 (2024): 240–65.

anti-Ukrainian rhetoric began to creep in,[35] exploding with full force during the 2025 presidential campaign. The elected president, Karol Nawrocki, formally independent although with a strong support of the *United Right*, did not hide his anti-Ukrainian sentiments both during the political campaign and when taking up the office.[36]

In the end, Poland's transition from a country with negative to positive net migration was marked by a sharp turn against migrants, but also a sharp turn towards the rhetoric of a besieged empire, tapping into long-standing historical patterns and narratives. Combining the former with the latter can help shed further light on the role that concepts of "race" and "religion" played in the process.

IV. THE NEW POLISH POLITICS OF THE EMPIRE

The fact that two successive governments have continued with this given migration rhetoric and policy showcases the broad public support for them. Part of this continuity relates to a broader shift in social opinion on migration across Europe. Here, I focus on the specific Polish foundation that provides such support.

I argue that the *longue durée* perspective outlined above is crucial for understanding this specificity, as history plays a comparatively large role in Polish politics—some even go so far as to describe Poland as a country where "history matters too much."[37] Interest in history has expanded significantly since the fall of

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[35] "Sondaż: Jak zmieniło się nastawienie do Ukraińców? Wiemy, co uważają Polacy," *Rzeczpospolita*, February 4, 2025, https://www.rp.pl/spoleczenstwo/art41764191-sondaz-jak-zmienilo-sie-nastawienie-do-ukraincow-wiemy-co-uwazaja-polacy.

[36] For more, see, for example, Alexander Palikot, "Who is Nawrocki, Poland's new president, and what could his narrow victory mean for Polish-Ukrainian relations?" *Kyiv Independent*, June 2, 2025, https://kyivindependent.com/who-is-nawrocki-polands-new-president-and-what-his-narrow-victory-could-mean-for-polish-ukrainian-relations/.

[37] Paweł Machcewicz, "When History Matters Too Much: Historians and the Politics of History in Poland." *Contemporary European History* 32, no. 1 (2023): 15–20.

communism: in 1987, 15% of Poles described their interest in history as "large" or "very large," and by 2016 this figure had risen to 25%. Similarly, the share of Poles declaring no interest in history dropped from 12% to 8%.[38] Historians are also overrepresented among Polish politicians. In both 2019[39] and 2023[40], they made up about 5% of the elected members of the lower house of Parliament. Both Mateusz Morawiecki and Donald Tusk—the two prime ministers responsible for the restrictive migration policies discussed above—hold M.A. degrees in history. The recently elected Polish president, Karol Nawrocki, not only holds a doctorate in history but also previously served as the head of the Polish Institute of National Memory.

Importantly, from 2005 onwards, Law and Justice introduced the idea of the so-called "new historical policy," which presents history not as a matter for academic consideration but as something that should be actively shaped by public debate and the proactive actions of political institutions. Historical policy, in other words, should focus on strengthening national identity and protecting the national interest first, viewing any push for academic rigor with skepticism.[41]

Combined with the marginalization of the political left from 2005 onwards—and with it, more critical approaches to what "Polish" history means—the political debate concerning history has narrowed to two right-leaning positions: the nationalist-conservative vision of the *Law and Justice* Party's new historical policy, and the liberal-conservative vision of the *Civic Platform*, which portrays Poland as an

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[38] CBOS, *Świadomość historyczna Polaków. Komunikat z badań* (Warszawa: CBOS, 2016).

[39] Wojtek Duch, "Polacy wybrali historyków. Premier, ministrowie i posłowie po historii w nowym Sejmie," *Historia.org.pl*, October 19, 2019, https://historia.org.pl/2019/10/19/polacy-wybrali-historykow-premier-ministrowie-i-poslowie-po-historii-w-nowym-sejmie/.

[40] Jan Lande, "Historycy w nowym Sejmie 2023. Liczby i fakty," *Historia.org.pl*, October 17, 2023, https://historia.org.pl/2023/10/17/historycy-w-nowym-sejmie-2023-liczby-i-fakty/

[41] For more, see Joanna Kalicka, Piotr Witek, "Polityka historyczna," in: *Modi memorandi. Leksykon kultury pamięci*, ed. Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, Robert Traba (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2014), 378–387.

emerging Western power and a future leader of Central-Eastern Europe. I would suggest that the notions of colonization and empire are crucial for understanding this dynamic. The recent shift to positive net migration reinforces this dual approach, in which Poland simultaneously looks back nostalgically to its imperial history and seeks to overcome the trauma of perceived colonialism by (re)embracing colonial strategies itself.[42]

Interestingly, with the left marginalized, Law and Justice has taken up themes traditionally associated with left-wing postcolonial theory, merging them with the romantic martyrology of Poland as the "Messiah of Nations."[43] Emphasizing sovereignty, its politics focus on accusing the liberal right of forfeiting it in favor of closer ties with the EU, which is portrayed as a neocolonial project. Instead, the party emphasizes national pride, "rising from the knees" after centuries of foreign domination, and the need to safeguard a fragile national identity against colonial impositions—primarily from the "German-led" EU. Part of that narrative concerns protecting Poland from its historical perpetrators, most notably Germany, Russia, Islam, and Ukrainians. While they admitted that Poland was (and still continues to be) colonized, they refused to accept that Poland could be a colonizer—or even perpetrator, as exemplified by significant opposition to any discussion of antisemitic pogroms.[44]

Despite rhetorical differences, governments led by both Civic Platform and Law and Justice have, in practice, embraced the politics of the empire. Under their rule, Poland has gradually evolved into a country with a strong center and exploitable peripheries.

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[42] On the usefulness of colonial metaphors in relation to Polish history, see, Ewa Domańska, "Obrazy PRL w perspektywie postkolonialnej. Studium przypadku," in *Obrazy PRL*, ed. Krzysztof Brzechczyn (Poznań: IPN, 2008), 167–186.

[43] Cf. Stanley Bill, "Seeking the Authentic: Polish Culture and the Nature of Postcolonial Theory," *Nonsite.org*, no. 12 (2014), https://nonsite.org/seeking-the-authentic-polish-culture-and-the-nature-of-postcolonial-theory/.

[44] For more, see, for example, Wojciech Engelking, "Ja to ktoś inny. O tym jak Polacy (nie)mordowali Żydów" *Kultura Liberalna*, 474, no. 6 (2018), https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2018/02/06/engelking-polska-izrael-holokaust-debata-ipn/.

Economically, this structure is well established. In Warsaw, parity-adjusted GDP per capita ranks among the highest in Europe, comparable to Stockholm and higher than Amsterdam; the national average, however, remains close to the European bottom. The disparity between the capital and the rest of the country is among the highest in Europe—only Romania displays a larger gap.[45] Poland also aspires to be a regional leader in other domains, with by far the largest percentage of GDP spent on the military[46] and ambitions to lead initiatives such as the Visegrad Group and the Intermarium.

More importantly, Poland increasingly seeks to operate as both a demographic center and periphery, with the distinction following religious and ethnic lines. As an empire-in-the-making, Poland no longer accepts its status as an exploitable periphery within the European empire—one subject to brain drain and used as a supplier of cheap goods. Following the victim-offender overlap,[47] the formerly colonized become colonizers, reproducing the othering strategies inherent to colonization. However, lacking a strong historical foundation in the Orientalizing perspectives of past empires, Poland tends not to favor biological or phenotypical conceptions of "race" (even if such notions are gaining popularity) as a category that stratifies society into privileged exploiters and subjugated exploitable.[48] Instead, "religion" continues to function as the primary category of racialization, including certain overlap between the interwar patterns and the

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[45] "Urban-rural Europe - Economic Activity in Capital Cities and Metropolitan Regions," *Eurostat*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Urban-rural_Europe_-_economic_activity_in_capital_cities_and_metropolitan_regions.

[46] "Military Expenditure (% of GDP) – EU," *World Bank* https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=EU.

[47] Jennifer M. Reingle, "Victim–Offender Overlap," in *The Encyclopedia of Theoretical Criminology* 1 (2014): 1–3.

[48] See, for example, "Brunatna Księga," *Stowarzyszenie Nigdy Więcej*, https://www.nigdywiecej.org/brunatna-ksiega.

present.[49] It must be noted, however, that the dividing line between these categories is not clear cut—there is a certain messiness in between these categories, as religion is often equivocated with ethnic identity, and both are often ascribed based on visual characteristics or language used. Phenotypical characteristics may also increase the status of the representatives of religions usually perceived as "problematic."

Just as "race" is only loosely related to visible traits or pseudoscientific explanations, "religion" also operates politically as an arbitrary, abstract category that can be filled with meaning rather than a lived phenomenon. I do not argue, of course, that nationalist uses of Catholicism lack any theological basis—for example, the rhetoric of nationalist priests and politicians emphasizing their Catholic affiliations may build on similar claims to Febronianism and Gallicanism. Nor do the 19th-century references end there: the romantic, martyrological vision includes the belief that Polish Catholicism has a special mission to protect the Church and save the world, which justifies disobedience toward Catholic authorities when necessary. Rather, I argue that theological claims are not at the core of political debates; religious classification operates in a manner analogous to race, instigating the stratification of arbitrarily defined groups and justifying political, economic, and often sexual subjugation.

For example, the political discourse on "Islam" ignores the organic historical presence of this religion in Polish society—most notably among the Polish Tatars. Instead, Islam is Orientalized and treated as a foreign invader. Combining local imperial nostalgia with imported Islamophobia, the notion of *Antemurale Christianitatis* is frequently invoked, especially by right-wing politicians, as is the reference to the 1683 Battle of Vienna, in which the Polish army under King

[49] On the relationship between race and religion see, for example, Topolski, Anya Topolski, "The Race-Religion Constellation: A European Contribution to the Critical Philosophy of Race," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 6, no. 1 (2018): 58–81.

John III Sobieski halted the advance of the Ottoman Empire.[50]

Interestingly, the identity-defining intra-Christian divisions so prominent in the interwar period have largely been replaced by ethnonationalist labeling that disregards the specific religious affiliations of migrants from predominantly Christian countries. Here, the historical references continue to play a role, invoking, for example, anti-Polish pogroms by UPA forces in Ukraine. But denominational stereotyping did not disappear altogether, as the association of non-Catholics and foreignness diminished but did not disappear completely.[51] Similarly, traces of a religious "center"–"periphery" dynamic remain visible. While only tentative conclusions can be drawn based on available data, early studies suggest that proximity to Catholicism significantly facilitated the integration of Ukrainian refugees in Poland and their sense of national belonging. Those with strong Polish ties benefited from special Latin-rite provisions and additional support from Roman Catholic parishes. Greek Catholics, while maintaining a Ukrainian identity, could rely on a network of Greek Catholic parishes and the use of Roman Catholic spaces to foster belonging, labor integration, and access to institutions. Yet this also led to these parishes being branded as "Ukrainian places," even if they had served local populations for decades. Non-Catholic Christians, such as members of various Autocephalous Orthodox Churches, faced far greater difficulties, as they had to navigate complex religious and national tensions also

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[50] For more, see, for example, Natasza Styczyńska, "Refugees Not Welcome. The Populist Radical Right in Poland and the Migration Crisis," in *Visions and Revisions of Europe*, eds. Karolina Czerska-Shaw, Marcin Galent, and Bożena Gierat-Bieroń (Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2018), 75–90.

[51] See, for example, Maria Wojtczak, "Niemiec – Protestant versus Polak – Katolik," in *Interakcje. Leksykon komunikowania polsko-niemieckiego*, eds. Jacek Grębowiec, Alfred Gall, Justyna Kalicińska, Kornelia Kończal, Izabela Surynt, Christian Pletzing (Wrocław: ATUT, 2014), http://www.polska-niemcy-interakcje.pl/articles/show/45.

present in Ukraine, including suspicions of Russian ties.[52]

The Polish race–religion constellation resembles that of other countries in the broadly construed West, as it categorizes people into different "races" along religious lines, positioning Christians above Muslims. Consequently, while refugees from the Middle East and Africa are perceived as "others," Ukrainian and Belarusian refugees fare better, being viewed as part of "us" or at least "culturally compatible."[53] Yet they still do not stand on equal footing with Polish citizens: they remain subject to discrimination, viewed as both economically and sexually exploitable on one hand, and morally suspect on the other—a perception often marked by gendered stereotypes.[54] The stereotype of "Ukrainians committing welfare fraud" (akin to the U.S. trope of the "Welfare Queen")[55] has prompted nearly all major political players in the ongoing presidential campaign to compete in advocating for restricted social support. In early April, the Prime Minister announced that the government was rapidly working on curbing financial aid for Ukrainian children—a populist move unlikely to achieve much beyond further disadvantaging the economically vulnerable, and one that overlooks the fact that 78% of Ukrainian refugees officially work (and probably even more unofficially).[56]

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[52] See, for example, Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper, "Practicing Belonging Through Religious Institutions: Ukrainian Migrants in Warsaw," *Polish Sociological Review* 222, no. 2 (2023): 151–168; Oleksandr Dobroier, "Ukrainian religious migration as a challenge to ecumenism in Poland," *Verbum Vitae*, 43, no. 4 (2025): 1029–1051.

[53] "Public Narratives," *ODI*.

[54] "Sondaż," *Rzeczpospolita*.

[55] See, for example, Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

[56] "800 plus według surowych reguł," *Rynek Zdrowia*, April 3, 2025, https://www.rynekzdrowia.pl/Finanse-i-zarzadzanie/800-plus-wedlug-surowych-regul-wejdzie-wczesniej-Nowe-informacje,270051,1.html.

V. RELIGION MAY WANE, BUT THE RESULTING RACIALIZATION REMAINS

Throughout this paper, I tried to briefly present the historical context around the current approach to migration in Poland. While today, the equivocation of Poland and Catholicism does not seem particularly challenging, there is at least significant ground to undermine this connection from a historical perspective. In the interwar period, there were multiple competing visions for what it means to be Polish, even if racialization along religious lines ultimately prevailed. Such racialization seems to have lasting consequences as it influences the treatment of people on the move and their stratification to this day.

Moreover, racialization seems to be stronger than its original religious grounding. While Islam continues to be Orientalized and racialized, the religious differences between the Christians tend not to play such a significant role anymore. But the racialized ethnic differences that they created continue to determine the social status of individuals. Similarly, despite the religious rhetoric of the previous government, Catholicism and interest in religion in Poland are experiencing a significant collapse, as Poland has the largest intergenerational gap in reported importance of religion in the world.[57]

That, of course, does not mean that Catholicism does not continue to enjoy the premium of "banal" existence and remains imbricated in the functioning of the state and its institutions. However, the current government is not following the same path as the previous one. Instead, it proposed, among others, to diminish the state's financial support for the Catholic Church,[58] and to reduce religious instruction in public schools.[59]

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[57] "Young Adults Around the World Are Less Religious by Several Measures," *Pew Research Center*, June 13, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/06/13/young-adults-around-the-world-are-less-religious-by-several-measures/.
[58] "Fundusz Kościelny do likwidacji? Episkopat reaguje," *TVN24*, March 27, 2025, https://tvn24.pl/biznes/najnowsze/fundusz-koscielny-do-likwidacji-episkopat-reaguje-st8383808.
[59] "Redukcja lekcji religii od września," *Onet.pl*, Jan. 21, 2025, https://www.onet.pl/informacje/kai/redukcja-lekcji-religii-od-wrzesnia-episkopat-i-katecheci-protestuja/3jmvqdq,30bc1058.

And yet, despite such a secular turn and the slowly returning multi-ethnic character of Poland, the former more inclusive forms of understanding Polishness do not get too much public attention. Instead, Poland turned towards the politics of the empire, which, on the one hand, silently embraces exploitative migration to support its continued growth, and, on the other, rhetorically and structurally embraced dehumanizing divisions of "us" and "them," thereby enforcing the growing division between its "center" and its "peripheries." And it quickly learns from the dehumanizing strategies of other empires. The suspended asylum claim process is only a part of that strategy.