Master's Thesis

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MA in Tourism

"Tourism Destinations as Spaces of Contested Hospitality: Between Commercialization, Moral Imperatives and High-Stake Practices"

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Abstract

This thesis explores how tourism destinations, as spaces of hospitality, transform under pressure of migration crises, focusing on the Polish-Belarusian border region of Podlaskie. Once associated with peace, nature, and multiculturalism, the region was radically transformed after the migration crisis, which has begun in 2021. Based on qualitative research, including interviews, field observations, and discourse analysis, the project examines how power structures, infrastructure, and symbolic layer of the space have shifted within the destination, as well as how the meanings and practices of hospitality have been negotiated, and reconstructed along the way. Lastly, the project uncovers latent potential of tourism infrastructure in managing humanitarian aid and conditions necessary for a successful activation of tourism infrastructure during crises.

The research is grounded in social constructivist, inductive approach, in order to uncover various meanings and points of view on the focal issues. The research relies on qualitative data collection methods - semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and discourse analysis of legal acts and media reports. The project also operates within theoretical frameworks of Jacques Derrida's (2000) works on hospitality, Doreen Massey's (2005) theories of space, and Pechlaner et al's (2016) model of Extended Hospitality.

As key findings, the project uncovers that the focal tourism destination during the crisis was transformed both in a physical way, through military presence in the region, new infrastructure being built in the region, new stakeholders' presence, etc., as well as in a symbolic way, as narratives surrounding the region shifted from concerning tranquility and multiculturalism to those focused on securitization, danger, and politics. Additionally, the project identifies three distinct forms of hospitality that co-existed within the destination's space at the same time and often clashed in fights for dominance between each other: traditional commercial hospitality, hospitality as a moral imperative, and hospitality as a criminalized act. While tourism stakeholders continue to offer hospitality to tourists, their welcome is tightly curated, silenced, and seemingly apolitical; at the same time, individual residents and activists provide support to refugees out of ethical obligation - a form of bottom-up, deeply personal hospitality that took place in the absence of institutional help. Nonetheless, those acts are still restrained by legal, emotional, and ideological boundaries. Lastly, in the most extreme form, acts of hospitality were reframed by the state as illegal, turning hospitality into a disputed and discouraged behavior, rather than a noble act.

Eventually, the thesis arrives to the final argument concerning tourism infrastructure remaining unused, even though it holds potential for humanitarian response. In a stark contrast to a peripheral case of a youth hostel in Ścinawa in western Poland, which has successfully operated as a refugee center for the past three years, Podlaskie's case highlights that prejudice, discouragement, political unwillingness and legal ambiguity undermine tourism's potential in managing humanitarian crises, effectively bringing no benefit to anyone, only harm.

As a result, the project contributes to critical tourism studies, by presenting tourism destinations not as static backdrops for tourists' pleasure, but dynamic entities affected by a magnitude of factors, contributing to relevant processes of reframing important values such as e.g. hospitality. Additionally, Podlaskie's case is offering valuable insights into how hospitality is never just about kindness, but always about power, place, and who is allowed to belong, thus further contributing to theories of hospitality and nuancing the complexity of this phenomenon. Lastly, on a practical basis, the project exemplifies the importance of bottom-up initiatives, sustainable lawmaking, and long-term strategic planning both in tourism management and humanitarian aid.

Key words: *contested hospitality, tourism destinations, migration crisis, Polish-Belarusian border, critical tourism studies, tourism infrastructure*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Problem Area

As Russell (2003) predicted, the 21st century is becoming increasingly defined by both tourism and forced migration. With growing opportunities for global mobility on one side and escalating conflicts, climate change, and socio-economic inequalities on the other, this dual dynamic is now more evident than ever before. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions it has brought upon the travel industry, amounts of travelers worldwide keep growing and - only four years after the crisis - achieve levels comparable to or even exceeding 2019 statistics (UNWTO, 2025). With over 1.4 billion international tourists in 2024 (UNWTO, 2025), ca. 330 million tourism-related jobs worldwide and contributing to 9,1% of global GDP in 2023 (WTTC, 2024), tourism is one of the biggest global industries in the modern world.

Similarly - yet on the other side of the spectrum - numbers of forcibly displaced people have been growing in the recent years, in 2024 reaching 122,6 million with 47 million of them being children under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2024). They come from different countries, with a majority originating from Syria, Afghanistan, Venezuela, and Ukraine (UNHCR, 2024). With various conflicts appearing and currently happening around the world, rapidly progressing climate change, and growing economic inequalities, The Danish Refugee Council (2025) predicts the current number of displaced people will grow even by additional 6,7 million people in the upcoming years. With both tourism and forced migration movements increasing, it is unavoidable for them to meet in certain spaces, as it has been visible in Europe in the last years, e.g. in the Mediterranean region (Melotti et al., 2017) or Canary Islands (Vives, 2017), where spaces previously associated with tourism economy became parts of important migration corridors.

At first glance, besides being mobility-related, tourism and refugee studies might not have a lot in common. After all, tourists and refugees are undoubtedly subjected to different legal frameworks, economic conditions, access to transportation and services, etc. However, there are some concepts shared between the literature concerning both topics, spanning across disciplines such as economics, ethics, sustainability, etc. As this project argues, one of such frameworks can also be *hospitality* - in this study understood as a multi-dimensional concept that operates across two main domains: as a commercial industry (Lashley & Morrison, 2000); and as a moral and socio-political

phenomenon (Derrida, 2000; Boudou, 2021; Elgot, 2020; SBS & Davis, 2012). It is also a concept that becomes highly visible in tourism settings, such as tourism destinations, which are by default spaces of welcome and thus hospitality (Lugosi, 2008).

While in the modern tourism realm hospitality is most likely defined along the lines of *"a cluster of service sector activities associated with the provision of food, drink and accommodation"* (Lashley & Morrison, 2000, p.2), thus placing it in the boundaries of selection, economic exchange, and certain personal gains; in a more philosophical and moral sense the purest – though unachievable - form of hospitality is *"to give the new arrival all of one's home and oneself, to give him or her one's own, our own, without asking a name, or compensation, or the fulfillment of even the smallest condition"* (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000, p.77), rejecting any kinds of restraints or even host's control of the process. Hospitality is also often invoked in political contexts by refugee rights advocates seeing it as *"a moral principle of openness or a humane gesture beyond what the law requires"* (Boudou, 2021, p. 86) as well as by politicians in their speeches talking about the *abuse hospitality* from unwanted migrants (Elgot, 2020) or about being hospitable while holding a right to be able to decide to whom it should apply (SBS & Davis, 2012) effectively twisting hospitality into a subjective process of selection, diverging from the ideal previously framed by Derrida (2000) and applying restrictions, regulations, and legal barriers on who deserves to be welcomed and on what terms. Interestingly enough, tourism destinations under pressure of migration crises do become spaces where those notions of hospitality, its values, restrictions, definitions, etc. are re-negotiated and reshaped, as one space is suddenly affected not only by tourists' - requiring commercial hospitality - presence, but also refugees' - requiring more moral-based hospitality; and government representatives' - looking into various regulatory and discursive aspects of the situation.

The case study for this project is the region of Podlaskie in Poland with special focus on its borderlands. Being the location of one of Poland's most impressive national parks in Białowieża with their European Bison population, numerous baroque architectural pieces, reminiscent of tzar-era Russia, Tatar villages with Poland's last two wooden mosques, Tykocin - a town with Jewish culture imprinted in its every element, Grabarka Mountain - a holy place for Orthodox Christians, and many more (VisitPodlaskie, n.d.), Podlaskie offers a unique mixture of cultures, religions, histories, languages, and cuisines, where people of diverse backgrounds have been living in

harmony and symbiosis for centuries. Due to the multicultural background (VisitPodlaskie, n.d.) and history of forced migration in the last century (CRR, 2025), it is safe to assume that traditions of welcoming *Others* and lived experiences of previous generations of refugees have imprinted hospitality into the very core of the region and its people.

Unfortunately, in the recent years, the region has faced various problems, with the major one among them being the migration crisis at its doors. In August 2021 the region was hit with the crisis focal to this project - an unprecedented migration pressure on the border between Belarus and Poland. According to Polish Border Guard (2022) in the whole year 2020 they have registered 129 *illegal* crossings on the border with Belarus, while only in August 2021 this number reached 3.531, peaking in October 2021 with 17.447 registered cases, signaling a growing trend, leading the Polish authorities to a belief that it is an action orchestrated by the Belarusian officials (Rzecznik Ministra Koordynatora Służb Specjalnych, n.d.), thus shifting the public discourse's focus on this topic from humanitarian concerns to political and security arguments connected to an ongoing anti-immigration, mostly Islamophobic narrative present in Polish politics since ca. 2015 (Cywiński et al., 2019). Polish government's strong reaction, including a construction of a border wall, increased military presence, and introduction of the state of emergency in the region affected well-being of the migrants stranded on the border, radically limited inhabitants' freedom of movement (Appendix A) and completely banned outsiders from visiting the region for ten months (Appendix A), thus had a major impact on the lives of the local community, and tourism entrepreneurs. The narrative presented in the media, portraying the situation as dramatically dangerous and critical additionally affected the region's image in the eyes of potential tourists (Skibińska, 2024). As a result of the crisis, the space of the destination was not only physically changed by new infrastructure and military operations, but also symbolically, as the forests of the National Park were no longer only tourists attraction, but also a place where refugees were seeking shelter and often suffering and dying, causing a need to rethink what hospitality means for the region.

Due to all the factors mentioned above, it comes without a doubt that *hospitality*, whether seen as an industry, or a socio-political phenomenon, is in many ways connecting tourism and refugee studies, not only in this case but in many other places in Europe and beyond. While previous research has mostly explored hospitality separately in tourism and refugee contexts, very few

studies have examined how tourism destinations, especially those near migration crises zones, can navigate multifaceted hospitality rooted in their history of welcoming travelers and nowadays facing refugees as well. By integrating those perspectives, the project looks at a case study of Podlaskie in Poland, in order to examine how spaces where tourism and forced migration coexist function and how hospitality is reinterpreted and negotiated there, as well as if there is any potential in tourism infrastructure in contributing to managing migration crises.

1.2. Research Questions

Coming from this problem area, the study aims to answer the following questions:

How are tourism destinations, as spaced of hospitality, affected by migration crises?

Supporting questions:

- **How is the concept of hospitality interpreted and negotiated by different actors in the context of a migration crisis?**
- **What role can tourism infrastructure and actors play in responding to humanitarian needs during forced migration events?**

The region of Podlaskie is an important case study due to its unique dual nature as both an important tourism destination and the epicenter of a currently ongoing migration crisis. As this situation is not entirely unique, visible also e.g. in the Mediterranean region (Melotti et al., 2017) and The Canary Islands (Vives, 2017), as well as due to growing migration movements predictions (The Danish Refugee Council, 2025), it is crucial to study intersections of migration and tourism, in order to promote an extended view on destinations and the concept of hospitality beyond tourist-host relationships. It is also important to explore possibilities of engagement of a broader array of stakeholders, such as tourism industries, in tackling issues arising in relation to migration. Additionally, by examining tourism stakeholders' and infrastructure's role in migration crisis in the Podlaskie region, the study provides important insights into future development of structures and networks, which would hopefully contribute to a more sustainable and equitable approach to managing migration movements in Europe and beyond.

2. Literature Review

Despite being seemingly distant, studies on tourism and refugees do intersect occasionally, however, the existing body of knowledge in this aspect is still scarce and often fragmented. For example, some researchers (e.g. Akhmedov et al., 2022; Katsanevakis, 2015, Tsartas et al., 2020) are focusing solely on refugees' negative effects on tourism destinations:

Akhmedov et al. (2022) highlight the unfavorable attitudes of the local community towards Yemeni refugees and perceived problems they cause for the Jeju island in Korea, where the society has perceived Yemeni migrants as *the Others* who they wished not to engage with, as in their view they have posed a possibility for a crisis and a threat rather than an opportunity for economic growth, effectively limiting the refugees' possibilities for successful settlement, employment, and entrepreneurship in the region. Ironically, those negative attitudes were mainly caused by the lack of interactions with the refugees, which in turn amplified the isolationist attitudes within the local community, creating an effectively unbreakable cycle.

Taking a more environmentalist point of view, Katsanevakis (2015) focuses on litter caused by migration in the Aegean Sea, thus damaging local undoubtedly being one of the main tourist attractions. The study (Katsanevakis, 2015) argues that Greek islands such as Chios, Kos, Leros, Lesvos, and Samos, located near the Turkish coast have been affected by marine litter such as inflatable boats, lifejackets, clothing, etc., appearing on the seabed, and beaches. The author (Katsanevakis, 2015) relates this litter to migrants crossing the Aegean Sea and abandoning their transportation aids once reaching the Greek coast. While acknowledging the relative irrelevance of this issue in the light of the number of lives lost on this migration corridor and larger problems migrants need to face in their journeys to Europe, the author (Katsanevakis, 2015) argues for the importance of this research by highlighting that this type of marine litter can especially affect smaller coast towns which might not have as many opportunities as larger resorts to upkeep their beaches, therefore lowering their competitiveness on the tourism market, due to tourists being discouraged by visual and aesthetic unpleasantries in places they want to perceive as relaxing and idyllic.

Lastly, Tsartas et al. (2020) are arguing for a magnitude of issues emerging from the presence of refugees in tourism destinations, once again invoking cases of the Greek islands of Lesvos and

Chios. The islands have faced large numbers of refugees since 2015, which caused certain tensions among the local stakeholders. Firstly, the authors (Tsartas et al., 2020) highlight an overwhelmingly negative attitude of the local business representatives towards refugees. Only trade and transportation sectors representatives have deemed the crisis to be beneficial for them, while the others deemed the effects to be negative, as they believed that refugees' presence on the island is preventing tourists from visiting the destination, as they negatively affect destination's image and tourists' experience on the island. However, the study (Tsartas et al., 2020) has also showed a potential for a destination to benefit from the crisis, due to an increase of 'sympathy tourists' visiting the island after the initial stage of the crisis to show their support and help with destination's recovery. Additionally, the study (Tsartas et al., 2020) underlined that lack of preparedness of the local and national authorities to handle the crisis has multiplied local communities' dissatisfaction with the situation, even though it has sparked grassroot initiatives and collaboration projects between various vendors on the island, aiming to aid the refugees.

On the other hand, some researchers tend to focus on the positive effects of refugees on tourism economy (e.g. Farmaki & Christou, 2019; Burrai et al., 2022) highlighting the benefits of refugees becoming involved in the destination development and increasing the value and diversity of tourist product:

Farmaki and Christou (2019) in their review article conclude that in the light of growing migration into Europe, service industry needs to begin thinking about ways to utilize the manpower to aid with inclusion of refugees and migrants into the job market in the host countries. They highlight that it is a *win-win* situation, as employment opportunities for refugees mean easier adjustment to the reality of the host country, chances for development, and higher satisfaction with their lives. Simultaneously, employers are able to hire motivated and often skilled workers on various positions in the service industry.

Taking an approach more aligned with this project, Burrai et al. (2022) argue for the importance of refugee stories being implemented in the storytelling of the destination in the form of guided tours. Focusing on a case study located in Leeds, the authors (Burrai et al., 2022) present that by allowing refugees to construct walking tours of the city based on their connection to its specific part can be an important element both for them to claim their belonging to the city and empower their narratives, as well as for the tourists to deconstruct their believes on who is local and who is

a stranger in this context. Tours like those can add a new layer of the city's cultural landscape and allow for voicing narratives of people whose stories might have been otherwise overlooked. In this context tourism is used for both refugees and tourists as a social tool, allowing to further analyze and think through phenomena such as exclusion, hospitality, and xenophobia and how they affect their lives.

Bazrafshan et al.'s (2023) publication provides a disappointing but an accurate constatation of the literature review on the intersection of tourism and refugees. In their publication, they notice a significant disproportion in the amount of research focusing on the economic outcomes, especially the negative ones, caused by the presence of refugees in tourism destinations, over those promoting a more social justice-oriented agenda and advocating for tourism-related research pioneering in shifting refugee-related narratives in the academia. While economy-focused studies hold undoubtable value for advancing practical insights on destination development, branding, product value, etc., in a broader perspective, the economic relations between refugees and tourism appear to be quite superficial in comparison to other humanitarian, social, and ethical reasons concerning displaced populations, which even further argues for the importance of this project, which proposes an extended view on destinations not as simply passive victims of the crisis, but actual entities, which can play vital role in tackling issues crucial to migration.

3. Theoretical Framework

The following project is informed by three key concepts: Doreen Massey's (2005) theories of space, Derrida's theories on hospitality (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000), and Pechlaner et al.'s (2016) model of Extended Hospitality. In combination, those concepts aim to create a framework for the analysis of Podlaskie as a destination in crisis and allow for an in-depth understanding of the studied phenomena. Firstly, Massey's (2005) approach to space, informed the analysis by offering a way to look at the studied destination as a multi-layered, co-created space, rather than economy-focused, static tourism entity. It allowed for opening up the definition of a destination as multi-faceted space, rather than just a place used for tourists' pleasure. Derrida's view on hospitality (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000) allow for an evaluation of the forms of hospitality present in the destination. Due to the concepts of conditional and unconditional hospitality and the tensions between them, the project is able to make clear distinction between Polish state's practices, which were proven exclusionary and conditional, the local community's representatives' behavior, often leaning more towards unconditional, humanitarian approach to the issue of refugee aid, as well as commercial hospitality trying to find its place in the complicated landscape. It also contributes to the analysis of hospitality as a multifaceted, never-neutral practice. This approach worked in tandem with Pechlaner et al.'s model, which served as a bridge between rather philosophical Derrida (2000) and real-life tourism setting in the destination, effectively explaining the role of tourism stakeholders in refugee aid, as well as their potential, which could have been latent in this case, but definitely should not be underestimated and to portray that commercial hospitality can also play a role in more unconditional hospitality initiatives.

3.1. Tourism Destinations as Spaces of Hospitality

In order to practically conceptualize the physical scope of this research and tackle the issue of defining the role of tourist destinations in migration processes, it is crucial to consider theories of space related to the topics of refugees and tourism. Over the years various scholars have been studying the concept of *space.* For example, Isaac Newton (Newton & Chittenden, 1850) was arguing for 'absolute spaces' - independent beings unaffected by any external forces or interactions happening within them. However, more central to this project will be theories diverging from Newton and arguing for spaces as more dynamic concepts, such as e.g Doreen Massey's (2005, p. 9) view of space based on three principles: that space is *"a product of interrelations"* within itself;

"a sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist", thus multiplicity is crucial for space's existence; and *"always under construction"* highlighting the importance of constant dynamics within a space.

One of the definitions of tourism destination states: "A tourism destination is a physical space with or without administrative and/or analytical boundaries in which a visitor can spend an overnight." (UNWTO, 2019) and provides an overview of a destination as a perpetual being, present equally before, during, and after tourist's stay, presenting a visitor solely as a consumer and a passive bystander within the destination and focusing on the transactions happening within its boundaries. Contrary to that is e.g. Framke (2002, p.105), who says that "interaction, cooperation, networking and social practice are all crucial activities in describing a destination", highlighting a more dynamic perspective on a destination seen as a multitude of relationships between internal stakeholders, as well as the visitors, thus seeing them as co-creators of the space, rather than bystanders, and arguing for the everchanging nature of a destination shaped by those dynamics overtime.

In this project specifically destination is seen not only as a place shared by tourists and tourism business (hosts), but among as a broader concept encapsulating also other representatives of the local community, NGOs, local and national governments, and finally also refugees, with all of those groups contributing to the nature of space, its dynamic, power structures, and social fabric. Therefore, while it takes a point of departure in traditional tourism-focused definitions, like Framke's (2002), effectively it reflects Massey's (2005) theory in a sense that the project focuses on analyzing the destination, as a result of all the interrelations happening within it, not only tourism-related ones; acknowledges that all those groups will have distinct aims and goals, which may be not aligned with each other; and that the destination is ever-changing and this process was only catalyzed by the migration crisis.

3.2. Defining Hospitality

Jacques Derrida's (2000) work on hospitality offers a unique lens, which proves efficient when considering the ethical dimensions of welcome and exclusion. He (Derrida, 2000) draws a fundamental distinction between *unconditional hospitality*, which is the absolute and limitless welcome of the stranger, offered without question or expectation, and *conditional hospitality*, which is always mediated by laws, norms, borders, and the rights of the host. Unconditional hospitality, in its pure form, requires the host to lose all control, authority, and even the right to

question the guest's identity. Yet, as even Derrida (2000) admits, this ideal is impossible to fully realize in practice. As not only is every act of real-world hospitality necessarily conditional, shaped by social structures, political concerns, and institutional frameworks, but it can also physically dangerous for the host to abandon all of their rights. Nevertheless, the impossibility of unconditional hospitality does not render it irrelevant. Rather, Derrida (2000) suggests it must persist as an ethical horizon. A sort of an ever-existing tension that exposes the limits and responsibilities of actual hospitality practices in real life.

This tension is particularly relevant in the context of this thesis, which examines how hospitality is enacted, withheld, and understood in a broader context on the intersection of tourism and migration. While commercial hospitality in Podlaskie remains tightly curated for tourists, other forms, such as activist aid, begin to approximate the logic of unconditional welcome, even as they are constrained by law, emotion, and risk. Derrida's (2000) framework highlights how these moments of moral action are haunted by the impossibility of pure welcome, and how the boundary between host and guest is never neutral. Derrida (2000) explains that real hospitality is always limited by rules, even though we might wish to welcome others completely. In Podlaskie, this is visible in how activists like E. tried to help refugees but were stopped by fear of punishment and legal boundaries. Their welcome wasn't total - but it was a powerful attempt. Nonetheless, moving slightly outside of Derrida's (2000) vision, the project focuses not only on the philosophical tension in hospitality practices but also sees it as a lived, negotiated practice that is constantly shaped by the politics of borders, tourism, and national identity. In practice of this project, Derrida's (2000) concept is applied as a defining tool, which allows to characterize various manifestations of hospitality in their nature and create a distinction between each one.

3.3. Extended Hospitality Model

Pechlaner et al. (2016) in their publication explore the intersection of tourism and refugee studies in the concept of hospitality, as one of the very few authors directing their research in this way. While they (Pechlaner et al., 2016) argue that in the past hospitality has been a core concept necessary for survival and well-being of the others, thus considered a virtue and a moral obligation, nowadays it has become directly related to tourism as an industry and thus simply a commodity and an element of a tourist product. In their argument, hospitality should be understood more broadly and closer to its primal meaning.

Due to that, they propose a concept of Extended Hospitality (Pechlaner et al., 2016), in which they open a discussion for hospitality to apply to tourists, economic immigrants and asylum seekers alike, treating them equally based on the shared value of providing strangers with respect, dignity, shelter, and care, rather than extending hospitality only to specific groups. Their theory, based on the model below encourages the tourism industry, local companies, and the asylum-seekers to learn from each other to foster a more comprehensive and inclusive concept of hospitality.

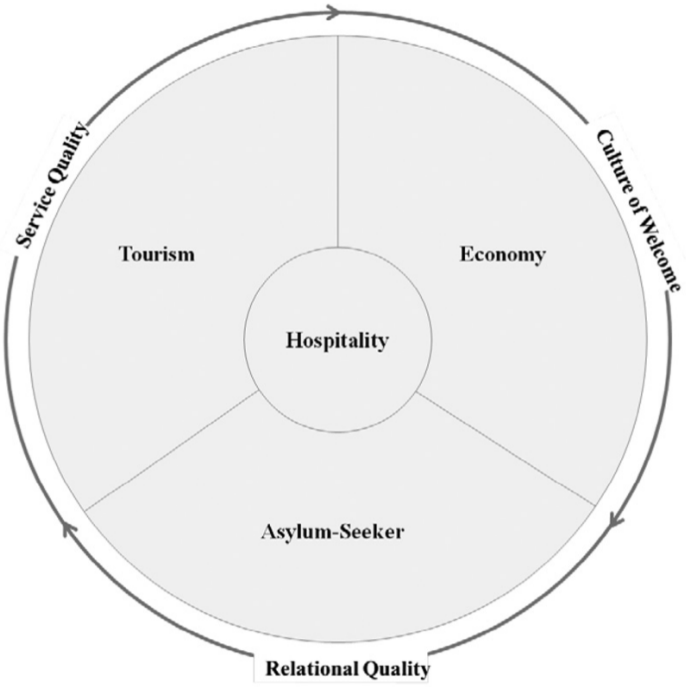

Figure 1, Pechlaner et al., 2016, p. 435

The authors (Pechlaner et al., 2016) argue, that the tourism industry with its high service quality, has experience in managing the host-guest relations and contribute to the discussion with their understanding of intercultural encounters, experience, know-how, and capacity to take care of visitors, and welcoming practices. The local companies, having experience with 'Welcome culture' can bring to the discussion their experience on inclusion programs and initiatives. Lastly, the refugees themselves, through relational quality can move from being guests to being hosts, as if they were shown hospitality in the beginning and offered to be included in the local community, they will be able to take a role of the host in the future and return the favor to the locals.

Effectively, through those conversations and collaborations, the model aims to restore the 'true' meaning of hospitality applying to everyone present in the shared space. Nonetheless, the model presented by Pechlaner et al., (2016) is able to focus specifically on shifting tourism's narrative of hospitality from economic towards a more equitable approach, as it comes from a study located in Bavaria, where 'Welcome culture' towards migrants is well developed with various programs promoting their integration and well-being (Pechlaner et al., 2016), therefore tourism stakeholders do have learning material they can source and learn from.

In the context of this project, Pechlaner et al.'s (2016) model comes into play in the last aspect of the case, in which tourism's potential in crisis management in analyzed. In contrast to Pechlaner et al.'s (2016) context of southern Germany, where hospitality infrastructures are supported by inclusive policy frameworks, this thesis uses the case of Podlaskie to show why tourism infrastructure may remain inactive despite material capacity. As will be shown in the analysis, this inaction is rooted not in logistical barriers, but rather lack of political will, fear, and legal ambiguity. It would be therefore crucial to ask why - in a space benefitting from tourism activities and effectively welcoming strangers - certain groups ended up being excluded from hospitality; what boundaries did they encounter; and what external factors might have restrained action, thus questioning which factors came into play when in Podlaskie's case the concept was not applied, but was in exchange visible to operate highly effectively in a comparable case on the other end of Poland.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Paradigm and Approach

This project aims to understand how tourism destinations are dynamically changed by migration crises occurring within their spaces. Within this scope, the project examines how different actors interpret the concept of hospitality in the context of forced migration and tourism, as well as how tourism hospitality infrastructure can be used or forbidden to be used in times of crisis through policing and political will. Given this, the study is situated within a social constructivist paradigm, acknowledging that hospitality, as applied to both tourism and forced migration, is not a fixed concept but one shaped through broader discursive and socio-political processes. Rather than seeking objective truths, the project aims for situated knowledge and reflection of the subjective realities of different actors in the destination.

As it will be explained later, the research process in this case included extensive fieldwork aimed to openly explore the studied region and hospitality practices within the destination, rather than approaching it with fixed assumptions, hypotheses to prove, or pre-established believes, thus in its nature the following research would be considered inductive.

4.1.1. Ontology

Following Guba and Lincoln (1994), constructivist ontology assumes that realities are relative and multiple, constructed by the perceptions of its participants. Even though they can be shared between groups and even cultures, they are inherently local and case specific. In this project's case the reality of hospitality and the border in Podlaskie region is naturally constructivist as it has become evident in the research process that there are vivid differences between various actors' approaches to the issue, which are often manifesting within the same individuals, as they might play dual roles of e.g. both local residents and government officials. Additionally, due to the region's unique history, culture, and identity, as well as its precarious situation during the crisis, its reality is likely to not be present in exactly the same form in any other place in the world, however, could occur in similar form in other tourism destinations.

4.1.2. Epistemology

Epistemologically, constructivists believe that knowledge is actively produced between the researchers and studied phenomena during the research process and data collection (Guba &

Lincoln, 1994). As it has been in the case of this project, the majority of information creating the grounds for the research has been sourced physically in the studied region directly from people involved in tourism and the migration crisis in the region, to ensure that the data came directly from the source and as a result of interactions between the researcher and the studied case.

4.1.3. Methodology

Methodologically, social constructivism favors qualitative methods over quantitative, as the objective of data collection within this paradigm is to gather knowledge in a natural, situational rather than 'lab-sterile' setting (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, this project's data collection took place primarily during ethnological fieldwork conducted in the borderland in Podlaskie region in the form of participant observations and semi-structured interviews conducted in settings natural to the interviewees, such as forest tours or their daily duties. Additionally, it has been supplemented by content-rich secondary data from tourism promotional materials and media reports.

4.2. Research Methods

4.2.1. Primary Data

The primary data for this project was collected during ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the borderland regions of Podlaskie voivodeship between April 12th and 16th, 2025. The objective of the fieldwork was to become fully immersed in the case setting, as well as to build trust and gain nuanced understanding of the local community. The design of the fieldwork also allowed the study to remain flexible, sensitive to newly occurred themes, and become deeply appreciative and respectful to the local context, rather than approaching it with external categories or interpretations. It is crucial to acknowledge that all encounters with the local community were conducted in Polish, which is a native language to both the interviewees and the researcher, which undoubtedly aided in facilitating engagement, trust, and knowledge production.

Participant Observations

In the research process, participant observation was used as one of the two core methods during the fieldwork period in the Podlaskie region, in order to provide a more contextual and broader understanding of how hospitality, bordering, and moral responsibility are performed in everyday life, how the region functions during the crisis, what is the current state of the migration corridor, as well as to understand potential experiences a tourist might encounter when visiting the region, etc. Given the region's sensitive situation surrounding the migration crisis, participant observation

offered a way to capture discourses, responses, and dynamics that might not have occurred during interviews due to their political sensitivity, interviewees' reservations, possible anxiety or fear of repercussions, etc., thus which could have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Observations were conducted primarily in unstructured settings, including guided walks through the forest with national park employees, visits to the village of Kruszyniany, informal moments between official meetings, and spontaneous encounters with state actors such as border guards. In some cases, the line between a tourist and observer was blurred, as some observations took place e.g. during guided tours.

The focus during these observations was on how hospitality was practiced, understood, and manifested in the broader context - who was positioned as a guest or intruder, how the landscape itself was framed and affected by the crisis, and how state presence (such as patrols, barriers, or signs) shaped the general atmosphere of the destination.

Fieldnotes were taken discreetly and expanded at the end of each day (Appendix G), often drawing from direct quotes, emotional impressions, and spatial descriptions. These notes were later analyzed thematically alongside interview transcripts and secondary data, allowing for cross-validation of emerging themes and greater contextual depth.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews, by design, provide space for interviewees to freely elaborate on the topics they feel most compelled to discuss, while still allowing the researcher to guide the conversation and ensure that key themes are covered, as due to their nature, while following a rough interview guide, they reserve space for modifications of the conversation (Brotherton, 2015). Although this method can sometimes result in uneven data that complicates comparative analysis - since participants may focus on different aspects of the subject - in this project, that variability was considered a strength rather than a limitation. One of the key aims of the study was to explore differing perspectives across various social and institutional roles, making the diversity of responses both expected and analytically valuable.

During the fieldwork period, five interviews were conducted within the defined scope of the case, alongside one additional interview with the Operations Director of a youth hostel (Appendix F, in text as G.), which took place outside the project's immediate geographic focus but was included

for its relevance to the broader discussion connected to the project. Namely, the interview offered insight into how tourism infrastructure can be repurposed in response to migration crises. The Director had overseen the transition of a youth hostel into a refugee reception center and shared practical experiences in managing aid distribution, employment programs, and everyday operations. While her work dealt primarily with Ukrainian refugees, whose legal status and administrative pathways differ significantly from those in the Podlaskie border crisis, the conversation offered important benchmarks for what local tourism actors might be capable of, under more constructive policy frameworks.

The remaining interviews were conducted specifically in the Podlaskie region and involved: 1) a National Park employee and tour guide currently facing trial for assisting refugees (Appendix A, in text as E.); 2) a second guide from the Park who has been vocal in opposing governmental responses in the region (Appendix B, in text as K.); 3) a 2025 presidential candidate encountered during a campaign stop in Kruszyniany (Appendix C, not anonymized); 4) representative of the local Muslim community (Appendix D, in text as B.); and 5) two anonymous border guards who were briefly interviewed during a control operation near the border (Appendix E, in text as X. and Y.).

These interviews were conducted in a variety of settings, ranging from office meetings and guided walks in the forest to informal interactions and unplanned encounters. For example, interviews with park guides often unfolded gradually during hikes, where conversations were intertwined with commentary on flora, fauna, and the region's landscape, as they would normally do on similar tours. The meeting with the presidential candidate was opportunistic and time-constrained, but nonetheless offered insights into how national-level actors frame the migration issue when speaking to local constituents. The conversation with the border guards was brief and unplanned, arising during a routine control, yet it added a valuable dimension to the understanding of institutional perspectives contradicting with their own personal feelings. For example, during national park tours, conversations flowed freely between explanations of the natural environment, which are typical for such tours, and reflections on state policy, ethics, and fear. These moments were valuable, not only by increasing the feeling of mutual trust between the researcher and interviewees, and thus contributing to more in-depth and rich data, but also by symbolically revealing how personal and political narratives intersected in the region on various levels.

All interviews loosely followed a common guide, which was adapted slightly depending on the interviewee's role and the course of the conversation. Core thematic areas included: concepts and experiences of hospitality; evaluations of state policies and governmental actions; perceived consequences of the crisis for the region; and accounts of refugee aid efforts. In some cases, questions were skipped if the topic had already been addressed indirectly, or when time limitations made it necessary to prioritize. Simultaneously, spontaneous questions were sometimes added to follow new threads that emerged during the interviews.

Interviews with E., B., and K. in Podlaskie and G. in Ścinawa were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in both tourism and refugee aid — the intersection central to this project. These individuals were known for publicly sharing their views and activities through media or social platforms, making them not only relevant but also likely to be open to participating. Additional interviews, including those with two border guards and a presidential candidate, were conducted opportunistically during fieldwork. Although not initially planned, their roles in shaping or enforcing border policy offered important institutional and political perspectives on hospitality and migration. Two other individuals — a national park guide and a local resident involved in refugee aid — were invited but declined to participate. Nonetheless, the final set of interviews reflects a wide range of positionalities and stakeholder roles, providing sufficient depth and variation to support the project's analytical aims.

After completion, all interviews were transcribed, translated to English, coded, and subjected to thematic analysis, in order to identify recurring patterns, conflicting viewpoints, and areas of overlap across different actors' narratives. The coding process involved several stages. First, initial descriptive codes were assigned to relevant segments of the transcripts, based on what participants were discussing, e.g., "informal aid," "fear of extremism," "government obstruction," "tourism collapse", etc. In a second round, these descriptive codes were grouped into broader analytical themes that captured shared or divergent meanings across interviews, leading to four main areas of findings: Destination and its Change, Views on Hospitality, Limitations to Hospitality, and Tourism Infrastructure in Times of Crisis. These four themes were selected not only for their recurrence across the data set but also for their theoretical relevance to the core research questions and their resonance with key concepts such as space, power, and hospitality. They have shaped the overall structure of the Analysis chapter as presented in this project report.

The analysis aligned with an inductive approach, as themes were not pre-determined by theory or hypotheses to prove but rather emerged from the data itself through close reading and in-depth engagement. However, the process was still informed by the theoretical frameworks mentioned before. This meant that while the coding was grounded in what participants themselves emphasized, attention was also paid to how their statements related to broader issues mentioned in the concepts, such as conditionality of hospitality, the role and nature of space, and the role of tourism infrastructure in shaping responses to forced migration. The analysis focused not only on what was said, but also on how it was said, and in what context, recognizing that attitudes toward hospitality and belonging are shaped by individual identities, political roles, and spatial environments. Special attention was also paid to language and wording used by the interviewees such as e.g. the difference between usage of 'People on Route' vs 'Refugees' vs 'Illegal Migrants', suggesting the general approach, political viewpoint or level of familiarity with the topic among different interviewees, as well as to contradictions within individual narratives, especially where participants with 'dual identities' such as border guards being local residents expressed support for refugees, while enforcing strict border policies as part of their job or the Muslim minority highlighting their European identity expressing both moral obligation to help refugees and fear of Islamic extremism.

Due to the political sensitivity of the case and the small size of the studied community, all participants were anonymized. They were informed of this procedure prior to the interviews, both to ensure their informed consent and to encourage open expression of views without fear of identification. Anonymization was essential for protecting participants from potential social, professional, or legal repercussions, especially given the controversial and contested nature of refugee aid activities in the region.

4.2.2. Secondary Data

While the project heavily relied on primary data collected during the ethnographic fieldwork in the focus region, secondary data also played an important role in the process. These two data sets were not analyzed in isolation but rather brought into dialogue with one another on several levels. Firstly, various policies, governmental actions, events, and effects were cross-referenced with official governmental documents and media reports. This helped ground participant perspectives in a broader discursive and institutional context. For example, when interviewees criticized the

government's response to the crisis, these narratives were examined alongside the legal justifications used in national policy, revealing key tensions in narratives between local ethics and state strategies.

Additionally, media reports on the situation as well as tourism-related promotional materials, as elements of the discourse analysis, allowed to explore narratives around the situation, which contributed to the analysis of hospitality not only in practice, but also in terms of narratives and discourses surrounding it. These materials were analyzed with focus on framing, terminology, and certain silences, adding a layer of analysis on how hospitality was framed, legitimized, or restricted by official narratives shared with the general public.

Lastly, previous literature and theoretical concepts (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000; Massey, 2005; Pechlaner et al., 2016) served as an analytical tool guiding the analysis in order to provide it with a framework and ensure its relevance. It has also allowed to connect empirical accounts with somehow abstract concepts on hospitality and space, allowing for mutual exchange and complementariness between them, hopefully contributing to theoretical development and research advancement within tourism, migration, and social justice studies.

Discourse Analysis

As a supplementary element, this project utilizes discourse analysis of secondary sources such as legal documents, media reports, as well as tourism promotional materials, to attempt and understand which legal and physical actions have been taken by the government regarding the crisis, what messaging was presented to the general public regarding the situation on the border, and lastly what image in regards to hospitality has been intentionally promoted towards potential tourists visiting the region, in order to highlight the contrast between hospitality messages, practices, and governmental actions defying those principles.

The legal documents for the analysis included original acts such as Art. 264a §1 of the Polish Penal Code, Border Wall Legislation of October 2021, Presidential State of Emergency Declaration of September 2021, and Ministry of Interior and Administration's Temporary Ban on Access to the Border Zone; as well as amendments to the pre-existing acts such as Amendment to the Act on Granting Protection to Foreigners of 2021, Amendment to the Act on Foreigners of 2021, and the newest development in the situation - Amendment to the Act on Foreigners: Temporary Suspension of Asylum Rights of February 2025. In total seven legal texts. Those documents were chosen

specifically as they refer directly to the border crisis in Podlaskie or were motivated by that crisis. Additionally, they provide an overview of Polish state's motivations and specific actions towards the refugees, as well as draw general ideas and themes in the official narratives surrounding the crisis, refugees themselves, as well as individuals involved in aiding them.

The media reports on the situation included source material coming from a variety of online sources considered as leading in Poland, such as WP.pl; Onet.pl; TVN24, and others. Those portals were among outlets deemed as the most influential in 2024 by Polish Media Monitoring Institute (IMM), due to highest numbers of references and quotations in other media outlets (IMM, 2025), which can suggest that they are considered reliable by industry professionals, as well as that they generate significant numbers of original content, adding to their advantages when choosing them for this project. The timeframe for this analysis included reports published between July 2021 up to nowadays, however, the largest number of reports occurred between July 2021 and summer of 2023, as those were the years when the crisis was at its highest level with largest numbers of registered crossings as well as the strictest governmental policies and actions in the region. In total 20 articles were analyzed.

Lastly, tourism promotional materials included written, as well as audiovisual content produced by the local Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) focusing on promoting the region, its tourism value, diversity, unique qualities, etc. with special attention towards hospitality practices and traditions. The materials were evaluated based on their potential to reach viewers and thus potential visitors, as well as their promotional and/or discouraging impact on the region. A total of two thematic guides, three articles, and one video were analyzed.

4.3. Positionality

Given this project's qualitative nature and its engagement with sensitive topics such as forced migration and politics, it is important to reflect on my own position as a researcher during the whole process, as my personal perspectives, social lenses, and potential biases may have shaped the data collection, analysis, and presentation in both visible and subtle ways.

I was born and raised in Lower Silesia, a region in western Poland, located approximately 700 kilometers from Podlaskie - the site of this study. As will be explained in the following chapters, Podlaskie is a highly specific region, marked by its history, ethnic and religious diversity, and

geopolitical proximity to the eastern border, making it highly different from the context I am familiar with, thus introducing a certain distance between myself and the local communities I engaged with. While I share linguistic and cultural characteristics with the residents of Podlaskie, which undoubtedly aided with data access and blending in with the local community, I was still perceived, at times, as an outsider - a tourist.

Further distancing me from the local context is the fact that I have spent the entirety of my higher education abroad, namely in Western Europe. While this academic environment has shaped my critical thinking and theoretical perspectives - especially on hospitality, state power, and border practices - it has also distanced me from the everyday lived realities and struggles in Poland. These influences may have shaped the way I approached the field, including the questions I asked, the narratives I have been drawn to, and the frameworks I used to interpret local responses.

Throughout the research, I therefore had to navigate a sort of dual positionality as both an insider and outsider. On one hand, fluency in the language and familiarity with national cultural codes granted me a level of access and trust that would likely be more difficult for a foreign-born, English-speaking researcher to achieve. On the other hand, I was frequently challenged by values and worldviews that slightly diverged from those I grew up with in western Poland or had adopted through my international education, particularly with respect to religion, nationality, migration, and state authority.

Due to those factors, I have done my best to approach the research process with an awareness of these privileges and limitations, making a conscious effort to remain reflective throughout it. This involved continuously questioning my assumptions, staying open to participants' narratives even when they contradicted my own expectations, and adapting my language and interview style to ensure respectful and empathetic dialogue, while remaining mindful about how power dynamics between me and the local community have shaped the research setting.

4.4. Usage of Generative AI

In the course of this project, generative AI – Chat GPT – was used on various stages and levels of engagement. First and foremost, it was used to transcribe and translate data collected during the interviews. In order to ensure efficiency of the project, it was more convenient to use AI for the otherwise tedious process and check it afterwards, rather than to conduct the process manually,

especially for interviews lasting 45 minutes or more. Additionally, Chat GPT was used during the ideation process, in order to ensure that certain important elements of the analysis or conclusion, which could have been otherwise omitted or forgotten - due to abundance of data and problems to tackle - were included in the final written part of the project. The tool was also used to enhance the style and value of the written elements of the project, to ensure its highest possible efficiency, readability, and coherence. It is however important to note that no AI tools were directly used to explicitly generate or produce any kind of knowledge or written text in this paper.

5. Analysis

The Analysis part of the project consists of three main parts: Space Analysis, Meanings of Hospitality, and Tourism's Potential in Crisis. The first part (5.1. and 5.2.) provides the background of the destination before the crisis as well as main narratives dominating its space. It is then followed by the introduction of the migration crisis, its infringement on the destination's being, and the results it had on the destination. It is then followed by the second part (5.3. – 5.4.) deconstructing the meanings and different forms of hospitality which are present in the destination in connection to both tourism and the crisis, as well as certain limitations that they meet. Lastly (5.5.), the analysis explores tourism infrastructure's potential in crisis management and external factors needed for a success of such endeavors.

5.1. Pre-Crisis Landscape

Over the years, hospitality has been taking various forms of commodified products, rather than an altruist act of kindness, eventually evolving into what can now be observed as the generally understood Tourism Industry. Poland is not an exception to this process - in 2019, Tourism generated 6,3% of Polish GDP (Bąk-Filipek & Podhorodecka, 2021). This study places its focus on one of the Polish voivodeships - Podlaskie, with special focus on the areas located on the border between Poland and Belarus. Located in the North-East of Poland, bordering Lithuania and Belarus, Podlaskie is Poland's 6th largest (GUS, 2024a) but only 14th most populous (GUS, 2024b) out of all 16 voivodeships. Despite not being the most popular or the most developed tourist destination in the country, the region presents a well-developed tourism industry, as well as a great potential for further developing its tourism offer in the future.

5.1.1. Natural Beauty

One of the most important aspects of tourism offer of the region is its untouched, primordial nature. While the whole region is generally not heavily urbanized, the main natural tourism attraction is Białowieża National Park – over 100 km² of vast forests unique due to their ancient history and the fact that they are the only remaining part of the primordial European forest, which has once covered the whole European Plain. It is characterized by significant biodiversity, with the most famous animal being the European Bison, which is also the logo of the park. It is a UNESCO National Heritage Site. Historically the forest has been used by Polish kings as their private grounds since the 16th century and Russian tsars in the 19th century, with each ruler introducing

some levels of protection on the forest, seeing its uniqueness. Interestingly enough, the current population of the bison in the national park is not native to it, as after World War I the native population has gone completely extinct. It was only due to various efforts that a herd of four bison were brough to the park from European zoos and Western Caucasus to successfully reestablish the bison population in the region (Bialowieski Park Narodowy, n.d.), highlighting the importance of the Park for the local population, scientist, and ecologists.

Figures 2 and 3 – European Bison in its natural habitat (left); View of the National Park (right); Source: Own Work

5.1.2. Unique Regional Identity

'Bieżeństwo 1915' – History of Refugees

In 1915, the German army has been pushing through the Eastern front forcing the Russian army to withdraw, applying their scorched-earth policy into practice - destroying everything that could be useful for the enemy and evacuating the local population (Łabowicz, 2018). As a part of that plan, a widespread campaign of fear was conducted by the government and propagated by local priests targeting the local population, aiming to encourage them to leave their homeland (Łabowicz,

2018). As a result, it is estimated that between 80-90% of the local inhabitants left their homes and started their journey East within Russia (Łabowicz, 2018) from what can now be geographically considered Podlaskie region and back in 1915 was part of the Russian Empire claimed during the partition of Poland in the end of the 18th century (PWN, n.d.). During their 3- to 5-year-long exile, many of them lost their lives due to sicknesses, lack of food, water, and poor sanitary conditions. It is estimated that only 1/3 of them successfully returned home (Prymaka-Oniszk, 2016).

Figure 4 – Local exhibition concerning the refugees of 1915; Source: Own Work

'Localness' over 'Polishness'

In his publication on Podlaskie, Barwiński (2004) explores various aspects of the region through the lens of religious, cultural, and national diversity. He concludes that Podlaskie is in fact one of the most diverse regions in Poland in many ways. First of all, the region historically has been changing its belonging. Over a thousand years ago, it was simply a vast forest area acting as a natural border between the early kingdoms of Poland, Lithuania, and Russia, and as all of those countries have been constantly attempting to claim parts of it for themselves, all of them have been

creating settlements in the region adding to a varied cultural landscape from the early days of human existence in the area.

After many years of wars, claiming and re-claiming the region, either by Poland, Russia, Lithuania, the Polish–Lithuanian Union, etc., as well as with spontaneous settlements created by Tatars and Jews, the region has seen a lot of cultures, religions, and language mixed in one place. According to the Russian census of 1897, in the end of the 19th century the region was inhabited by ethnic Poles (50%), Jews (20,5%), Ukrainians (12,7%), Belarusians (9,6%), Russians (3,3%), Germans (1,6%), and other nationalities (2,3%) (Barwiński, 2004, p. 55). Interestingly enough, ethnic data does not seem to align with language usage, as 39,1% of the population used Ukrainian to be their main language, 34,9% used Polish, 14,9% used Yiddish, 5,9% used Russian, 4,9% used Belarusian, 0,2% used German, and 0,1% used other languages (Barwiński, 2004, p. 54). Religion-wise at the same time 48,8% of the population were Catholic, 20% were Jewish, 29,3% were Orthodox, and 1,6% were Evangelical (Barwiński, 2004, p. 53). It is however important to notice, that the author (Barwiński, 2004) remains skeptical towards the census, as other reports (Hawryluk, 1999 in Barwiński, 2004) seem to suggest that certain data could have been manipulated for political reasons, such as underestimating the number of Polish-speaking inhabitants in order to promote russification of the region. The census also does not include regional micro-languages, which were often a mixture of other languages present in the region, thus could not have been classified into any group. It is therefore difficult to analyze the actual historical social fabric of the region, nonetheless it is safe to assume that it has always been diverse.

Interestingly enough, the Tatar minority seems to be completely omitted in the historical data. Tatars have been present in the region for centuries, especially due to widely known religious freedom of the 16th century Poland (Makowski, 2025). In 1679 king Jan III Sobieski granted Tatars land rights as a repayment for supporting him during the war with Turks (Makowski, 2025). It is important to mention that despite their formal alliance and feeling of belonging in Poland, Tatars have maintained their culture and religion, adding Islam to the religious mix in the region. It is also crucial to mention that Tatars often highlight that despite the ethnic and religious differences they are and self-identify as Polish (Appendix D).

Barwiński (2004) in his publication concludes that there is a significant amount of people in the region who when asked about their nationality answer simply *tutejszy*, which could be translated

to *local* or *native*. It can be caused by the fact that a significant portion of the local community has roots in countries like Belarus, Ukraine or Lithuania, thus cannot identify with one single nationality. This emotion is more visible among the elder generations rather than younger, as well as those working as farmers or physical workers, signaling that it could be more popular among those living on the countryside rather than cities (Barwiński, 2004). This notion has also been visible during the fieldwork conducted for this project, as the general feeling of separation from the rest of the country, a strong feeling of local identity, and general dissent towards the government officials has been palpable both during the interviews and observations in the region, when one of the interviewees expressed e.g. disappointment with the state's reaction, distrust towards the national authorities, as well as a sense of misunderstanding and separateness from the rest of the country (Appendix A)

Figures 5 and 6: A Muslim cemetery in Kruszyniany combining elements of Muslim and Polish funeral traditions (left); A local memorial reading "In memory of Narewka Commune inhabitants - victims of Hitler's regime" illustrated by Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish symbolism (right); Source: Own Work

5.1.3. Tourism Narratives

As shown above the region has a lot to offer both in terms of natural attractions, as well as historical, architectural, and cultural ones. Those narratives are also visible in tourism messaging targeting potential visitors of the region. When analyzing Podlaskie's tourism narratives, they

highlight two crucial visions of the area. First and foremost, it is *nature* and everything that can be associated with it, e.g. *relax*, *escape the city*, and *tranquility*. It is visible e.g. in the regional DMOs slogan occurring in two versions – *'Podlaskie - power yourself with nature'* and *'Podlaskie – powered by nature'* (Podlaska Regionalna Organizacja Turystyczna, n.d.). While similar, whether intentional or incidental, the distinction between them is interesting, as they allow the DMO to reach out to a broader spectrum of potential visitors: the first one presents a potential escapist benefit for the tourist that will visit the region to source from the natural resources of the region, while the other one focuses on the unique closeness with nature presented by the region, which can be appealing to those seeking sustainable and natural experiences. Together they do create a coherent messaging appealing to those tourists who value nature and seek connection with it. Those aspects of the tourism offer are mostly connected to the Białowieża National Park, various biking and walking trails, and multiple lakes of the region, which very effectively aligns the actual product of the region with this marketing narrative, ensuring tourists' satisfaction during the visit.

Another important aspect highlighted in promotional materials is cultural and religious diversity of Podlaskie. This narrative can be seen e.g. in a thematic guide titled '*Podlaskie – in a crucible of cultures*.' inspired by the vision of cultures mixing and melting together like metals in a crucible. In this narrative, the attractiveness of the region for tourists stems from the mix of Polish, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Lithuanian, Jewish, and Tatar cultures present and existing simultaneously in the region for hundreds of years. In connection to that, various religions such as Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, and Islam and thus their architectural and other physical manifestations are present in one place. Examples of tourism products related to that narrative are e.g. 'Jewish Legacy Trail' – including synagogues and Jewish cemeteries, 'Tatar Trail' – leading through two Tatar villages with their wooden mosques and cemeteries, a Tatar restaurant, and other places; 'Orthodox Churches Trail' – highlighting the most impressive Orthodox churches and the Holy Mountain Grabarka visited by many pilgrims every year; as well as various festivals such as 'Basowiszcza' allowing a chance for Belarusian modern musicians to come to Poland and present their art to Poles and the Belarusian minority alike and promote Belarusian language, which UNESCO has declared as potentially vulnerable (UNESCO, n.d.) or 'Tatar Culture Festival' attracting tourists with its shows of horseback archery, Arabic calligraphy, and Tatar arts. This part of the tourism narrative can effectively attract visitors seeking a place where they can experience a multitude of cultures in one spot and who are craving cultural and educational enrichment. This

narrative also highlights openness and hospitality of the local community, which proves that diversity and inclusion are aspects of a society that can not only coexist but cooperate and build their future together despite or even because of their differences and by cherishing each other's cultures.

It is therefore clear that the local tourism actors successfully translate region's potential into actual products and marketing efforts targeting tourists. Two main themes of *nature* and *cultural and religious diversity* envision a place of peace, rural hospitality grounded in tradition, tranquility, and multicultural heritage. Promotional materials analyzed in this project frequently depict the region as an authentic escape from urban life, where visitors are welcomed into serene forests, historically important places, and authentically welcoming spaces. In connection with the reality of the destination, those narrative would have definitely created an authentic and convincing experience for the tourists, if only the reality has not changed.

5.2. Migration Crisis

Despite a great tourism potential and narratives of multiculturalism, tranquility, and relax being present on the tourism market of Poland, the situation of the region started to change dramatically in the summer of 2021. This date marks the period when border patrol units responsible for the Polish border with Belarus started reporting significant and increasing numbers of *illegal* attempts to cross the border with its peak coming in October 2021 with over 17.000 registered crossing attempts within a month (KG Straży Granicznej, 2022). In comparison, in the entirety of 2020 they have registered 129 of such attempts (KG Straży Granicznej, 2022). The crisis occurred in the very spaces previously associated with the above-explored themes of natural beauty, peace, and calmness. As described by one of the interviewees in this project during her trial, which will be explored later: "*When you go to the forest for a walk - the forest that is your place of work, rest, relax, and you meet there people who can barely stand up, then, please believe me, it is a clash on so many levels*" (CRR, 2025, 19:00), precisely describes the change that has occurred within the studies space during the crisis.

First and foremost, the situation has been especially difficult for the refugees themselves, as on one side the Belarusian officials were continuously pushing them to attempt crossing into the Polish territory (Straż Graniczna, 2023), while Polish officials were refusing to allow them to cross or even file asylum applications (Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, 2022). The Border Patrol

Guards during fieldwork admitted that in the initial days of the crisis they were not prepared for the situation at all – lacking training and equipment – as the volume of activity on the border has never been this high before (Appendix E). One of the guards said: *"None of us expected it to come down to this… It was never like this before here. Despite knowing that it is our job, it all felt very surreal"* (Appendix E). Therefore, it does appear that the situation was shocking even for the very people that theoretically should have been prepared for it, which adds to the feeling of brutalness and rapidness of the change that has happened on the border and the region around it.

The behavior of Belarusian guards mentioned above, as well as the political background of the situation - including the general Western condemnation of the falsified presidential election in Belarus in 2020 (BBC News, 2020) and arrestment of a well-known Belarusian oppositionist in May 2021 (United Nations, 2022) leading to European sanctions on the country (EEAS, 2020) - in the opinion of Polish politicians indicated that the migration crisis has been orchestrated by the Belarusian regime, aiming to destabilize European borders (Rzecznik Ministra Koordynatora Służb Specjalnych, n.d.). While the amount of evidence in the case does suggest that the Belarusian regime weaponized migration and purposefully organized the crisis, it is crucial to note that people present at the border were also victims of this situation, often arriving at the border not aware of the reality of the situation (Grzywaczewski, 2021). Despite that, Polish officials have used the political aspect of the crisis as an excuse for harsh border practices and various legislations aiming to tame the situation. Ever since the beginning of the crisis, the approach of Polish authorities has been questioned. One of the most important accusations regarded border patrols' refusal to accept asylum applications on the border, which has been deemed a violation of the Polish constitution by the Ombudsman (Pankowska, 2021) and the Geneva Convention by the UNHCR (Reuters, 2021). Additionally, the Polish Parliament (Sejm) has issued an official act ordering the construction of the wall on the border, which would aim to stop the migration (Sejm, 2021). The decision was widely criticized by the opposition, mainly for its populist nature, not solving the root of the problem, and allegations of using public funding for private gain (Polskie Radio, 2023); the environmental activists, highlighting its destructive effects on the unique nature of the region (Kojzar, 2022); as well as various NGOs for its inhumane approach to migration (Gazeta Prawna, 2022). Humanitarian organizations claim that it is very difficult to confirm the total number of victims of the crisis, however, they estimate that ever since its beginning as of summer of 2024,

including all parts of the Belarusian border (meaning with Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia) at least 130 refugees lost their lives due to various reasons (Chrzczonowicz, 2024).

Figures 7 and 8: Border between Poland and Belarus on July 2nd, 2020 (Left; Source: Torstenspecht Wikimedia, 2020) and April 15th, 2025 (Right; Own work)

Both the physical change in the way how the border was transformed from roughly liberal to a militarized space, as well as the metaphysical aspect of the situation in which forests of the National Park - previously associated with tourism and relax – were someone's place of shelter and in the worst cases their places of death. Thus, it is safe to say that the government's reaction to the crisis has brutalized the space and introduced a dynamic of hostility rather than hospitality in the region. On top of being inhumane, the government's policies were harmful for the region's nature and harmony, which has been compromised and, in some places, effectively destroyed. Additionally, the political narratives of the situation, referring to the need of protecting the region from *invaders* caused a shift in the way the region has been understood by the general public towards an almost *war-like* narrative.

5.2.1. Effects of the Crisis on Tourism

As it has been already established in the previous chapters, the region has been a space of a relatively significant tourism economy, which has then been brutally and unceremoniously changed by the migration crisis. While undoubtedly the very way in which the crisis was handled

was deeply hostile and inhumane, on top of that it has in fact contributed to - if not even directly caused - a major collapse in the regional tourism economy.

When discussing this situation, K. (Appendix B) underlined that while she cannot speak for everyone, she believes that: *"Nobody would ever blame those poor people… They are just trying to find a better place for themselves and their families. What I think everyone is angry at is how this whole situation was managed – without one deeper thought, aggressively"*, which presents a deeper frustration with the government and their activity in the region and directs the blame and disappointment at them, rather than the refugees themselves.

In the interview, E. (Appendix A) has brought up various cases of local business suffering, by saying: *"A lot of smaller businesses, like agritourism farms, smaller restaurants and bars, etc. closed down and never returned. Many places had to change their business model and from serving fancy dishes changed to preparing burgers for the military. Businesses had to keep paying taxes, but they had no clients, no income… I think our district officials reacted very weirdly; they could have given at least tax breaks to those businesses, but nobody even thought about that. Our municipal governments have not supported us as local inhabitants.*" and bringing up her own example: *"I had some foreign group tours booked for April and May and all of them cancelled their trips. Literally everyone I had booked until the end of 2024".* Those two examples highlight not only the significance of the damage the crisis has caused to the tourism actors but adds to the emotion expressed by K. (Appendix B), which shows disappointment with how the problems were not addressed correctly by the local and national officials. According to E. (Appendix A): *"In September 2021 we have been completely separated from the rest of the country - I mean Bialowieza, Hajnówka and smaller communities in the area… No tourists were allowed to come here. It has lasted from September 1st, 2021, up until beginning of July 2022."*, which illustrates the significance of the restrictions imposed by the government on the region.

Additionally, both E. (Appendix A) and K. (Appendix B) highlight a highly destructive role the media had played in the situation. E. said: *"The media had immediately picked up on the topic, created the whole narrative about how dangerous it is here, and it was enough to create real consequences"* (Appendix A), while K. said: *"Of course the media did not help with all the negative information they have been sharing everywhere. The funny thing is that they could not even come here physically, because nobody was allowed to enter the region, so they really had no*

idea what they were writing about" (Appendix B). Both of those reports present how the media played an active part in re-shaping the view of the space in the eyes of the bystanders – potential visitors, the general public. E. mentioned: *"We have been trying our best to demystify this whole crisis on a local level. We have been talking to our marketing institutions to completely abandon the word 'safety' and focus on using words like 'beautiful' and 'magical' to completely ignore the whole discourse about safety here"*, which highlights the significance of the damage created by the media on the image of this destinations as a space of tranquility, welcome, and multiculturalism, as none of their reports were concerning those elements of the region.

When analyzing articles from the time of the crisis surrounding the region, the reports were overwhelmingly negative. Whether motivated by political interests or their own attention gain and *clickability*, the media were overwhelmingly reporting only on the supposed dangers connected to the crisis. The reoccurring themes consisted of phrasings such as: *"Dangerous situation on the border"; "Hoards of migrants on the border"; "Military fights to protect Polish borders",* etc. creating a narrative focused on *danger* and almost a *war-like* situation. One of the most well-known accidents, when a Polish soldier was unfortunately wounded near the border wall and later died in the hospital generated a wave of articles surrounding that topic and once again brought up negative feelings. As also referred to by E.: "*And then in June 2024, when Donald Tusk came to Dubicze Cerkiewne and gave a terrible, terrible speech after that soldier was killed at the border, which caused the whole terrible media narrative and caused this whole idea of reintroducing the exclusion zone and eliminating tourists from this area completely again*". It comes therefore without a doubt, that media narratives of *safety* and *danger* in the region were focal ever since the beginning of the crisis and worked in tandem with the politicians excusing and supporting each other's actions. Undoubtedly, that have had an effect on how the situation has been perceived by the potential visitors, which on top of various restrictions on entering the area, contributed to the economic situation of tourism stakeholders in the region and created a necessity of additional work to put in order to reshape those narratives and promote tourism in the region once again.

As of April 2025 - the time of fieldwork connected to this project - despite the relative lack of migration efforts on the border, none of which were observed during fieldwork - the military presence is still visible in the region also in the tourism-related areas, which undoubtedly may have an effect on the experience of tourists visiting the region, by invoking feelings of danger, uncertainty, and other - undoubtedly negative - feelings connected to the crisis. On the illustrations below are visible military air patrols (9); soldiers being transported to their posts (10); entrance to one of the newly-built military bases in the region (11); and view from one of the national park's viewpoints normally used to observe bison but now including also the border wall (12) as well as signage informing about the laws prohibiting civil presence beyond it (13). Such physical changes to the space drastically change its nature, as they do not align with the previously overwhelming themes of tranquility and hospitality, but rather in contrast represent the new powers of hostility and militarization infringing on the destination's past and *fighting for dominance* with them.

Figures (9 – 13) as explained above; Source: Own Work

Interestingly enough, the local community, both connected to tourism and not, does not seem satisfied with the presence of the army in the area either. As overheard during the fieldwork in an informal conversation at a grocery store, a local woman said: *"The soldiers are driving like morons again. They almost crashed into me when I was taking my daughter to school in the morning. I am sick of it at this point"* (Appendix G). Additionally, a signage can be seen right next to the entrance to the strict reserve of the National Park, reading "*Attention soldiers, policemen, and other officers! When you enter beyond the gate of the National Park's strict reserve area, while not on duty, you break the law, including National Park's restrictions. Such actions are punishable. Entrance to the area is allowed only with a licensed national park's guide"* (Figure 14). When asked about it, K. explains (Appendix B): "*It is because we had cases of soldiers and other officers using this area for their daily jogging or other walks. They were destroying the forest, going where they are not supposed to go, leaving trash behind… It was so disrespectful that the National Park's directors had to intervene."* It is therefore clear that by the enthusiasts of the region and its nature, such behavior was considered rude and inappropriate. Similarly to the situation with reckless driving, officers have been infringing on the life of the local community and introducing imbalance to their routines. Such situations further illustrate tensions arising between the local community, tourism stakeholder, and soldier or other representatives of law enforcement and the government, as their values, goals, and understanding of the region do not align with local's.

Figure 14 - as explained above, Source: Own Work

Besides the physical changes within the space of the destination, there were also cases of more symbolic imprints the crisis has left on it. One of them was an entrepreneur trying to include the migration crisis as well as the border wall and military presence connected to it within souvenirs (Figure 15), however, it was quickly ended through resistance of the local community, who not only found it distasteful to place their heritage together with politics, but also inadequate due to the fact how much the crisis has affected tourism in the region, thus their livelihood (Chołodowski, 2023).

Figure 15, Source: Czaban robi raban/Facebook as presented in Chołodowski (2023)

Additionally, in the Summer of 2024, all the foreign phone numbers logging in the area received text messages from the governmental agency reading: *"Warning! BAN on staying in the Polish area near the Belarus border. Unauthorized crossing is forbidden. Soldiers may use weapons. Turn back immediately!"*. It is a case that was also brought up by E. (Appendix A), when she said: *"They were sent to every foreign number which was within the range of the local cell towers, which I believe was aimed at migrants and refugees, but tourists were receiving it as well. And they were asking, excuse my language, "What the f**k is this about". It took all of us a long time to go through all the ministries and institutions responsible for that to finally force them to change the content of the message and finally to stop sending them at all."* While the agency argued that the message was meant for the refugees attempting to cross the border, the text was also received by foreign visitors, which according to many business owners, made the tourists feel unsettled and unsafe (Onet, 2024).

Both of those examples show not only how the crisis has reshaped the destination, but also that the local community is actively aiming to prevent the crisis to be associated with the region in any

way. Those cases reveal two tensions – one of the crisis infringing on the region's previous image, similarly as in the case military presence and infrastructure but in a more symbolic way; but also the other one of the local community fighting back for the sake of preserving their livelihood and income coming from tourism, understandably so after many restrictions and attempts to prevent them from running their businesses.

The above-mentioned aspects of the change occurring in the focal tourism destination perfectly reflect in what Massey (2005) argues for – that space is not a passive vessel, but an ongoing construction shaped through intersecting relations and narratives. In Podlaskie, the same space normally marketed as and actually being a tranquil eco-tourism destination, became patrolled as a militarized border zone, and inhabited - even if only briefly - by migrants seeking safety. These layered uses do not merely coexist side-by-side but compete with each other for dominance, reshaping the identity, feeling, and experience of the space itself. This tension results in a morally ambiguous landscape: a space that once symbolized openness and retreat now carries the weight of surveillance, premeditated silences, and suffering. The tourism identity of Podlaskie was therefore not simply disrupted by the crisis. It was suspended in a state of constant tension of what is going to come next, what restrictions are going to be imposed. The region's physical infrastructure, once related to openness and cultural richness, became entangled with barbed wire, legal restrictions, and political hostility. Additionally, even in a symbolic way the crisis has left imprints on tourism in the region, whether through certain souvenir attempts or warning messages sent to tourists. Those cases reveal that the destination has in fact been constantly under construction, through the multiple new and old actors clashing with their contradicting interest and goals within the same space, which is a direct reflection of Massey's (2005) principals of space. Yet this was only one side of the story. As the following chapters will show, despite a seeming degradation of the space, hospitality did not entirely vanish from Podlaskie. Instead, it was reconfigured, resisted, and reclaimed in unexpected ways by those who live and work in the region.

5.3. Narratives of Hospitality

In tourism destinations, hospitality is not only expected - it is foundational (Lugosi, 2008). Tourists are unlikely to feel welcome in spaces that do not extend some form of welcome themselves. Classic definitions frame hospitality as "the act of being friendly and welcoming to guests and visitors" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.), or, more commercially, as "a contemporaneous human

exchange (...) designed to enhance the mutual well-being of the parties concerned through the provision of accommodation, and/or food, and/or drink" (Brotherton and Wood, 2000, as cited in Hemmington, 2007). Yet, as shown in the previous chapter, Podlaskie's borderlands no longer resemble a typical destination. Transformed by the migration crisis, this space has become one where certain *visitors* - namely refugees - were systematically treated with hostility instead of hospitality. This chapter explores how that crisis has reshaped the meaning and practice of hospitality in the region. In line with a social constructivist approach, hospitality here is treated not as a fixed or neutral value but as a contested and negotiated practice. By examining how various actors in the region, such as residents, tourism stakeholders, state officials, etc., invoke, embody, or reject hospitality, this chapter seeks to deconstruct how the concept itself has evolved in a space once associated with openness, multiculturalism, and care.

5.3.1. Commercial Hospitality

While the argument being made in this project aims to prove that hospitality has been transformed through the crisis in the region, the notions of traditional tourism-related hospitality are still visibly present in tourist areas. During fieldwork, visits to tourist sites and participation in guided tours revealed deeply embedded hospitality values, whether it is through local food, stories about historical coexistence, and access to spaces that symbolize multicultural tolerance, such as the mosque in Kruszyniany or heritage trails through Orthodox communities. As visible on the figure below (Figure 16), presenting a front page of a menu at a local Restaurant 'Fanaberia' in Białowieża, the local spirit of welcomeness and inclusivity can still be found in the destination. Nonetheless, it is impossible not to notice that these moments of welcome exist within a clearly demarcated frame: tourists purposefully are directed to engage with an idealized image, but not with the present-day tension of the border crisis. The hospitality offered is undoubtedly genuine but most definitely is also compartmentalized - it seems that the local community does not wish to be associated with the crisis, untouched by political conflict, as it was already mentioned in the previous chapter describing attempts to eradicate any possibilities of tourists encountering the crisis, and expressed by E. when talking about the attempts to reshape the marketing narratives for the region (Appendix A) as well as by the representative of the Tatar community (Appendix D): *"We are proud of our hospitality and we do not want to be associated with any side of the politics, including during this crisis. Everyone should feel welcome here, no matter what they believe in, who they vote for or where they come from"*. It was only during the moments when the crisis was

explicitly brought up that it was discussed, as interviewees were aware of the nature of the research. During guided tours being part of the participant observation, the crisis was not mentioned even once. It is nonetheless understandable that the local community wishes to move on from the troubles caused by the situation, especially in relation to the period when fear and other negative emotions deterred potential tourists from visiting the region, thus affecting their economic well-being.

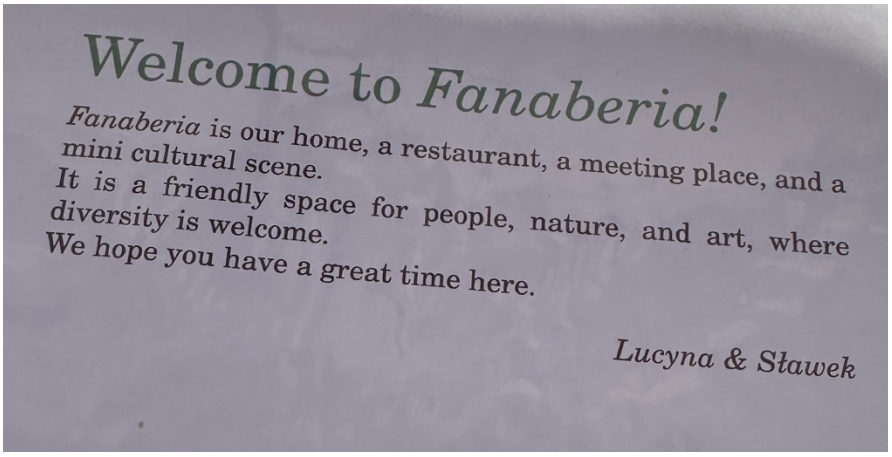

Figure 16, Front page of the menu in Restaurant 'Fanaberia'; Source: Own Work

Therefore, in this case it is crucial to underline that while traditional tourism hospitality in Podlaskie remains visibly practiced, it operates within a carefully bounded and seemingly *depoliticized* frame. As interviewees like E. and the Tatar community representative B. reveal, hospitality is maintained and tends to avoid entanglement with the migration crisis, which is viewed as politically divisive and economically harmful. However, this selective silence is already political, in a sense that it reflects a form of premeditated strategy applied to hospitality. It is genuine in its core but consciously limited in its scope to preserve the destination's image and ensure tourists' positive experience.

In doing so, hospitality in this sense is both a genuine act of welcome and a mechanism of erasure, as it simultaneously upholds ideals of welcome while excluding the present-day realities that challenge them, putting in question the authenticity of the experience and real motivations of the hosts. If placed withing Derrida's (2000) frame, this kind of hospitality is highly conditional. As it is motivated by economic gain, expectations of the visitors, and selection of guests. However, what Derrida's (2000) lens helps reveal is how this kind of hospitality operates by excluding the Other

- such as refugees - from its narratives, as they simply do not fit, so they are omitted and silenced. Thus, no matter how many efforts will be placed into *depoliticizing* this hospitality, it will always be operating within a political frame, even in silence.

5.3.2. Hospitality as a Moral Imperative

While commercial hospitality in Podlaskie is carefully performed, bounded and aims to be *depoliticized* in tourism settings, another form of hospitality emerged there specifically during and because of the migration crisis. This form was less visible, less regulated, and far more ethics- rather than profit-driven. This form of hospitality was not motivated by economic interest, but by moral necessity. Faced with the visible suffering of people on the border, some local residents, guides, and volunteers began to offer food, water, warmth, and support - thus hospitality - not because they were expected to, but because they could not bear to do otherwise. In the absence of institutional care, hospitality became a moral imperative, enacted by individuals who chose to help despite legal, reputational, and psychological risks.

It is crucial to note that during the crisis Podlaskie became a central moral and political battleground where residents had to choose between following the law and responding to visible human suffering in the absence of organized humanitarian aid. Within the same space, where tourism hospitality has been performed for tourists, migrants were denied any kind of support. E., when asked if there was any external help offered during the crisis, answered: *"Not at all. We had some activists, but also not a lot of them. Many of the larger NGOs did not want to get involved."* (Appendix A). This situation created a paradox of a space which traditionally should have been associated with its hospitality and instead was turned hostile, forcing bottom-up intitatives to replace systemic care.

It was exactly for those reasons that E. decided to get involved in helping refugees: *"There was no other way! ... Not only do I work in this forest, but I also spend a lot of my spare time here. So, I met a lot of people on route, as I call them, and every time that happened I had to choose to help or not to help."* (Appendix A). For her it was also a sense of religious obligation, which she mentioned during her trial: *"I was taught that Christian altruism was something noble. That we as humanity should strive to achieve it. Simply, that we should be good people"* (CRR, 2025, 17:24). For E. (Appendix A), this moral impulse was also rooted in historical memory. She referred to the experience of *bieżeństwo* - the mass displacement of civilians in 1915 - as a reminder of her own

family's reliance on strangers' kindness*: "We were raised in a way that taught us that hospitality means helping those who need it because we have experienced this many generations ago. My own great-grandparents were refugees, and they managed to come back here only because strangers they met along the way decided to help them."* (Appendix A).

Due to those notions and shared values such as religion and history, it is possible to assume that such approach to hospitality as a moral imperative is present in the local community. Both religious values and historical memories inform a regional ethic of hospitality that is distinct from the nationally politicized discourse and becomes also a sort of way of honoring ancestral suffering and continuing a cycle of care - of paying back. Such approach is dramatically different from the business approach to hospitality, as it is altruistic and not performative. It is honest and not performative in its form. Paradox of the whole situation is connected to the fact that those acts of moral hospitality were performed in the same spaces and the same actors as tourism hospitality described above yet were motivated by absolutely different values. Theoretically, those acts could be as close to Derrida's (2000) unconditional hospitality as possible, however, as it will be revealed in the next chapter, it is more complex than it could have appeared based on E.'s example as they also exist within certain boundaries.

5.3.3. Boundaries of Hospitality

Another interviewer - K. - also underlined that she was helping refugees because her emotions would not let her remain indifferent: *"I felt like that was the only right thing to do. I could not watch those people suffer, when I met them in the forest. How could I have just walked away?"* (Appendix B). Once again, leaning towards an understanding of hospitality, as a moral imperative and leaning towards Derrida's (2000) unconditional ideal. Yet this care was still often accompanied by specific limitations.

Emotional Limitations

K. has highlighted an important aspect when asked if there were any organized local aid actions. She said: *"Everyone is engaged to the level they can. Some people are physically in the forests, some are just cooking food, some do not do anything. I could never judge how people help or decide not to help at all. I know from my own experience how emotional it is to be here and see all the suffering and death right at your doorstep. Not everyone is able to handle that. I have a neighbor who is still under psychological care, as she needs a professional to work with through*

everything she has experienced and heard of" (Appendix B). With this example it is possible to illustrate that hospitality encounters emotional boundaries, which are deeply personal and individual, therefore it is not possible to expect the same level of involvement from all the community members, which can further complicate organizing aid. Especially, if hospitality is enacted in brutal conditions, such as in this case, which may be too harsh for more sensitive people and prevent them from engaging in those hospitality initiatives.

This directly resonates with Derrida's (2000) understanding of hospitality as suspended between the impossible ideal of unconditionality and the real-world constraints, which are always shaped by laws, norms, and capacities. While K. and others demonstrate moral impulses to act, their ability to do so is mediated by affective limitations: exhaustion, trauma, fear, and the burden of emotional labor. In this sense, K.'s narrative reveals that hospitality is bounded by deeply intimate and subjective emotional thresholds. The idea of helping unconditionally becomes ethically admirable but practically unsustainable when hosts are overwhelmed by the psychological toll of proximity to suffering.

Legal Limitations

K. mentioned (Appendix B) also one situation in which she met two young girls hiding in the forest. Even though she was able to provide them initial help by offering them food and water, her abilities reached a limit in which she was forced to call the border patrol, as the girls wanted to apply for asylum. When the patrol arrived, they were rude and unprofessional both towards the refugees and K. They took the girls to an unknown location and K. later found out that they were pushed back to the Belarusian territory. She was visibly emotional when telling this story. In this case, the emotional weight of this encounter was compounded by the officials' behavior and legal cruelty of the system. She said: *"I was drained out of all the emotions at the end of the whole situation. I put my whole heart to help those girls, done everything in my power and when I needed help from the authorities they ruined everything. I felt powerless and disappointed in the system. I felt like it was my fault that those girls got pushed back and that I was the one who called the guards for them"* (Appendix B). This situation highlighted the fact that despite the informal aid offered to the refugees it can only go to a certain point, after which professional and legal help is needed. In this case, the system failed, exposing the legal boundaries of hospitality. Additionally, as exemplified by E.: *"Towards some of the young activists the officers were super rough, brought*

them to the ground, cuffed them with plastic ties… very uncomfortable situations in which the law enforcement was the real threat to us" (Appendix A). Such legal ambiguities as well as questionable behavior of the law enforcement representatives also could have limited bottom-up hospitality, as the local community may not feel comfortable enough to risk their security when facing law enforcement officers or when navigating complexities of the Polish law.

This example not only reveals the emotional toll of grassroots hospitality but also illustrates a fundamental tension within Derrida's (2000) framework: the threshold at which hospitality is no longer in the hands of the host but absorbed by the state. K.'s experience of aiding the girls to the limit of her personal capacity, only to be overruled and compromised by the legal system, speaks to how conditional hospitality is enforced through state power. For Derrida (2000), conditional hospitality is always mediated by the host's authority, but here, the host is effectively disempowered, as legal and institutional frameworks override moral agency. The state not only controls the borders but also redefines what "help" means and when it becomes criminalized. Moreover, in this case the act of hospitality effectively but not willingly became complicit in causing more harm.

Dual Identities

Importantly, not all state actors were unsympathetic. In one notable instance during fieldwork, two border guards expressed visible discomfort with their roles during a routine control near the border. While unable to act outside their official duties, they acknowledged the emotional conflict between their professional obligations and personal values. They have highlighted that the current situation is absolutely beyond what they have expected when beginning their service many years ago. They recalled times from before 2021, when the border looked much different from what it is now. They were aware that some people were trying to cross it *illegally* but those were mostly Belarusians running away from the regime or members of families artificially separated by the border trying to meet their keen or *semi-legally* exchange produce, food, etc. They have also highlighted that when the crisis erupted, they were not prepared for its scale both in terms of equipment and training, especially due to the fact of how different the border looked like not so long ago. Additionally, E. mentioned a situation connected to her trial, in which elected officials e.g. mayors, express solidarity with her as neighbors but must contain themselves in official settings due to their functions: *"It often even comes from people like mayors or other officials, which officially cannot*

say what they think because of their public service, but silently they do support people like me" (Appendix A). Those two cases present an interesting situation of 'dual identity' of certain inhabitants of the region, in which they are internally conflicted between their duties to the governing bodies and legal boundaries and their moral and personal views as simply people living there and experiencing the situation first-hand.

These accounts once again reflect what Derrida (2000) describes as the tension between unconditional hospitality and the conditions imposed by institutional frameworks. The border guards' and officials' discomfort reveal a fractured host identity, caught between personal values and the roles demanded by state structures. Though unable to act beyond their duties, their unease signals a suppressed hospitality, constrained by legal obligations but not entirely extinguished. These individuals illustrate how state actors can remain morally ambivalent, haunted by the gap between what they must do and what they believe should be done, yet not finding courage to openly speak up about what is right, probably due to personal reasons.

Ideological Limitations

The Tatar community of Kruszyniany adds another layer of complexity to the local narratives of hospitality. As said during the interview with the Tatar community leader: *"Of course we should help them. They are our brothers and sisters like every other human being"* (Appendix D). At the same time, however, their narratives revealed a deep-seated anxiety about being associated with Islamic extremism. During a guided tour in the village, the local guides repeatedly emphasized that, despite their religion, they are Polish citizens, firmly rooted in national and European identity: *"When they ask us if we feel Polish, we say that we don't feel Polish – we are Polish."* (Appendix D)

In an interview (Appendix D), the community leader articulated a desire to distance themselves from what he described as "Arab culture" and the forms of Islamic radicalism visible in certain international contexts. He highlighted that while it is necessary to help the refugees stuck on the border, it is important to realize that nefarious forces might use migration to *smuggle* extremists to Europe: *"I know that most of them are good people, but it would be naive to ignore the fact that certain movements have interest in smuggling their representatives into Europe and I am afraid that they are abusing this situation to serve their own interest"* (Appendix D). He illustrated this with a story about an Arabic teacher once invited to instruct Tatar children in the language for

religious purposes. According to the interviewee, at some point the teacher told students that they were religiously obliged to act on the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, should they ever encounter him. This deeply disturbed the community, who felt that the teacher had overstepped his educational role and introduced extremist ideology under the guise of language instruction, resulting in his removal from the school.

On one hand, those examples may be seen as an attempt by the Tatar community to demonstrate their proactive stance against extremism and use their awareness of such movements as Muslims to warn Polish citizens about it. On the other hand, it illustrates how Islamophobia, as perpetuated by dominant national discourse and media narratives, can infiltrate even Muslim communities - producing hesitation, narrative self-discipline, and a degree of internalized distance from other Muslim identities. It remains difficult to determine whether this account reflects the interviewee's genuine fear, internalized Islamophobia, or a rhetorical strategy of self-protection in a political climate where being Muslim often invites suspicion.

In terms of Derrida's (2000) views it is not necessarily a complete rejection of hospitality, but an example of how hospitality is filtered through ideological and emotional limits. This is not a failure but a condition of hospitality itself, which always takes place in a space of negotiation between ethical aspiration and political reality.

In summary, while the above mentioned view on and practices of hospitality do not meet Derrida's (2000) standard of the absolute unconditionality, they reflect a *desire for the impossible* - a striving toward openness even as it is obstructed by the law, fear, emotional labor, history, and the politics of belonging. It is precisely in these imperfect, ambivalent practices that the ethical weight of hospitality reveals itself most clearly.

5.3.4. Hospitality as a Crime

On January 28th, 2025 prosecutor Magdalena Rutyna among other indictments read the following statement: *"In the name of the Republic of Poland, I accuse E. of facilitating illegal stay of one citizen of Egypt and nine citizens of Iraq, who have earlier illegally crossed the border from the Republic of Belarus on the territory of the Republic of Poland, as between March 20th and 22nd, 2022 around Stare Masiewo and other unknown locations within the Hajnowski district in Podlaskie voivodeship, working in short intervals with premeditated intentions together and in agreement with other unknown people for the personal benefits of the foreigners. Working against*

the law as stated in Art. 264a §1 of Penal Code, she facilitated their stay by providing them with food and clothing during their stay in the forest, instructed them what to do in case they are arrested by the law enforcement authorities, additionally providing them with shelter in an unknown location" (CRR, 2025, 1:30-2:28).

E. is one of the five persons accused in this case, in which all of them allegedly broke Art. 264a §1 of the Polish Penal Code, stating that "*those who help foreigners to stay illegally in Poland for their own personal gain can be sentenced to anywhere between 3 months up to 5 years in prison*" (Kodeks Karny, 1997). Nonetheless, Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights in this case believes that the prosecutor's interpretation of this law is politicized and unrightfully includes humanitarian aid, as the law was created for people abusing migrants for their personal monetary gain, such as smugglers, and in this case there was no 'personal gain' for the accused, and that it can then create a dangerous precedence in which each case of humanitarian aid could become punishable (Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, 2024).

This case is only a culmination of many attempts made by Polish politicians and lawmakers on the path of creating a securitized narrative around migration and migrants themselves and thus acts of hospitality towards them. The discourse analysis of the key legal acts mentioned in the earlier parts reveal tendencies of Polish lawmakers in persistent, politicized presentations of the subject, rather than strive for humanitarian and sustainable solution to the crisis. Firstly, it is visible in the usage of such verbiages as "*protection of national security"; "territorial integrity"; "hybrid war"; and "illegal activity"* create a sense of danger and a situation that requires extraordinary measures, including those infringing on the liberties of the local humanity and human rights. It presents migrants as a problem to tackle rather than humans with rights and agency. It is especially troublesome in the absence of notions related to humanitarianism, such as *care, hospitality, responsibility*, and even explicitly lifting the right to *asylum* in the border regions in the recent legal texts, which suggest and portray a situation in which the state does not take responsibility for the migrants on the border, despite its legal and moral obligations to do so.

Additionally, political activity connected to migration is visible in social media, where various politicians spread campaigns focused on fearmongering. One of the more notable cases, a right-wing politician Janusz Kowalski (Kowalski, 2024) shared a photo of non-white men sitting on a bus stop in one of the border villages with black stripes covering their faces, as it is customary

done to criminals in Poland, with a description: *"Look at what Tusk is doing to Poland. It has begun. Did you really want it?"* (Figure 17) Overall, a message like that portrays migrants as criminals and a threat to Polish security and well-being, aligning with a broader political climate in Poland, and by proxy antagonizes anyone who would help them, as complicit in illegal activity.

Figure 17, Source: JKowalski_posel on X.com (2024)

In the case of E.'s trial and through other legal acts, the state reasserts its role as sovereign and the ultimate host by criminalizing the very act of welcoming. What was once considered a universal ethical good - providing food, shelter, and orientation to people in need - is transformed into a prosecutable offense. This is not just a withdrawal of hospitality; it is a violent reversal, where hospitality is legally recoded as endangerment, and those who offer it are treated not as moral actors, but as accomplices to criminality. Here, Derrida's (2000) ethics of hospitality are overridden by the politics of security, turning hospitality into complicity and morality into illegality.

5.4. Interim Summary: The Transformation of Space and Hospitality Practices

The analysis of Podlaskie Borderlands reveals that the migration crisis has not only disrupted the region's tourism identity but has also transformed the meaning, practice, and value of hospitality itself. Traditional tourism hospitality remains present in the region in a rather sterile, curated, commercial settings, as a carefully bounded practice designed to maintain a tranquil image while silencing the humanitarian realities unfolding nearby. While understandable, for the economic

purposes, it is rather inauthentic, especially in the light of how the region has been physically impacted by the crisis, as it is impossible to omit the presence of the military in the region, the border wall, and other reminiscences of the crisis. In contrast, morally driven, bottom-up acts of hospitality emerged in response to visible suffering, rooted in historical memory, religious values, and regional ethics. Despite how altruistic and unconditional they appear to be on the surface, even these acts were constrained by emotional, legal, and ideological boundaries, further complicating the meaning of hospitality in the region and aligning with Derrida's (2000) view on the issue in which unconditional hospitality is unachievable and tensions between conditional and unconditional hospitality are constant and significant. The most extreme expression of this transformation is found in the criminalization of hospitality, where helping refugees is no longer seen as a social good but redefined as a threat to national security. As a result, hospitality in Podlaskie has become deeply contested and fragmented. Although it is possible to argue that the migration crisis was not directly a tourism-related event, its shadows will continue to haunt the destination for years to come, reflecting in how the region is perceived and experienced and how different actors have behaved in its light. What was once framed as a welcoming landscape may now be remembered as a space of exclusion, where hospitality gave way to hostility.

In the following chapter, the focus turns toward possibility: whether and how tourism infrastructure, actors, and values might be mobilized as tools for crisis response, reimagining hospitality not only as a tradition under pressure but as a potential framework for ethical action.

5.5. Tourism's Potential in Crisis Management

While during the crisis period in Podlaskie large-scale infrastructure such as hotels, B&Bs, restaurants, and transport networks stood empty, the same type of infrastructure has been successfully repurposed to accommodate and support refugees in the context of the Ukrainian displacement beginning in 2022. The case of Ścinawa, studied on the periphery of this case, offers a stark contrast to Podlaskie's case: a local youth hostel was effectively turned into a reception center for refugees, providing housing, meals, language lessons, job consultations, coordinating with NGOs and local businesses, as well as organizing legal aid. As explained by its Managing Director, G.: *"When the war broke out, we saw what was happening and the decision was made literally overnight. Our director took steps to host people somewhere. In Ścinawa, really, apart from us, there wasn't any place ready—with rooms, bathrooms, and a kitchen. So we passed word*

to the mayor that we were ready." (Appendix F). A very important aspect was the willingness and support for the idea that the directory, employees, as well as local officials have shown, which has made the initiative possible. It was however also expressed by the Director of the youth hostel in Ścinawa that the process was tedious: *"At the start, when we contacted the mayor saying we were ready to take people in, they had to apply to higher authorities to recognize us as a refugee center. Everything in the beginning was messy"* (Appendix F). This aspect portrays a general tendency for the Polish bureaucracy, which does appear to be overwhelming at times, as it was also expressed by E. in Podlaskie's case: *"This whole process required so many papers and application, go through governmental controls, etc."* (Appendix A). Nonetheless, besides the community involvement, the government representative and lawmakers were still open to cooperate in this regard.

When it comes to motivations of organizing refugee aid, G.'s perspective does seem to align with what was present in Podlaskie as well - a sort of strive for Derrida's (2000) unconditional hospitality, as also expressed by E. and K., in which emotional and ethical considerations motivate actions. As explained by G.: "*Hospitality is letting someone into your life. In the case of Ukrainian refugees, for me it meant my life changed completely. Helping them became my priority. I did not care how many hours I worked or how much time I spent helping, driving them, arranging things. Hospitality, to me, is opening your world to someone else."* (Appendix F)

When comparing Ścinawa's case to Pechlaner et al.'s (2016) model, the tourism industries' and other companies' engagement in refugee aid was impeccable. Not only was the youth shelter involved, but as accounted by G.: *"Definitely restaurants. In Lubin and Wrocław, it was widely publicized that they were helping. (...) Or the Zagłębie football club visiting the kids - players coming to meet them. (...) Not always financial aid—sometimes it was about offering a sense of normalcy. Like sponsoring a bus so we could take them to the lake on a Sunday. Bread from the bakery was half-price, for them."* (Appendix F). Additionally, refugees also gradually become involved in the local community. They are involved in the economy: *"Sometimes they work harder than Polish workers and are more profitable"* (Appendix F), while children form bonds with the local inhabitants: *"Those who started school here in first or second grade now speak Polish fluently—sometimes better than Ukrainian. They fit in well."* (Appendix F). Therefore, it is safe to

say that Pechlaner et al.'s (2016) model is perfectly reflected in this case, creating an environment in which tourism infrastructure could have been successfully repurposed for refugee aid.

As presented above, when needed it was possible to arrange for tourism infrastructure and actors to become involved with helping refugees using the resources they have already had, therefore a question arises: *why was this possible in Ścinawa and not in Podlaskie?*

First of all, it is important to note that willingness to help refugees was expressed by E. and K. as tour guides, as well as by the Tatar community representative. In the light of the fact that tourism infrastructure stood otherwise unused, especially in the period of the exclusion zone, thus the highest point of the crisis, it is safe to assume that tourism actors would have been willing to engage in refugee aid, provided they would receive some kind of renumeration for their involvement, which would dramatically help with their economic situation and put their capacity to use, thus giving them work. As highlighted by the presidential candidate in 2025 election - Adrian Zandberg (Appendix C): *"There are no long-term strategies for the region and unfortunately it will have long-term economic consequences for the local community as it does appear that this crisis will prolong and will not end anytime soon, which is why we should work on a long-term complex support system for the region".* One of such initiatives could have easily included a monetary incentive to those hotel and restaurant owners - already suffering from financial problems caused by the crisis - who would have decided to engage in hosting refugees, NGO workers, volunteers, etc. or providing aid to them in other ways.

In Podlaskie, the main factors that prevented mobilizing tourism infrastructure for refugee aid was legal uncertainty and lack of political willingness to do so. As it was proven above, by the local and national officials hospitality in Podlaskie has been framed as a condemnable or even punishable act. Providing aid to the refugees, who have been framed as *illegal* and a *threat* to the internal security of Poland, was discouraged. Additionally, as explained by E.: "*Systematically, there was no help or even contact or acts of goodwill from the government. the lack of information and communication and well as absolutely no willingness to cooperate from the government's side"* (Appendix A). This approach added to the feeling of uncertainty and helplessness on top of the fear of being prosecuted for showing hospitality. This reflects the broader climate of fear and criminalization cultivated by the state - one that not only punished active aid but also discouraged

proactive solidarity from adjacent sectors like tourism, effectively preventing any kinf of engagement from their side.

It is also crucial to note at this point that a very visible difference between those two situations are who the refugees are – Ukrainians generally considered closely related to Poles culturally, religiously, and linguistically; and Middle Easters and North Africans – narrated in the light of alleged religious extremism and cultural unalignment with 'European values' not only in Poland but all over the Europe (IBA, 2024). This narrative could have affected the way the two crises were managed, as in the eyes of the general public, it was appreciated or even expected to help Ukrainians (Kalinowska et al., 2023), while if the government was engaged in aiding those refugees that were presented as *dangerous*, that would create a dissonance and might not have been welcomed by the society.

The tourism industry, by its nature, is built on the logics of hosting, care, and coordination ideally presented by the example of the youth hostel (Appendix F). While typically directed toward paying guests, these values are not exclusive to leisure contexts. As highlighted by the Extended Hospitality Theory (Pechlaner et al., 2016), tourism actors can and should be mobilized in the service of broader understanding of hospitality, especially in times of crisis. The Podlaskie case demonstrates the untapped potential of tourism actors as crisis responders. Not only do they possess the material resources such as beds, kitchens, and vehicles, but also the soft infrastructure of hosting: knowledge of local networks, the ability to mobilize local communities, knowledge of the regional geography, and long-standing community relationships. This capacity, however, was undermined in this case by political interests and hate-infused narratives surrounding the crisis, which have affected the local community and tourism actors in the region effectively discouraging their engagement in the crisis, as well as the governmental decision-makers fixated on securitization and acute actions rather than long-term politics.

The Podlaskie case in connection with the youth hostel's perspective reveal both the failure to mobilize tourism in response to crisis and the great potential that exists if these barriers are removed. With proper legal frameworks, financial support, and coordination, tourism destinations like Podlaskie could become models of ethical, inclusive hospitality as spaces that welcome both tourists and people in need. This would require a shift not only in policy but in imagination - seeing tourism not just as an industry, but as a social infrastructure capable of responding to human

suffering. In this sense, the tourism sector could have been not merely a passive victim of the migration crisis, nor just an economic loss. It could be a political actor in waiting - one whose silence, if broken, could help reframe hospitality as a shared, ethical, and practical responsibility. It is not only business but a physical manifestation of what hospitality is, how it is constructed, and what it should be used for.

6. Discussion

6.1. Reflections

Tourism destinations, especially through marketing and branding, can often end up being portrayed as idyllic spaces of leisure and welcome. Places where hospitality, as an act of welcoming is commercialized, used as a service and a product, something wroth being proud of but something that is rarely questioned. However, as this thesis has shown, such spaces can become deeply politicized and ethically charged when a migration crisis unfolds within them.

When trying to answer: *"How is the concept of hospitality interpreted and negotiated by different actors in the context of a migration crisis?",* the migration crisis of 2021–2023 exposed a deep fissure between how hospitality is understood and enacted on the ground and how it is framed and restricted by various actors. Rather than a monolithic response, Podlaskie's experience demonstrates the fluidity and relativity of hospitality in crisis. The findings of this project reveal that hospitality in Podlaskie is not a singular, stable practice, but a deeply fragmented and contested phenomenon. Traditional tourism hospitality persists but is strategically bounded and depoliticized. While such behavior of local tourism stakeholders is likely motivated by the need of restoring regular tourism activities in the region after periods of lockdown and thus no possibilities for them to generate profit, it is also paradoxical, as it creates an intentional silence surrounding the inhumane conditions on the border, lack of humanitarian help from the government, and undoubtable presence of the law enforcement in the region. Such approach attempts to place tourists in a cognitive bubble, seemingly offering them a picture of a destination that has moved on and forgotten about the migration crisis. In reality, new moral forms of hospitality have emerged in response to human suffering, but they are not highlighted or talked about, in fear of politicization or affecting the image of the destination, by resurfacing topics related to negative emotions, such as fear, suffering, and pain, which can drastically affect tourists' experiences.

But those aspects of hospitality are present in the region. They are performed by activists and local community members in silence, deep in the forest. They are motivated by the history of the region and generational trauma connected with forced migration or as a moral duty due to the absence of organized aid. Nonetheless, those acts are still very much constricted by emotional, ideological,

and legal limits in a landscape where the amount of human suffering, islamophobia, and fear of persecution prevent people from engaging in hospitality. That last limitation - fear of persecution - is perhaps the most radical shift in hospitality narratives, where acts of care have become criminalized and transformed hospitality from a virtue into a punishable offense. This layered fragmentation reveals that tourism destinations under crisis are not just economically disrupted, but ethically and spatially reconfigured.

It is therefore clear that Derrida's (2000) views on hospitality do find a reflection in the studied case. Podlaskie's situation has proven that hospitality is not a static phenomenon but a result of constant tensions between conditionality and unconditionality. Whether it is guided by personal interest, as in case of commercial hospitality; caused by external factors such as emotions, law or ideologies as in case of seeing hospitality as a moral imperative; or eventually done in bad faith as in case of criminalizing hospitality by the Polish state - this tension is ever-present and should never be underestimated. And tourism destinations are perfect spaces to understand that hospitality is always negotiated, reconfigured, and deconstructed, as it is highly visible in spaces that rely on hospitality as their primary trait.

When attempting to answer: *"What role can tourism infrastructure and actors play in responding to humanitarian needs during forced migration events?"* it is crucial to not forget that the government's approach to the crisis in Podlaskie was marked by securitization, isolation, and legal obstruction. Policies such as the exclusion zone, the construction of the border wall, and militarization of the region effectively devastated tourism - a sector reliant on openness, flow, and accessibility. Furthermore, through the prosecution of activists like E., the state actively framed hospitality as an offence, blurring the line between criminal behavior and moral duty. The symbolic message was clear: the state, not the local community, would determine who deserves help and under what conditions. The effect of various policies or lack thereof contributed to the creation of a significant missed opportunity: tourism infrastructure could have served as a powerful tool in crisis response, yet it did not. The region's hotels, hostels, transportation systems, and networks sat unused while people suffered in forests nearby. There are examples, such as in the case of youth hostels repurposed for Ukrainian refugees, that show how tourism assets can support humanitarian needs. Podlaskie had the capacity but not the permission. This disconnect highlights how infrastructure is not just physical but also political: the ability to repurpose space for care depends

not only on availability but on institutional will. And in a stark contrast of those two cases a deeper problem emerges: why are some people deemed worthy of aid, while the others are not? Why in some cases political willingness is overflowing and in others it is completely absent? While a proper analysis of this topic requires a more in-depth research, superficial differences such as cultural belonging, nationality and religion of the refugees, as well as political narratives surrounding the crises are immediately visible.

Some tourism entrepreneurs have already began shifting this narrative in alignment with Pechlaner et al.'s (2016) model. The World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance (2022) sets refugee support as one of their main goals, listing activities such as providing accommodation for refugees in transit, offering new employment opportunities or alternative positions in different locations of the same brand for the current employees, providing charity donations, etc., as model behaviors for hospitality entrepreneurs. Some of the examples they provide (The World Sustainable Hospitality Alliance, 2022) include Accor supporting all their Ukrainian employees who requested it in finding alternative workplaces outside of Ukraine as well as The Sheraton Phoenix Downtown employing refugees from Afghanistan and other countries, now accounting to 25% of their workforce across all the departments and providing them with complete legal and practical support in the process of resettling in the new country, as well as adjusting their corporate culture to include their new employees and make them feel welcomed. Nonetheless, in connection to the Polish cases, it is necessary to add another actor to Pechlaner et al.'s (2016) model - state representatives, as it was proven that without their engagement and permission, even if it means withdrawing their power and leaving space for the grassroot initiatives, it will not be possible to effectively organize refugee aid.

Lastly, when referring to the main question of this project encapsulating other finding: *"How do tourism destinations transform in their practices of hospitality during migration crises?"* it becomes evident that they follow Massey's (2005) principals of space. They are not static landscapes or passive backdrops for visitor consumption, but lived, dynamic spaces shaped by overlapping identities, interests, power structures, and moral decisions. This destination touched by the migration crisis changed both physically, through militarization of the region and presence of new actors within their scopes, but also on an ideological level, through renegotiation and reconstruction of values such as hospitality, which becomes applied or denied to a new group of

strangers in the destination – refugees. It is also important to note that tourism destinations should be considered spaces of hospitality. No matter if they are discussed in the context of tourism or migration, it should be a given that tourism spaces can be vital actors in managing crises as their physical potential and appreciation of hospitality as a value can create a viable space able to welcome and provide shelter for those who need it.

6.2. Practical Implications

While a major part of this project focused on theoretical aspects of hospitality, migration, and tourism destinations, there are still practical implications to be drawn from it. First of all, future crises could benefit from clearer frameworks that enable tourism actors to mobilize resources in socially responsive ways - turning destinations from passive bystanders into active agents of inclusion. Instead of focusing on securitization and restrictions, lawmakers and government officials should focus on allowing the bottom-up initiatives to act and place their efforts into creation of long-term regional strategies, as they will be needed in the light of growing migration pressures (Danish Refugee Council, 2025)

Additionally, the region of Podlaskie borderland's image is currently shattered and for many years will be covered in shadows of the crisis. Long-term tourism development strategies, as well as rebranding efforts will be needed on a large scale to restore the tranquility of the region and embrace rather than forget the atrocities of the crisis. Perhaps it could be an interesting idea to follow the path of previously mentioned case of Leeds (Burrai et al., 2022), where refugees were give voice in creating their own narrative of the space and take ownership of their stories, while offering an invaluable opportunity for tourists to educate themselves, which in the light of the previously-mentioned anti-migration narratives targeting only certain groups (IBA, 2024) could be proven useful.

6.3. Theoretical Contributions

As mentioned in the beginning of this report, the project has been sourcing from three main theoretical frames: Massey's (2005) theories of space; Derrida's (2000) hospitality, and Pechlaner et al.'s (2016) Extended Hospitality. The studied case has proven the applicability and relevance of looking at tourism destinations as dynamic spaces (Massey, 2005), instead of static beings. Additionally, it has added a new stakeholder, when analyzing destinations – migrants or refugees. While not applicable everywhere, migrants and refugees as stakeholders can gain significant

relevance in the light of migration movements gaining traction and already reflecting in destinations such as Canary Islands and Lampedusa. It can also be interesting to look at refugees and migrants becoming vital parts of tourism stakeholders as potential business owners and value creators, as it was expressed by Akhmedov et al. (2022) in their case study in which migrants were overlooked leading to missed opportunities in tourism development of the destination.

In terms of understanding of hospitality, the project extends Derrida's (2000) look at it. His concept of unconditional hospitality is useful as a provocation, but it is always bounded by fear, law, and fatigue that this thesis locates in real-world complexities. The Podlaskie case illustrates how actors aspire toward unconditional care, but must constantly negotiate boundaries imposed by legal systems, ideologies, and emotional capacity. In this sense, hospitality is not a spectrum between openness and closure, but an ongoing tension - constructed, practiced, and contested in real spaces.

Lastly, this study contributes to critical hospitality and tourism studies by highlighting the underutilized potential of tourism infrastructure as a site of humanitarian action, and the emotional labor shouldered by local actors in the absence of institutional care, which corresponds with Pechlaner et al.'s (2016) Extended Hospitality and proves that the model can and should be applied in real life. Nonetheless, the study argues for a modification of the model with the addition of a new actor in the form of state's representatives in order to facilitate the engagement fully and allow for the true realization of extended hospitality's potential.

6.4. Further Research

While this thesis is grounded in rich empirical material, it is limited by its geographical focus. Perspectives from state officials and security personnel were relatively scarce, and future studies could broaden the scope to include more comparative and richer data. Furthermore, the emotional and moral dimensions of hospitality discussed here are highly contextual and may vary across cultural settings, therefore future research could explore how hospitality is negotiated in other tourism destinations under crisis or examine the long-term impact of criminalizing care on community trust and civil society. The project also hopes to call for greater inclusion of tourism actors and scholars in humanitarian and migration planning, in order to allow for its capacity's contribution to more sustainable and equitable migration policies.

7. Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore the nature of tourism destinations as spaces of hospitality during migration crises, using the Polish region of Podlaskie as a case study. It asked how hospitality is interpreted, practiced, and contested by different actors in the context of a politically sensitive and ethically charged humanitarian situation. Through social constructivist paradigm and by combining ethnographic fieldwork, discourse analysis, the project has illuminated how tourism destinations are not passive, apolitical backdrops to unfolding crises, but are themselves deeply implicated in the negotiation of values such as care, inclusion, and security.

One of the central arguments of this study is that hospitality in Podlaskie has undergone a transformation - both symbolic and material - during the migration crisis of 2021–2023. Traditionally associated with tourism, local food, and cultural exchange, hospitality has become contested and eventually fragmented into three dominant aspects: commercial, moral, and criminalized. Commercial hospitality continues to exist but is now carefully curated and strategically depoliticized. It serves tourists who are invited and anticipated, while remaining silent about the ongoing human suffering at the border. In this way, it reflects what Derrida (2000) defines as *conditional hospitality*, which is structured around control, expectations, and selective inclusion.

In contrast, a second form of hospitality emerged from moral obligation. Organized by local residents and activists who felt ethically compelled to help, this form was not driven by economic gain or supported by various institutions of the system. Instead, it was rooted in deeply personal values, often linked to religion, historical memory, or emotional response. While this moral hospitality approached Derrida's (2000) notion of *unconditional hospitality*, it was still constrained by fear, legality, and fatigue - always falling short of the impossible ethical ideal. These acts were shaped not only by willingness, but by the emotional, ideological, and legal limitations within which people operated.

The third form of hospitality represents the most radical shift. In the case of E.'s trial, offering basic aid was reframed by the state as a punishable offense. Polish government actively presented hospitality as a threat, using language that positioned hospitality not as a social virtue, but as a challenge to national sovereignty. In this sense, the law did not simply regulate hospitality - it was

abused in a discourse to transform it. In connection to a general legal and media discourse surrounding the crisis, the result was clear – showing hospitality to refugees on the Polish-Belarusian border is a crime, as people stranded there are to be considered criminals and a threat to Poland. It is difficult to even place this aspect of hospitality in Derrida's (2000) framework, as the objective of this process was to completely eradicate hospitality.

The destination as a space itself changed as well, as exclusion zones were declared, military infrastructure was introduced, and the forest, once associated with peace and eco-tourism, became a space of trauma and death. This shift is echoed in Massey's (2005) conceptualization of space as dynamic, relational, and produced through social and political tensions. Podlaskie's case exemplifies how space is not fixed, but constantly made and remade by the narratives and practices that unfold within it.

The findings also reveal how tourism infrastructure, such as accommodation providers, transport networks, restaurants, etc. possesses latent potential to respond to humanitarian crises. However, this potential remains unrealized in contexts where the state obstructs or criminalizes local action. The comparison between responses to Ukrainian refugees and those from the Middle East highlights how hospitality is politically selective, racialized, and governed by ideological narratives.

Ultimately, this thesis contributes to critical hospitality and tourism studies by showing how values that might appear stable, in this case hospitality, are in fact shaped by power, legality, and discourse. It calls for greater recognition of tourism destinations not only as economic engines, but as moral and political spaces where inclusion and exclusion are constantly negotiated. In times of crisis, destinations like Podlaskie remind us that hospitality is not ever-present and never neutral and that even acts of welcome can become contested, resisted, and bare risk for the hosts.

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9. Appendices

9.1. Appendix A

Conversation with E. – national park employee, local guide and activist

Conducted on April 13th, 2025

Note! E. agreed to participate in the interview as a private citizen and a local community member, only under condition that it is acknowledged that her opinions presented in the interview are personal and do not reflect National Park's official stance on many issues.

Hi! Thank you so much for agreeing to do that. So, just to let you know, this whole project is about the intersections of tourism and migration, which is why this place is a perfect place to do that and why I wanted to talk to you as someone connected both to tourism and refugee aid in the region. Would you start by saying how this whole crisis has affected tourism in the region?

Well, first of all, the most important aspect is what we call 'the exclusion zone', which means that nobody besides the military and other authorities can be there. It has different levels of intensity and area it covers, but the largest area is actually in the strict nature reserve of our National Park. Tourists have never been allowed in this area anyway and never will be due to its value for nature preservation, but because of that zone we have been greatly affected in other ways.

In September 2021 we have been completely separated from the rest of the country – I mean Bialowieza, Hajnowka and smaller communities in the area… No tourists were allowed to come here. It has lasted from September 1st, 2021, up until beginning of July 2022. A lot of smaller businesses, like agritourism farms, smaller restaurants and bars, etc. closed down and never returned. Many places had to change their business model and from serving fancy dishes changed to preparing burgers for the military. Businesses had to keep paying taxes, but they had no clients, no income… I think our district officials reacted very weirdly; they could have given tax breaks to those businesses, but nobody even thought about that. Our municipal governments have not supported us as local inhabitants.

And then in June 2024, when Donald Tusk came to Dubicze Cerkiewne and gave a terrible, terrible speech after that soldier was killed at the border, which caused the whole terrible media narrative and caused this whole idea of reintroducing the exclusion zone and eliminating tourists from this area completely again. Fortunately, we had already gotten a new National Park director back then and she was lobbying against it and had rallied up mayors and entrepreneurs from the region to protest against it. It was kind of like civil disobedience to show that we will not agree to go through this again. We had already seen that, and we knew what consequences it will have, so it forced the government to rethink their plans and at this point it is created in a way that does not affect tourists and areas where they are in any way.

But despite that, the media had immediately picked up on the topic, created the whole narrative about how dangerous it is here and it was enough to create real consequences. Even based on my own experience, as a tour guide, I had some foreign group tours booked for April and May and all of them cancelled their trips. Literally everyone I had booked until the end of 2024.

Up until the end of July visitors in the regions were receiving text messages as soon as they entered the region. Interestingly enough, they had a different content in Polish and different in English. In English it was more or less "you are entering an area where military can shoot, go back where you came from". They were sent to every foreign number which was within the range of the local cell towers, which I believe was aimed at migrants and refugees but tourists were receiving it as well. And they were asking, excuse my language, "What the f**k is this about". It took all of us a long time to go through all the ministries and institutions responsible for that to finally force them to change the content of the message and finally to stop sending them at all.

This whole crisis basically affected us between 2021 and summer of 2023, in 2024 you would have practically not notice it at all. Nowadays there are almost no crossings, almost because this whole thing is controlled by Lukashenko's regime, but the border and the area around it, because of all the tools that the military and border patrol have, is controlled to the point that those people are pushed back to Belarus before they get any further than a few meters from the wall. But we all know well that pushbacks do not work, because the Belarusians are forcing them to attempt a crossing again and again… it's like ping-pong. But an average tourist for 99.9% will not see any **'Person on Route'** here at all if they stick to the main attractions. Back in 2022 I still had cases like that when I was having tours in the strict reserve and suddenly someone was running through

the forest. I would always yell at them “Stop. We are not police. I have water, chocolate…” They would stop, I would give them whatever they wanted, and they would continue their own way wherever they wanted to.

Now we have a new problem, because we are technically not at war, but the government has started their big project called “The Eastern Shield”, which we colloquially call “Tusk’s Wał” (Wał in Polish can refer to both a part of defense enforcements and a scam in informal language). It again means that the whole region will be militarized, it will affect the nature, which for us as people who work with tourists means larger density of tourists, because we will be limited again to areas that are not restricted.

And how did you get involved in helping refugees?

There was no other way! When you are here, live here every day… It is different when you live in a city. You go to your job to an office, to school, a factory, whatever, you go back home, and maybe you get to spend some time in your garden if you are lucky enough to have it. It is different in my case. Not only do I work in this forest, but I also spend a lot of my spare time here. So I met a lot of those people on route, as I call them, and every time I had to choose to help or not to help. I was raised in a belief that I should help and the general, national consequences of this are not my business. I am just a local citizen. Someone higher up, some institutions dedicated to deal with that should take care of those consequences. For me it was a moral obligation as a human. I had no other option.

And was the government involved in helping the refugees here in any way? Besides the military intervention.

Not at all. We had some activists, but also not a lot of them. Many of the larger NGOs did not want to get involved. You have to remember that they have their statutes and goals, but often it does not pay off to actually realize those goals. They would much rather focus on media activity due to ‘diplomacy’ and this case was not profitable. Many people came from across Europe, not only Poland, to help precisely because those who were supposed to be here to do this work were not present. And there were many sad stories that I cannot even think about or remember them, that those young activists – it is often young people that want to change the world - as well as us as the local community had to experience. Systematically, there was no help or even contact or acts of

goodwill from the government's side. Even those stupid taxes were not lifted… They talked about some kind of voucher for small businesses, meaning that if you offer accommodation and between September 2021 and July 2022 you had no tourists, they would help you in some way. But this whole process required so many papers and application, go through governmental controls, etc. and those officials that were supposed to conduct those controls would come and tell us: "We have it set up in such way that it makes it basically impossible to receive this compensation, because there is no money for that".

And from a more philosophical perspective, what does hospitality mean to you?

It is different here in Podlasie than anywhere else. We were raised in a way that taught us that hospitality means helping those who need it because we have experienced this many generations ago. My own great-grandparents were refugees and they managed to come back here only because strangers they met along the way decided to help them. It also means that if you live in a part of Poland that is called "Poland B" – the worse kind of Poland, you need to speak well about this place because it is beautiful and it is also a part of our hospitality that we want to show people that this place is special. We want to share and explain our everyday reality. So when it comes to tourists we want it to be authentic. We do not talk about it a lot in the media or promote it that much, because this legacy of hospitality is still alive here so you just need to experience it. This place is amazing and it was destroyed by the Polish government over the years.

And when it comes to helping refugees, for me it is purely a moral obligation. I have not talked to media about it up until my trial has started. I would take some reporters with me to the forest if they told me they were interested in showing what those people have to go through in there.

And did the media affect a lot your situation here?

We have been trying our best to demystify this whole crisis on a local level. We have been talking to our marketing institutions to completely abandon the word 'safety' and focus on using words like 'beautiful' and 'magical' to completely ignore the whole discourse about safety here and who poses which threat to whom, because this discourse is clearly political, just like the whole crisis. You can see it all across Europe that we are militarizing our border, and it is only the populist politicians that profit from it and they feed those discourse to gain support. Unfortunately, they do

use media to do that and in Poland unfortunately whoever has power controls the national media, which is sad.

If you ask a local inhabitant about this whole situation, they will never tell you that 'People on Route' can be a burden or cause a threat for them. They have never experienced that and they live here every single day, so they would never relate the crisis to tourism development here. I have gone to the forest during the day, at night, sometimes through places that are difficult because of the natural obstacles and I was never afraid of those people that I was supposed to help.

Maybe because I am older, the law enforcement was a bit calmer towards me because towards some of the young activists the officers were super rough, brought them to the ground, cuffed them with plastic ties… very uncomfortable situations in which the law enforcement was the real threat to us. Those soldiers would come here from all over the country for no longer than two months without knowing the terrain, which resulted in them being afraid of their own shadow and it was impossible to predict how they will react to even the smallest movement or noise.

Do you think that the majority of the people here see this the same way that you do?

I can only speak for myself. But because of the fact that I am the only person from here to currently be on trial for helping refugees it is a bit special, but I am receiving enormous support from the local community. From my neighbors… it completely does not reflect the things you see or hear in Polish politics or media. You also have to remember that because we are in borderlands, the main nationality here is not Polish and the main faith is not Catholic. We have diverse background coming from Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania and most of us are Orthodox, which in our history and tradition means that maybe we are not united as a civic society under the Polish flag, but deep in our hearts, as neighbors we support each other. It often even comes from people like mayors or other officials, which officially cannot say what they think because of their public service, but silently they do support people like me. Helping should not be illegal. We have to help each other. The only thing is how you frame it and what you use it for further. We just did what we had to do because we believed that nobody should die and suffer in that forest. And all those situations I saw there in 2021 and 2022… When I first heard about pushbacks my friends told me that I have to go there and help because I know the forest and they said that the local border patrol commander was there and pushed those people back to the Belarusian side. I could not have believed that someone I knew my whole life would ever do something like that. It has created some divisions here because

we had people who had to make decisions against their own morals because of the public roles they played or jobs they had and we really felt for them. We have our normal daily lives that we try to live amidst all of that and we all do what we think is right.

Great. Thank you so much for your time!

9.2. Appendix B

Interview with a local guide (K.) conducted during a private guided tour. The conversation in reality was more fragmented as it was intertwined with the elements of the tour.

Conducted on April 14th, 2025

First of all, thank you again for agreeing to meet. I know it's not easy to talk about some of this.

No problem. Honestly, I've been waiting for someone to ask. People moved on too quickly and those of us who were involved, we're still carrying it. So… thank you.

Can we begin with how you first got involved?

I didn't plan it. One day in late autumn 2021 I was walking in the forest as it's where I go to clear my head, it's also my place of work. And suddenly I saw them. Two men. They were clearly exhausted, wet, freezing. One of them looked maybe seventeen. I didn't know what to do, honestly. But I couldn't just walk away. They were completely lost, had no idea where to go and where heading towards a swampy area so I had to do something.

And what did you do?

I had some tea and a piece of bread with me - it wasn't much, but I gave it to them. They barely spoke English. guided them away, gave them some water and sweets and let them go. I told them where they were and asked if they needed anything else. I think they just felt relief that someone didn't yell or call the guards immediately.

That moment seems to have stayed with you.

Yes. That's when it became real. You see it on the news - "the crisis" - but this was real. I am originally from Warsaw, so I was initially not fully aware of the situation and I moved here right after the crisis started to be with my husband. But from that first encounter on I always kept some food in my bag whenever I had a tour. You never know who you might meet. I even have some with me now in case something happens.

BREAK

What is this sign about?

It is because we had cases of soldiers and other officers using this area for their daily jogging or other walks. They were destroying the forest, going where they are not supposed to go, leaving trash behind… It was so disrespectful that the National Park's directors had to intervene.

BREAK

Did you ever work with any groups or was it mostly just you?

I am not a part of anything organized. Some were more involved, some less to the level they can. Some people are physically in the forests, some are just cooking food, some do not do anything. I could never judge how people help or decide not to help at all. But many were scared. There were rumors that helping was illegal. That you could be arrested. I think that fear stopped a lot of people.

You mentioned in our earlier emails that you met two girls in the forest?

Yes. That was maybe the hardest day of my life. Two teenage girls, maybe 15 or 16, hiding under some branches. They looked terrified. One of them didn't stop crying. I gave them food and a big coat I had with me. They said they wanted to seek asylum. That's when I knew I had to call the border patrol. I thought… I thought that was the right thing.

What happened?

The guards came. And they were… cold. Not physically aggressive, but cold. Rude. Like we were wasting their time. They didn't let me speak with the girls again. Later I found out from a friend that they were pushed back to Belarus the same night. I was drained out of all the emotions at the end of the whole situation. I put my whole heart to help those girls, done

everything in my power and when I needed help from the authorities they ruined everything. I felt powerless and disappointed in the system. I felt like it was my fault that those girls got pushed back and that I was the one who called the guards for them.

BREAK

Did anyone you know face legal trouble?

K.: Of course. Everyone heard about E. and her trial. I know that some volunteers were dragged on the ground, cuffed with those horrible plastic ties. E. told me they once brought her friend down to the ground like a criminal. Very uncomfortable situations in which the law enforcement was the real threat to us, not the refugees everyone was warning us about.

Did you ever fear for yourself?

Sometimes. Not constantly. Emotionally it was very hard. I know from my own experience how emotional it is to be here and see all the suffering and death right at your doorstep. Not everyone is able to handle that. I have a neighbor who is still under psychological care, as she needs a professional to work with through everything she has experienced and heard of.

BREAK

Did you feel abandoned by the state?

Completely. There was no help. No coordination. Just walls and fear. I remember when they built that damn wall. It wasn't to keep anyone out - it was to keep us from seeing. From caring. It was like: "Don't look, don't feel, don't help."

Do you think the region will ever go back to "normal"?

K.: No. Not fully. There's a quiet anger now. A scar. People want to forget. But for those of us who were directly engaged here… we remember. The forest isn't the same anymore. I don't think it ever will be.

Thank you, K. Honestly. That's powerful — and deeply appreciated.

9.3. Appendix C

Short conversation with Adrian Zandberg – candidate to become Polish president in 2025 election. Recorded after his meeting with the local community of Kruszyniany – a Tatar village in Podlaskie, on April 15th, 2025

Hi! Would you have time to answer a few questions?

Sure! No problem at all.

So, I am currently working on my thesis talking about the intersection of tourism and migration and Podlasie is a perfect case study for this in my opinion. What has brough you here?

I always stop in Kruszyniany when I am in the area. Not only because Dzemil Gembicki (mosque caretaker) is my great friend from a long time ago, but also because this place is a great example of why diversity is the real strength and not a weakness of our society, and diverse Poland is the future and what we really need. This place is also a great example of what a strong, well-communicated, and collaborative local community, no matter how small, can achieve. Here in Kruszyniany or nearby in Krynki they are collaborating, they do not allow others to divide them and can riot when unfair businesses are trying to devastate their region. There was a case here a few years ago, when a giant agriculture company tried to devastate this region's touristic potential, people's quality of life – all in the name of profit.

Yes, and that community has experienced a great crisis here when the whole situation on the border has begun.

I think the initial migration crisis was not the main problem. The problem was created by unstable, unserious politicians. Even when we talk about the most recent law that was passed not so long ago lifting the right to apply for asylum in this region. It is clearly against our constitution. I want our country to be serious and in a serious country, when someone comes to us and asks to apply for asylum, we acknowledge and process their claim. If we determine that they should not receive asylum, we send them back to their country. And if we find their claim to be legitimate because they are running from political or religious prosecution, then following the Polish constitution, the current law, we grant them asylum. This is how our country and our officials should have behaved from the very beginning.

Instead, they have decided to build a wall on the border. What do you think about that?

I am very pragmatic in this case. I want our law enforcement representatives to behave in the border region according to the rules we have agreed to in the constitution and in international treaties. Technical aspect of how to organize it is secondary. It is crucial for our country to treat seriously its own laws.

I have already heard from the local community that they have not been satisfied with how it was solved and how they were treated. How should it have been organized in your opinion?

Well, I am not from here, so I cannot speak for the whole community, but I can talk as a politician and someone who loves coming to this region as a tourist. They definitely have not received enough support. Many people here live from tourism and what has happened disqualified their chances to do so. Besides an ad hoc aid program there are no long-term strategies for the region and unfortunately it will have long-term economic consequences for the local community as it does appear that this crisis will prolong and will not end anytime soon, which is why we should work on a long-term complex support system for the region. Currently in Poland the approach is often that the people should adjust to the radical and rapid changes the country implements and how they do it is their problem that they country does not want anything to do with. And I think it is absolutely unfair, and I think that people here are angry because of that because they feel betrayed both here and in Bialowieza where they have been greatly impacted, which is visible in hard data. It was also the local government that has disappointed them, not only the national government, which I think was even more difficult for them because those were supposed to be people who would fight for the interest of the locals, and they did not do that. I am sorry, but we have a few more meetings to attend so unfortunately, I have to go.

Sure. Thank you for your time!

9.4. Appendix D

Interview conducted with a representative (B.) of the local Tatar community in Kruszyniany

Conducted on April 15th, 2025

So how has the border crisis affected tourism and what the general mood is around the whole situation here?

We are proud of our hospitality, and we do not want to be associated with any side of the politics, including during this crisis. Everyone should feel welcome here, no matter what they believe in, who they vote for or where they come from. So, when the buffer zone was first created—three kilometers from the border—everything changed. I have a small agritourism business here, 11 beds. I had guests in the rooms, and I had to just go and tell them goodbye, because they were going to start inspections the next day. So they left, and we were shut down for ten months. And for us locals living here it was a bit too much. Sometimes it felt unnecessary… We were checked ten times a day. When we took our grandchildren to school, either to Krynki or to Michalowo for classes, we were stopped everywhere, asked for documents. It was exhausting. I had some leverage because of my position as a community leader so I'd call the commanders and say: I get that you need to do checks, but at least let people know someone harmless is on the road. Eventually, it got better. But the whole region suffered. Friends from Supraśl, a spa town, and from Białystok called me saying people were cancelling trips and bookings. They'd say, "If I can't go to Kruszyniany or Białowieża, why go at all?" This place is a real tourist magnet. And not just us - we benefit from these tourists, but so does the whole area. People come here, they need to eat somewhere, and the nature is beautiful. But the past situation is still affecting things. Last year in spring, the increase in migrant crossings led to harsher military responses, which suppressed the flow. Then they started sending SMS messages: "If you see a refugee, call the police." These messages spread fear. We brought in the regional governor, the authorities, and the media to correct the narrative, to show that nothing bad was happening here. Honestly, I've only seen two refugees – one was held by the soldiers outside the village and once a refugee broke into the mosque here, broke a window. He was exhausted - it was winter. He took a few złoty to charge his phone and grabbed a magnet souvenir. That's the only thing I noticed. We don't feel

any fear here. Someone once asked me if I'm afraid because we're so close to the border. I said, "Is Bydgoszcz safe when a bomb could fall there?" There is a lot of military presence. It's not like before, when you had refugees fleeing persecution. Now it's often organized groups – militias - being pushed in to maintain instability. You don't see families with small children like at the beginning. Remember the family that was held on the border with kids? That was different. I went there myself with a priest from the Catholic University of Lublin to criticize the situation. But now, I support tightening control. Not every refugee is the same. Some are fleeing poverty - that's one thing. But some are part of orchestrated actions. Recently I saw videos of groups of young men behaving aggressively, throwing stones - our soldiers are being attacked. So we need strong, responsible forces and security.

And what about that border wall?

The wall PiS built was a joke - good for cats maybe. It could be breached in 20 seconds. There are videos showing how. Why build such a costly structure if it's useless? They later reinforced it with coils and wires and it's more stable now. But I saw a video of people bringing a ladder, laying it over the barbed wire and walking right over. So now they're investing in electronic systems to monitor and respond quickly.

Before the crisis and the fence, how did locals interact—Belarusians and Poles?

Yes, back then, cows used to wander over the border. Even our bison did - then they came back. Wildlife suffered the most. Animals were getting injured in the barbed wire. Before, there was more cross-border communication. Belarusians were the ones guarding their side more strictly. They didn't want our cattle crossing over. Now it's the other way around. It's all changed. Then it got worse, especially at night. And those helping refugees were the first to be targeted. Many probably died in the swamps - they couldn't get out. The terrain is unforgiving. They were often beaten by Belarusians. At first, families were invited in, given hotels, and then robbed of all their money before being forced across the border with nothing. It was inhumane. Our side tried to help, but now the whole situation has changed. Poland now spreads awareness in those countries - don't

come, don't fall for lies. People suffer greatly if they do. But when militias are involved, that's a different story, with money coming from the top.

This area is multiethnic and multireligious—churches, mosques, Tatar communities. If the refugees were willing to integrate, would you accept them?

Of course we should help them in some way. They are our brothers and sisters like every other human being. I know that most of them are good people, but it would be naive to ignore the fact that certain movements have interest in smuggling their representatives into Europe, like I mentioned before, and I am afraid that they are abusing this situation to serve their own interest. At the end of the day we are Europeans. When they ask us if we feel Polish, we say that we don't feel Polish – we are Polish. Even if refugees come from Muslim countries, we are culturally incompatible. Religion might be the same, but the priorities are different. We're not culturally compatible - they know it and we know it. Religion is common, yes, but we practice it differently. In Arab countries, religion is fused with culture in a way that makes it rigid. We don't have Arab culture. I used to be the head of the Muslim Religious Association. We had Arab teachers because we didn't have enough educated people locally. At one point, we were losing the religion here. I can't read Arabic, I pray from memory. When Arab students came to Poland, we had them teach our children religion. But then my son told me what they were teaching and I started watching more closely. Once they brought an Islamic teacher to a kids' class. At one point he brought up Rushdie. He said they would have to kill him if they met him. I immediately told the kids to leave. I said - this is the last time. We then moved classes to public schools. Only those who taught religion - not Arab culture - were allowed to teach. We don't need Arab culture. Those are the kinds of dilemmas we've had.

That's a lot of insight. I will not keep you any longer. Thank you for your time.

9.5. Appendix E

Brief exchange occurred after a routine control conducted by a border guard patrol encountered while conducting fieldwork near the border wall near Jałówka village, Podlaskie Voivodeship. Both officers agreed to speak off the record on the condition of anonymity. Names have been replaced with X and Y. The transcript was written down from memory.

Conducted on April 15th, 2025

X: Okay, so what are you doing here?

I'm doing a research project related to tourism and the migration situation here. I'm not recording anything - just trying to understand how locals and people working in the area are experiencing things.

X: Well… there's not much we can say officially, you know.

Y: But we can talk as people, I guess. Just don't quote us directly with names.

Totally understand. I just want to know how things feel on your side. Has the situation changed much since, say, before 2021?

X: Completely. Back then, it was quiet. A few people trying to cross - Belarusians escaping the regime, sometimes families trying to meet across the border. It wasn't anything like this. No one imagined it would become… whatever this is now. None of us expected it to come down to this… It was never like this before here. Despite knowing that it is our job, it all felt very surreal.

Y: We were not trained for this kind of thing. I mean, yes, border protection, patrols — that's the job. But this is different. The scale. The politics. The pressure.

You mean pressure from the higher-ups?

X: Pressure from everywhere. The media. The government. The commanders. Even the locals sometimes. People expect you to be a soldier and a social worker and a villain and a hero all at once.

Y: Look, some of these people… they're in bad shape. It's hard to see. And on the other hand of course, we have orders. But it stays with you. You can't unsee some things.

Do you feel conflicted?

X: Honestly? Yes. I joined this job to protect, not to chase people in the woods at night.

Y: I didn't sign up to be heartless. But we also can't just ignore the law. It's… complicated. Some of us talk about it after shifts, but mostly we just stay quiet. Nobody wants to get in trouble.

Do you think there's room for change?

X: Not right now. Not with the current climate. Everyone's tense. You do what you're told. That's the reality. It's all about politics.

Y: Still… doesn't mean we don't feel. That part hasn't switched off.

I'm really sorry to hear that… Well, I will not keep you. Stay safe!

9.6. Appendix F

Conversation with Operations Director (G.) of a local youth hostel in Ścinawa in Dolnoslaskie region, which has transformed into a refugee center for Ukrainians in 2022

Conducted on April 8th, 2025

So, first, could you tell me about the place itself and what you do, and what you all generally do there?

The place is called "Pałacyk" in Ścinawa, a center for educational and creative activities. It's also a youth hostel and a place where, by design, we're supposed to host school trips, tourists, cycling groups, kayaking groups, anyone who needs a place to stay. We organize non-formal education, different forms of tourism. We also manage an ecological education center and a passenger boat. We operate and run all of it ourselves. And of course, in the process, we promote our municipality, which is small, but invests a lot—and it's thanks to one such investment that our center came to be.

And how did it happen that you started helping refugees?

When the war broke out, we saw what was happening and the decision was made literally overnight. Our director took steps to host people somewhere. In Ścinawa, really, apart from us, there wasn't any place ready—with rooms, bathrooms, and a kitchen. So we passed word to the mayor that we were ready. Of course, the county crisis management department was also handling refugee reception. And on March 1st, the first refugees fleeing Ukraine arrived at our center. That night, the first mothers with children came. One arrived with a leg in a cast, carrying only what she could hold—no underwear, no toiletries, nothing.

So it came from you—it was bottom-up, and later you got support from above?

Yes, exactly. It came from a basic instinct, from basic humanity, I think.

Did the local community help you at all?

Very much. During the first few months, if we needed anything—food, clothes, hygiene products—it was just a matter of calling two people or posting on Facebook, and we had everything that same day. Local businesses joined in too. For example, once we needed a single pair of shoes and a company came with a trailer full of shoes for everyone. But of course, that

only lasted in the beginning, during those first months of "hurray, hurray, everyone wants to help." After a few months, we were left to handle it on our own.

Do you currently receive any help from authorities or the community? What does it look like now?

We're not directly financed. Each refugee staying with us is subsidized monthly. There's a daily rate per refugee, and from that we basically cover what we want. We try to ensure the women here don't pay for housing, laundry, gas, electricity—nothing like that. We try to buy basic groceries like bread, pasta, onions, potatoes. They buy their own meat or things like laundry detergent. But we cover everything we can.

Did you fully shift to working with refugees, or is that just one part of your activities? For the first two years—yes, entirely. We were only a refugee center, because in the first months we had more people than we had beds. We added mattresses, had two people to a bed, and so on. So yes, for the first two years, it was solely a refugee center. For the past year, we've been trying to return to our original operations. Right now, only one wing is dedicated to Ukrainian refugees. The rest is again used for groups and individual tourists.

What kind of help do you offer refugees daily? Could you describe what it looked like at the beginning and what it looks like now?

In the beginning, it was full care. I personally went out and used my own money to buy underwear and bras at 'Pepco' *(Dollar store kind of shop)* for the women. It was heartbreaking in those first days, so we acted immediately. We handled all the documents PESEL numbers, international passports, medical appointments. We even had an elderly man with advanced cancer left with us by his family. So, we activated the whole medical network to care for him. We cleaned rooms, prepared everything for them, handled constant turnover. It was full service. They came, lived here, didn't have to pay a thing. They got a full support package and help from us with transportation, documents—everything. Now we're trying to limit it a bit, because the women are working, they're able to support themselves.

Do you also help them look for work?

Yes, from the very beginning. We constantly posted job offers, searched listings, helped with interviews—even tried to find unofficial work like house cleaning, gardening—anything to help them earn a bit for themselves. Now there are fewer people than before—at the start, it was over 80–90; now it's under 20.

How many of you work there?

There's me, our boss, our accountant, Karolina who runs the office, and two cleaning ladies. Keep in mind, we manage three facilities. The refugee center is just an extra task—none of us gets extra pay for it. It's more like a "bonus job."

Do you work with other organizations that help them? Like Caritas, Red Cross, etc.? Yes, some organizations are still active, mostly Polish-Ukrainian ones, often run by Ukrainians. They come by from time to time and offer financial support. Sometimes it's something small—like helping a new woman get a passport if she can't afford it. Others help with medications, things like that. So yes, there's still some support.

Do some of the refugees help others? Or is it mostly outside help?

Mostly help comes from Ukrainians who were already here. Those foundations existed before the war and now have projects aimed at supporting newcomers. There's a lot of psychological support available—many foundations offer it. But not everyone wants it.

You mentioned helping them find work and prepare for interviews. What challenges do they face in the job market here?

The biggest challenge is the language. Some people are eager to learn Polish and they do well—they work as cashiers, in sales, restaurants—jobs where you need to communicate. But others openly say they don't want to learn the language. So they end up in manual labor processing plants, tile manufacturing companies, heavy jobs. Language is the biggest barrier. Also, many women are educated—some have university degrees. But Ukrainian diplomas often aren't recognized in Poland. Getting them translated and certified costs thousands. So a woman who was a great accountant in Ukraine ends up doing cleaning jobs here.

Are local employers open to hiring Ukrainians?

Definitely. Especially because our women have proven themselves. Not all, of course—but many work very hard. Sometimes they work harder than Polish workers and are more "profitable," sadly—but it's true. There were cases where Ukrainian women were kept on staff while Polish workers were let go.

You mentioned mostly women—do you have any men staying?

At the beginning, yes—we had some young men, 16–17 years old. They've mostly left—Germany, France, the Netherlands. We had an elderly man with advanced cancer. Now we have one retired man who works at a sawmill and is usually away. Aside from one 8-year-old boy, that's our only male resident. The rest are mothers with children and older women.

Do these people express whether they feel welcome or excluded?

Yes, often. They're grateful—grateful that Poles help them, that we help them, that they can count on support. But there are tough moments. Kids come back from school crying because someone called them names. During summer activities, I've personally had to scold Polish kids for insulting Ukrainian children. Even adults sometimes come by and say things like "Are those Ukrainians still here?" It's hard to hear.

You mentioned some refugees moved on—do you know where or why?

Yes, one moment that caused people to leave was when the law changed and they were told they'd have to start paying for housing. Several women went to Germany. They're working there but sometimes call us in tears, wanting to come back. Others returned to Ukraine, but after heavy bombardments, sleepless nights in cellars, they came back. Some just want better lives for their kids. Living in a shared room with 8–9 people is tough. At one point, three families shared one room. It caused constant conflicts. Young guys left for work abroad better pay, better living conditions. Some wanted independence from their moms.

In your opinion, what kind of support do Ukrainian refugees in Poland need most right now?

At this moment? It's hard to say. I think they already get decent support. My own sister raised three kids alone when there was no child benefit program. These women get 800+, other subsidies, open access to the job market. As for emotional and psychological support there are

programs. But many don't want to use them. They live differently. They don't go out much. Even when they have time and free places to visit, they'd rather stay in, smoke cigarettes. Maybe it's depression, or maybe just a different culture. They miss extended families. In Ukraine, grandma, grandpa, aunties all helped with kids. Here, they're alone.

Do Ukrainian families form relationships with Polish families? Or do they stay among themselves?

Mostly among themselves. We're one center, but there's another nearby, and women from both centers visit each other. But outside of that, they don't have many Polish friends. The children, though—that's a different story. Those who started school here in first or second grade now speak Polish fluently—sometimes better than Ukrainian. They fit in well. But the adults mostly stick to their own group. Our elderly ladies live in their own little world, and I think they like it that way. They feel safe. It's like a small homeland and family for them.

So there's a generational difference?

Definitely.

How would you define hospitality?

Hospitality is letting someone into your life. In the case of Ukrainian refugees, for me it meant my life changed completely. Helping them became my priority. I didn't care how many hours I worked or how much time I spent helping, driving them, arranging things. Hospitality, to me, is opening your world to someone else.

You mentioned that the help for refugees started with your initiative, and then you began working with local authorities. What were the most important laws or government or local initiatives that helped you? Or maybe ones that limited your help or set boundaries for it?
At the start, when we contacted the mayor saying we were ready to take people in, they had to apply to higher authorities to recognize us as a refugee center. Everything in the beginning was messy—really, all the initial aid was just interpersonal, informal. For the first few days, we didn't even have a guarantee that someone would reimburse us or pay for the refugees' stay. But it felt more important to help first and figure out the rest later. So the municipality had to handle the legal setup, register us where necessary so we'd be an official refugee center. We fall under the

county level, so we became one of the county's refugee centers. And then all the aid legislation for Ukraine started to apply—defining who we could take in, for example. Anyone staying had to have a PESEL number and UKR status. If they didn't, we couldn't offer free housing. Later, there were more changes—like now, 800+ child benefits are only given if children are enrolled in Polish schools. It's a kind of barrier, but I think it's a good one. If they want to live here, it makes sense for the kids to go to school and learn how to function here.

Do you know of any other tourism-related businesses—hotels, restaurants, transport companies—that got involved in helping refugees?

Definitely restaurants. In Lubin and Wrocław, it was widely publicized that they were helping. But that was mainly during the first year of the war—everything was working differently then. Everyone was kind of enchanted by this energy to help. Here, too, all local businesses offered some kind of aid. Big stores, like I said—like a shoe store that delivered atrailer full of shoes. Or the Zagłębie football club visiting the kids—players coming to meet them. One of the kids even thought it was Lewandowski. That kind of thing brought little sparks of hope. Not always financial aid—sometimes it was about offering a sense of normalcy. Like sponsoring a bus so we could take them to the lake on a Sunday. Bread from the bakery was half-price, for them.

And has that changed over time? Is there less support now?

Yes. Everything has changed. Now there's very little help. Just a few individuals—like a lady who, although not wealthy, used to bring hygiene products every month for two years. She still does it, just less frequently now, maybe only for the elderly ladies.

Given your experience working with tourists and the services you now provide to refugees, what differences do you see in your approach? Do you treat refugees as guests, or is their status different?

Their status is definitely different. With refugees, I'm emotionally involved—especially with those who've been with us since the beginning. Now I try not to get as emotionally invested. I have to protect myself, because it costs me a lot emotionally, and I have to remember this is my job. It's an extra responsibility I took on. I've experienced a lot of hard things. We had to arrange for an alcoholic mother to have her children taken away. We had to find hospice care for a dying man. Right now, we have a very ill woman recently sent to us from Wrocław. At her first exam,

she was dehydrated, malnourished, and full of cancer. So no, I can't treat them like tourists. When tourists come, you smile, you're polite, you recommend places to visit, but you don't get into their personal stories. Here, you can't avoid it. You know all their illnesses, their situations, who they left behind, who they're grieving, who died. And yes, they can also frustrate you. Because sometimes they overstep—feel a bit too "at home" here. But this is still a center—we still have to maintain standards of hygiene and cleanliness, especially since we serve others from outside too.

And finally—what do you think caused people's attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees to change so much over the past few years? At the start of the war, there was a lot of help. Now, there's more support for reducing it.

I think over time, people saw that the way the aid was structured didn't promote independence. If you give someone money and free housing forever, they won't learn to be self-sufficient. It's like a child who will never move out if they can live with their parents for free. Here's an example: a refugee mother who doesn't pay for rent, water, electricity, gas, gives her kid an iPhone for their 8th birthday and brags about it on Facebook. Another man—who works under a contract, makes good money, lives here for free—complains when told he has to start paying something. He says, "But then I won't be able to save a thousand zloty every month!" My boss, who is extremely patient, asked him: "Do you think someone your age in Ścinawa can normally afford to save 1000 PLN a month?" There are truly needy people, yes—like our elderly women. They're sick, can't work, and get tiny pensions from Ukraine—maybe 300 PLN in Polish currency. They could use support—like even a second 300 PLN from us. But the cases of moms who took all the help— I remember our first Christmas, we organized gifts from several places, and the kids got presents five times over. Looking back, I think… our own kids don't get that much. We all got carried away. But now, realistically, it's time to stop. Time to set conditions: if you want to live here, you need to work. They can rent apartments in groups like some already do. So I think people's attitudes changed because they saw the refugees themselves weren't changing. Many still believe they're entitled and think it's our obligation to help—because they're poor and at war.

Okay? Great. Thank you very much.

Thank you very much.

9.7. Appendix G

Arrival in Białowieża – First Impressions

I arrived in Białowieża in the late afternoon. It has been an 8-hour ride. Many great views on the way. It is interesting how you can clearly notice when you enter Podlasie – suddenly you see Orthodox crosses, wooden houses, and the silence… It's quiet this time of year in general. It is still off-season after all. The town feels like it's resting, but there's tension under the surface. You can't miss the military presence: patrol cars going back and forth every few minutes, soldiers showing up more often than usual, a sign reading – "Military facility – no photos allowed" passed by on the road. At the same time, there are families riding bikes, tourists on the trail. Some foreigners asked me in English if I know where the nearest open store is. Not close for sure, it's Sunday – everyone is resting. It's a strange duality - this is still a tourist town, but one that feels tense and somehow surveilled.

I had dinner at a local restaurant — Fanaberia. The menu had slogans about welcome and heritage – "It's a place for all". Not for those stuck on the border, I though to myself. Everything felt cozy and curated. But no mention anywhere of the border, the pushbacks, the ongoing crisis. When I asked the waitress if tourism was affected by "everything happening lately," she politely smiled and said, "We prefer not to talk politics. Enjoy your time here"

No migrants or refugees spotted.

Guided Tour & Participant Observation

Took a morning walking tour in the national park with a local guide E. Some local participants, some tourists. Everyone with binoculars watching for birds on the trees. The tour was very polished: stories of tsars, primeval forests, local legends. Zero mention of migrants or the crisis. It felt intentional. Later, I interviewed E. We sat on a log on the border of the forest. She lit a cigarette. I think she was a bit nervous at first – maybe it's me or her life situation with the trial and all. When we started talking about the crisis, her tone changed. Passionate, angry, exhausted. It is clear that she is emotionally engaged in the whole situation. She definitely hates politics and politicians. All she wants is for the region to thrive and everyone else to let them live in peace. She recounted several instances of finding people in the forest — some barely alive. She said the worst part was

the silence. No help from the government. No communication. I felt honestly upset by the whole situation. I kept thinking about this conversation until the end of the day.

On the way back to the accommodation I stopped by in a local store. Overheard a conversation between the cashier and a local woman: *"The soldiers are driving like morons again. They almost crashed into me when I was taking my daughter to school in the morning. I am sick of it at this point"* – she said visibly resigned.

No refugees spotted.

Visit to Kruszyniany

Drove to Kruszyniany. Beautiful village, famous for its Tatar heritage. The mosque is a central attraction, and the guides lean heavily into the multicultural, tolerant narrative. My guide, **B.**, was friendly and proud - kept repeating: *"We are Polish Muslims. We love our country. We've always been peaceful."* I can't help but feel that it is a bit of self-censorship, but I can't ask him about it to not upset him.

One of the presidential candidates had a meeting nearby. Not many people arrived – seems like they are not interested in what he has to say. He answered a few questions for the media. I asked him for a short conversation after he was done. I was stressed but happy to see him. He gave me a lot of interesting information on how he would solve the crisis – totally critiquing both governments that had to deal with the situation. I left Kruszyniany with mixed feelings. It's a place that should embodies multiculturalism but also it seems like in their attempts to depoliticize themselves, they somehow take a stance anyway.

On the way back I stopped by the border wall. Got immediately stopped by the local border guards' patrol. They were very nice in general but cautious – it's their job after all. They gave a lot of insights on their job and daily lives. They seem to hate this situation like everyone else. No refugees spotted, again. It seems like the crisis is really gone.

Hajnówka – Forest, Frustration, and Fatigue

Met with K., another guide who had been involved in informal aid. She took me for a walk along the strict reserve of the national park where many crossings happened. It's a haunting space - beautiful, quiet, but marked by what she called *ghosts.* She saw a lot of things happening there.

It is interesting that there is a sign trying to deter soldiers from entering the area. Are they also not welcome here?

Debrief and Reflection

Final day. It's surreal. Touristic signs in one direction, border warnings in another. Soldiers walking by while birds chirp in the trees. This space is really unique.

My last note: Hospitality here is real but split. It's everywhere and nowhere at the same time. People care, but they are afraid or tired or silenced? That's what makes this space so complex. And so human.