

Karolina Koziura

COVID-19: Voices from the Polish Borderland

“The pressure of the state machine is nothing compared with the pressure of a convincing argument.” Although this quote comes from one of the most remarkable critiques of Communism, the *Captive Mind* written by Czesław Miłosz, one can also relate it to our global experiences of pandemic during the last couple of weeks. Isolated and frightened, we have observed how the pandemic changes the way politics and economy operate. The pandemic also exposed various forms of inequalities that underlie our society by hitting the most vulnerable groups of population. Across the globe, we also witnessed the almost unprecedented rise of state power manifested through a strict surveillance of citizens and imposed restrictions on mobility.

The internal discussions of the response of Polish government to the global pandemic has been dominated by the strict surveillance of citizens and restrictions on the usage of public spaces - including the most problematic and surprising ones, such as the ban entry to forests introduced on April 3.¹ People on quarantine were regularly visited by police officers and high tickets were given to those breaking physical distance rules.² Even my parents who live in the countryside were reprimanded by law enforcement for being outside despite keeping a social distance with their neighbors. Many also feared that the anxiety surrounding the pandemic will be used by Polish government and the Law and Justice, the ruling party, to further consolidate their power. Especially that with the ban on public gatherings people could not openly protest the

¹ <https://wyborcza.pl/7,162657,25853616,rpo-zakaz-wchodzenia-do-lasu-bez-podstawy-prawnej.html>, accessed May 15, 2020.

² <https://www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus/wprowadzamy-stan-epidemii-w-polsce>, accessed May 15, 2020.

strict anti-abortion law that the government tried to push through during the Covid-19 crisis as well as the planning of presidential elections (set initially on May 10) despite a virus lockdown.

Little has been said, however, about ways in which the current pandemic changed the lives of people inhabiting the most remote and peripheral parts of Poland. On the eve of the pandemic, one of the first government's actions was to close Polish borders to foreigners. The first confirmed cases of a positive result for COVID-19 were associated with people returning from Germany.³ Polish government advised that Polish citizens, their children, spouses and the holders of the so-called Polish Card should return to Poland as quickly as possible. Special charter planes, co-funded by government, brought Poles back home as a part of a rescue action #LOTdoDomu.⁴ Only during the first week of the pandemic more than six thousand Poles returned to Poland. The virus had accomplished what Law and Justice had long sought: to bring Poles back to Poland.⁵

Yet, it was much harder to reimagine borders on the local ground. In western borderlands, the place from where I come from and where my parents live, national borders (at least their physical aspects) ceased to exist a long time ago. Since 2007, following the 2004 EU enlargement, Polish Zgorzelec and German Görlitz; Polish Cieszyn and Czech Těšín as well as many other borderland towns and villages have become integrated fabrics where daily lives transgressed and challenged national borders. On the eve of the pandemic, many Poles inhabiting the center welcomed the Polish government's decision to reinstate the border checkpoints. The

³ <https://www.gov.pl/web/zdrowie/pierwszy-przypadek-koronawirusa-w-polsce>, accessed May 15, 2020.

⁴ <https://zdrowie.wprost.pl/koronawirus/10307847/lotdodomu-wiadomo-ilu-polakow-wrocilo-do-kraju.html>, accessed May 15, 2020.

⁵ <https://www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus/zamykamy-granice-przed-koronawirusem>, accessed May 15, 2020.

Ministry of Health envisaged border closures as the best way to stop the spread of the virus and protect citizens. Overnight, the western borders of Poland - the ones we all thought are long gone - were easily brought back and reaffirmed. In March, a month in which we should celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Schengen Agreement's implementation, borders returned across Europe. Once intertwined communities were again divided and separated. Temporary barricades, walls, railings, and barriers were set back to remind everyone about the existence of borders.

Only people in the borderlands reacted with disbelief and confusion. They had managed to imagine their lives without national borders. In the region where my parents live most of young people commute daily to nearby German and Czech towns where they work, German and Czech used to do their basic grocery shopping in Polish supermarkets, many visit doctors and hospitals on both sides of the border, students go to school on both sides of the border, and people simply take daily walks across rivers and boulevards that marked national borders in the past. The return of borders forced them to make quick decisions regarding the future of their jobs but also potential relocation (if not separation) of their families. Polish border guards, soldiers, and paramedics would check everyone hoping to cross the border, conduct a detailed interview, and - in most cases - deny the entry.

Not everyone agreed with this rapid interference in people's everyday lives and spatial practices. Across Western and Southern Polish borderlands, Poles would protest the closing of borders and demand the return of transborder activities. In March in Cieszyn/Těšín, a small banner "Tęsknię za Tobą Czechu/Stýská se mi po tobe, Cechu"/"I miss you Czech" that inhabitants of Cieszyn raised on Polish side of the city for their Czech neighbors manifested that people desire not only the return of their economic activities but also unique transnational

intimacy that they have cultivated for over a decade.⁶ During April protests in Zgorzelec/Görlitz, Słubice/Frankfurt an der Oder, Gubin/Guben transborder communities would exclaim “Wpuśćcie nas do pracy! Wpuśćcie nas do domu!”/Let us return work! Let us return home!” In Neu Rosow a child held a transparent: “Let my teacher in” while in Poland Rosówek a teacher held a sign “Let me in to my students.”⁷ Despite the fact that German border regions ceased the border regulations for transborder communities commuting to work, only on May 4 the Polish government ceased the 14 days quarantine for transborder workers. For Polish government, neither testing nor virus tracking were considered as the biggest success in preventing the spread of coronavirus but the closure of national borders and the establishment of sanitary border controls. Transborder workers needed to either resign from work or return to their families.⁸

The pandemic further exposed the institutional weakness of the European Union by reaffirming the presence of its internal borders. Regardless the open flow of capital, goods, and people, for governments national borders are still a very tangible source of power. In the context of growing anxiety and fear, the relative silence of European community regarding the closure of borders shows that for many national borders (and national states) are still considered the foundational units for imagining their communities. It is perhaps too early to assess how exactly this pandemic will contribute to a global rise of nationalism. Yet, the example of Polish western

⁶ <https://bielskobiala.wyborcza.pl/bielskobiala/7,88025,25807750,w-podzielonym-przez-koronawirusa-cieszynie-polacy-wywiesili.html>, accessed May 15, 2020.

⁷ <https://tvn24.pl/poznan/koronawirus-w-polsce-protesty-na-polsko-niemieckiej-granicy-4565864>, accessed May 15, 2020.

⁸ <https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,173952,25898992,mieszkancy-zgorzelca-i-cieszyna-maja-dosc-zamknietych-granic.html>, accessed May 15, 2020.

borderlands and transborder communication give a hope that the shared global experience and the hardening of borders by states might actually strengthen the cross-national solidarities.