In the past two years, the so-called "refugee crisis" ranked high on the European political agenda. To be more precise, the very surge and scope of maritime migration flows from the turbulent terrains in the Middle East profiled domestic and EU-level politics across the European Union member states. The mere geopolitical logic of the refugees' escape routes put a worrying spotlight on the Mediterranean Sea as a natural border at the EU's southern flank. No less worrying should appear, however, the scant presence of critical voices calling to assume the responsibility 'at the EU border regime' for over 10 000 refugees, who, reportedly, had died since 2014 in their failed attempts to cross the Sea. The human facets of the tragedy either vanish under the EU-led hegemonic discourse on rational-bureaucratic models of border management or – being ipso facto part of the same discursive process – are used for delegitimizing speech acts such as the demonization of the human traffickers. [1]

As a result, the policy issue as such is being incrementally dehumanized, with nasty consequences to be seen unfolding: It facilitates populist parties' attempts throughout Europe to paralyze the "rule of law-reflex" of liberal democrats, who came to form the mainstream of society. Should one succeed in coining the entirety of refugees and their movement as a sort of "fateful", "faceless mass", the tradition of inalienable human rights and enlightened individualism could be neglected much easier. Moreover, the dehumanization policy cover helps implement measures that indeed reinforce the so-called "Fortress Europe" [2], mainly because the human cost can easier be neglected by decision-makers and responsive society. This even more so proves to be plausible if one considers that the meaning of today's borders cannot be effortlessly understood from a privileged – aka "hypermobile" or "cosmopolitan" – perspective of the lucky holders of "powerful passports" [3].

Against this truly topical background, the book *Building Fortress Europe: The Polish-Ukrainian Frontier* by political anthropologist and current fellow at the University of Lancaster dr Karolina Szmagalska-Follis seeks to shed light on various ambiguities and blind spots pertaining to the process of primarily Polish-Ukrainian re-bordering, defined as "the talk and the practice of defining and enforcing the boundaries of the European Union" (p.12). In bringing scholarly attention to the Eastern dimension of the EU border regime, Szmagalska-Follis takes an illustrative case to study the process of re-bordering that took place at the Polish-Ukrainian frontier between 2003 and 2008. This borderland was subject to a steady ideational, territorial, and civilizational
re-bordering, following the century-old dynamic of oscillating empires, nation-states and peoples.

In her attempt to write an "ethnography of the border regime" (p.18), Szmagalska-Follis sets her analytical focus on the varying "forms of agency, belonging, and habitation" (p.7) that accompany the process of re-bordering on the level of individual experience, in a way resembling the idea of "letting the subaltern speak", as Gayatri C. Spivak, an authority in postcolonial theory, once put it. In this case, the role of the subaltern is played by Lena and Oksana, two young Ukrainians who travel to Poland on a regularly basis as itinerant workers, "who live in Ukraine and work in Poland, in low-paid jobs on the outskirts of the official economy" (p.56). While following their mobile-life trajectories, one of the main findings the author makes is that, despite being subject to time-space fractures mainly related to the process of re-bordering, Lena and Oksana are able to retain a certain degree of agency situated in regulative grey zones. For example, while waiting in the korydor (a metaphor used by the authors´ interlocutors for the mandatory 90 days out-of-Schengen period until being able to request a new Schengen visa) back in Ukraine, Lena would adjust in time (towards "a long-term anticipation of a better future", p.68) as well as in space (switching from the place of work to the place that she defined as home). Oksana, for that matter, would decide not to "enter" the korydor and to pretend having lost her passport instead – meaning that she would keep the document under her pillow and use for border-crossing purposes the specifically issued one-way pass called "the certificate of return to Ukraine".

Instead of stopping at this site of inquiry, the work distinguishes itself from the "traditional single-sited ethnography" (p.18) and in what follows takes up a more encompassing perspective: "To write the border is to attend to the specific places, agents, and practices whereby the sorting out is performed on a day-to-day basis. This includes but is not limited to the borderline itself" (p.18). With the research agenda framed this way, the subsequent book chapters address the practical matters of the border guards' daily work, including their strategies of surveillance, the classification mechanisms of the immigration agency in Warsaw, the EU-imposed capacity-building measures as well as the externalization of the border control measures to the adjacent countries.

Szmagalska-Follis finds out that the process of re-bordering the EU's Eastern frontier in the course of Poland's accession to the European Union – which meant the end of the visa-free travel regime to Poland for the inhabitants of the neighboring countries – manifests itself especially in a changing self-image of the people involved most intensively in this process, i.e. border guards. On the one hand, they act as submissive "agents of re-bordering" (p.92), not least because of the new status they found themselves in during the process – an empowered status that provided feasible opportunities for overcoming their Eastern-Europeaness inferiority complex. On the other hand, the process creates a new cleavage between the border guards' new sense of responsibility and the technology-based boundary management of the EU, which tends to downplay the human intuition – let alone the "banality of exclusion" (p.94), where previously unknown signifiers, such as "refugee", "migrant", "asylum seeker", are authoritatively charged with a pre-defined meaning, i.e. the meaning that the EU has already assigned to them in respective regulations.

The insights from Szmagalska-Follis' fieldwork at the next node of the border regime, the Aliens' Bureau (Poland's central immigration agency based in Warsaw), demonstrate a varying degree of flexibility, with which Polish residence permits are granted (or not) on the basis of what she aptly calls a "sorting machine" (p.130).
The latter one's “functioning” is considerably contextualized by the established discourse on asylum that fluctuated from being human rights-centered to incrementally becoming security-oriented, including (according to the Polish public) new forms of culturalisation, that serve to “rationalize the call for restrictive immigration policies” (p.136) – an idea that the book's author borrows from Verena Stolcke.

The last nexus deals with the way “specific modes of segregation and exclusion that are increasingly accomplished beyond boundaries and within buffer zones” (p.149). The part that deals with training projects aimed towards capacity building for border services is particularly instructive and demonstrates that the knowledge transfer happens in a way that leaves no room for any critical contextualization thus diminishing the role of the border management to an "apolitical and technical matter" (p.159), as the Polish organizer of the discussed training put it.

In principle, Szmagalska-Follis' work is firstly embedded in the tradition of the critical school, and builds on such concepts as "governmentality" (and "neoliberal governance"), "biopolitics", "hegemonic discourse". Secondly, it broadly draws on the main findings of the analysis of transnationality and citizenship. In this context, it is appreciable that the author's research methodology accounts for the shortcomings broadly associated with poststructuralist research and its distraction "from social and economic problems on the borders [and] from the communities and people" (p. 8). The intense fieldwork conducted by the book author, just as the series of background talks held and observations made, facilitate original and participative (to the extent possible in analysis) insights into the complex process of re-bordering.

It has to be admitted, however, that – even for this ethnographic piece where a dense web of context, or “intertext" (p.172), is to be expected – the book's text gets sometimes too literary, thus devoting unnecessary much space to rather less important details, which downplays the rigor of the writing.

Another point of critique can be raised with regard to the overall methodological approach. The informal "petty trade" on the Polish-Ukrainian borderland, as described in the first chapter on the basis of eyewitness accounts recorded by the author might be read as a disclosure of preliminary research as well as a confession to an inductive approach, rather a frequent choice in interpretivist accounts. In that context, it is a matter of academic taste whether the fact that some of the research interlocutors were found by pure coincidence (as acknowledged by the author herself) can be seen as a proof with regard to the requirements of intersubjective traceability, or whether it should be regarded as ill-founded. In any case, the fact that reflections on methods take up only three pages of space in the appendix and, apart from that, are scattered among the book, is in some way telling in that regard – even with respect to the experimental approach.

These critique points notwithstanding, the book under review proves, on the overall, to be strikingly topical (even though it was published four years ago) and relevant for the contemporary understanding of the interplay between the EU’s external border-management policy, the Europeanization of respective national policies within the EU, as well as the impact of these political endeavors on peoples' lives and the emergence, affirmation and contestation of borderland-related images/narratives within specific local and historical contexts.
Notably and rather unexpectedly, the book helps to re-allocate the responsibility for allegedly depoliticized border-management measures from the borderlands back to Brussels – a finding that could not be more topical and timely.

[1] This point gets clearer when comparing it to the glorification of the escape agents (*Fluchthelfer*) that helped citizens from the GDR to reach the territory of the FRG.

[2] Historically, the term "Fortress Europe" was used during WWII both by Nazi Germany (hinting at the need to fortify those parts of Europe that had brought under its control) as well as by the Allied Forces. Here, it is used as a metaphor for the EU border regime, encompassing its bureaucratic, legal, procedural as well as its local-materialist dimension. This understanding broadly follows the ascription used in the reviewed book, except one diverging nuance. The author of the book stresses the lack of intentionality visible throughout the development of the EU, and regards Fortress Europe as a "product of uneasy compromises, an evolving and contested machinery designed to meet the political, social, and cultural needs of the European body politic [sic!]" (p.24). Interestingly, the term is open to both negative as well as positive conscriptions, based on the attitude towards the immigration issue.


Citation: