

# January 2024

## Report from the Polish–Belarusian border

*I crossed the fence and the border guards were running, running, and I was running away from them. [...] I fell on the ground and my phone broke. I was alone and I got lost in the forest for 3 days, without food, without phone. I felt that I was going to die. I was alone.*

*Then I walked and I found a dirt road. [...] It was bad luck, a man came in a civilian car, not police or military. [...] He called two people from the border guard.*

*They came, took me and pushed me back to Belarus through the fence. [...] I was alone at night. I didn't have any food and phone. I ate from the trees, not to die from hunger. I walked a lot. Then, after 3 days I met a group of migrants.*

Statement of a man who experienced pushback in early January

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## Introduction

The following study contains first-hand data from people participating in the events described. We would like to thank all humanitarian organisations operating in the Polish-Belarusian border area and individuals working with them for providing us with reports of their interventions. Our sources include organisations, informal initiatives as well as individuals, often wishing to remain anonymous, so we do not mention them by name unless they have given us permission to do so. Special thanks are due to all those on the move who have chosen to share their own experiences with us.

Humanitarian workers and those working with them emphasise that the difficult context and ethics of their work often prevent them from obtaining more detailed information about the stories and situations of people on the move. During interventions, many are in such a poor psycho-physiological state that it is not possible to obtain more data without putting them at risk of retraumatization or making them feel that they owe humanitarian organisations any answers to their questions by virtue of receiving material or legal support from them.

The described interventions and support provided to persons on the move took place on the territory of the Podlaskie and Lubelskie Voivodeships. For persons in Belarus, information is provided on the legal situation and access to procedures for applying for international protection in Poland and Belarus.

We hope that this brief outline of the context will help you to better understand the current dynamics of events in the border region with Belarus. For additional questions and recommendations from individuals or organisations who might also be interested in receiving the reports, please contact [wearemonitoring@gmail.com](mailto:wearemonitoring@gmail.com).

### Definitions

At the end of the report you will find a list of terms and definitions we have adopted.



number of deceased

56

## Situation at the border

In January 2024, the typical low number of requests for assistance for the winter months continued, which, as in previous years, is related to severe weather conditions. For 13 days, the temperature in Białowieża did not exceed 0 °C, reaching as low as -24 °C. It rained or snowed in the Białowieża Forest for 18 of the 31 January days. At the end of January we observed an upward trend in water levels in rivers, including the Narewka River<sup>1</sup>, which is often crossed by people walking through the Białowieża Strict Reserve. The danger for people attempting to cross this river is the strong current, murky water that does not allow one

to determine the depth, extensive backwaters masquerading as oxbow lakes, which are death traps, and the risk of hypothermia due to getting wet.

From the accounts of people with whom we have been able to speak, it appears that there are still people in the strip between the Polish and Belarusian border barriers. We have also received further accounts of people who have been pushed back despite their declared desire to apply for protection in Poland. We write more about this in the chapter on pushbacks.

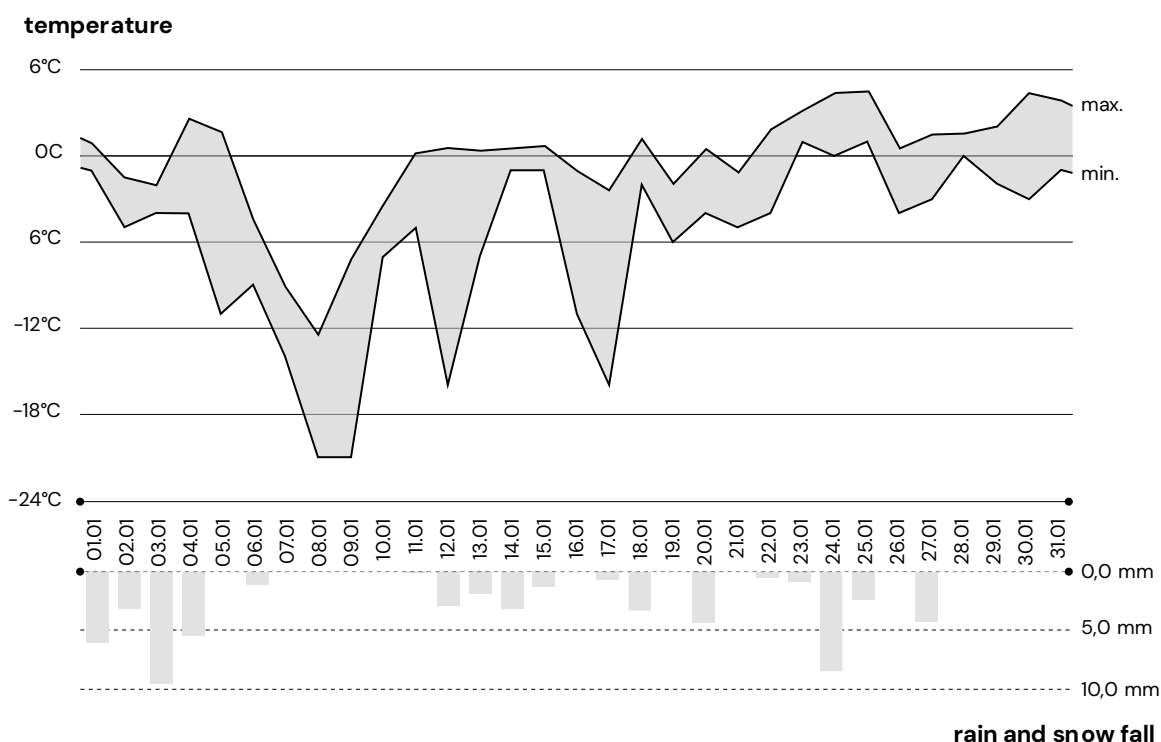


Fig. 1 Weather conditions in January 2024 according to Białowieża weather station

In January, one border fatality was reported.

On **January 6**, Belarusian media reported the death of a man from Yemen under the border fence on its eastern side<sup>2</sup>. The man is the 56th

known victim of the Polish–Belarusian border. Due to the subordination of the Belarusian media to authoritarian rule, we have no way of verifying this information.

<sup>1</sup> <https://hydro.imgw.pl/> [archival data from the Białowieża–Park site].

<sup>2</sup> <https://gpk.gov.by/news/gpk/157389/> [accessed on 5.02.2024].





Funeral of Abdullahi Abdirashid Mohamed. Photo: archives of the Egala Foundation

On January 8, Abdullahi Abdirashid Mohamed was buried in the Muslim cemetery in Bohoniki. The man was 25 years old, originally from Somalia. He died on the 22nd of October 2023 in a Border Guard car. The circumstances of the death and the long wait for the man's burial are still in doubt, and the manslaughter investigation announced back in October by

Jan Andrejczuk (head of the Hajnówka District Prosecutor's Office) has not yet started. According to the findings of journalist Agnieszka Rodowicz<sup>3</sup>, the file has been forwarded to the District Prosecutor's Office in Białystok to designate a unit to conduct the proceedings

### Quantitative summary January 2024

	groups	number of individuals	children (unaccompanied minors)	women (pregnant)
<b>Total requests</b>	17	60	17 (1)	12 (1)
<b>Requests from Sistiema</b>	3	36	14	8 (1)
<b>Aid provided</b>	3	6	-	-
<b>Reported Pushbacks</b>	7	24	3	4
<b>Number of interventions</b>			-	

<sup>3</sup><https://oko.press/nowa-wladza-stara-bieda-cicha-nadzieja-pogrzeb-abdullahima-w-bohonikach> [accessed on 6.02.2024].

## Wider context

On January 16, a spokesman for the District Prosecutor's Office in Warsaw, prosecutor Szymon Banna, informed the Polish Press Agency (PAP) that an investigation had been opened into the events in Usnarz Górny in 2021 and the overstepping of powers by the Border Guard. According to PAP, the investigation was initiated in accordance with the decision of the District Prosecutor's Office in Sokolka and is being conducted by the Military Division of the District Prosecutor's Office in Warsaw<sup>4</sup>.

On January 18, a verdict was delivered before the Voivodeship Administrative Court in Białystok on a complaint by a Syrian citizen against the action of stopping and turning back to the border line on the basis of the so-called border ordinance, which took place on 16 May 2023. The commander of the Border Guard post in Białowieża was formally responsible for the action. In the course of the proceedings, the Border Guard argued that the time limit for filing a complaint had been exceeded and that there was no evidence of the presence of the complainant foreigner in Belarus and on the territory of Poland and that the persons responsible for the turning back were soldiers of the Polish Army and not Border Guard officers. The court disagreed with this argument, upheld the complaint and found the action of the Border Guard to be ineffective. It held that the complaint was legitimate, on top of which it was filed in time. In addition, the court treated (in the same way as in previous judgements of

this type) the foreigner's account as sufficient grounds to conclude that the crossing of the border by the foreigner and the pushback had taken place, and the fact that the Border Guard does not register pushbacks and does not issue any documents to foreigners turned back under the regulation is of no significance here<sup>5</sup>.

Also published in January was the report *Concertina kills* by Let Them Live! coalition, prepared in cooperation with, among others, the Civic Network-Watchdog Poland. The document is devoted to the impact of the presence of razor wire entanglements on animals living on the border. It contains extensive photo documentation of the concertina itself (in many places the border is overgrown by vegetation and almost invisible to passing people and animals, thus posing an even greater threat) and of animals that have become stuck and died in the entanglements. The author demonstrates how local and governmental institutions, which have it in their duties to care for or monitor animal welfare, fail to do so in the case of victims entangled in concertina. The conclusions section calls for the wire to be dismantled and replaced with a different safety device that is less dangerous for animals, and until then, for a clear identification of the institutions that have a duty to provide real help to animals that get caught in it, as well as for a body to monitor the problem and make it compulsory to reliably report on these cases<sup>6</sup>. The report is available on the website of the *Let them Live!* coalition.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosc/prokuratura-prowadzi-sledztwo-w-sprawie-przekroczenia-uprawnien-przez-funkcjonariuszy-0> [accessed on 6.02.2024].

<sup>5</sup> Wyrok WSA w Białymstoku z dn. 18.01.2023 r., sygn. II SA/Bk 664/23, CBOSA.

<sup>6</sup> [https://niechzyja.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Concertina\\_raport.pdf](https://niechzyja.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Concertina_raport.pdf) [accessed on 6.02.2024].

## Demography, trends and humanitarian interventions

In January 2024 we recorded requests from 60 people travelling in 17 groups (total on both sides of the border). This is another month with a decrease from the previous month – in December we received 118 requests of people on the move in 19 groups, in November it was 301 people in 72 groups. The reduction in the number of crossings at the border is the poor weather conditions, in which those who choose to travel (or are forced to travel) are much more likely to suffer serious injury, hospitalisation or even death from hypothermia.

The decrease in crossings at the border, which has continued for consecutive weeks, is also noticeable in the statistics of the Border Guard regarding the number of "disclosures of foreigners who attempted to illegally cross the Polish-Belarusian border". The notifications from people on both sides of the border should not be treated as the same as the number of border crossings, but they give a general picture of trends. An article published by the Border Guard Headquarters on February 5th shows that from the beginning of 2024 until February 2nd: [...] 105 attempts to illegally

cross the Polish-Belarusian border were recorded on the section protected by the Podlaski Branch of the Border Guard<sup>7</sup>. A comparison of this number with data from November and December 2023 presents a similar trend – according to subsequent announcements published on the website of the Border Guard Headquarters, in December 2023 there were 471 disclosures of attempts to cross the border, while in November – 1385.

During the reporting period, women accounted for as much as 20% of the total number of reports – 12 out of 60 people reporting a need for support. In contrast, reports from minors accounted for more than 28% of all requests for assistance (1 of the 17 minors contacted in January was travelling unaccompanied by a legal guardian or carer). This is a significant increase in the proportion of people from vulnerable groups, unprecedented in the autumn/winter period. However, at this stage and with such a small overall number of reports, it is difficult to forecast whether this situation will continue or whether it is just a short-term trend.

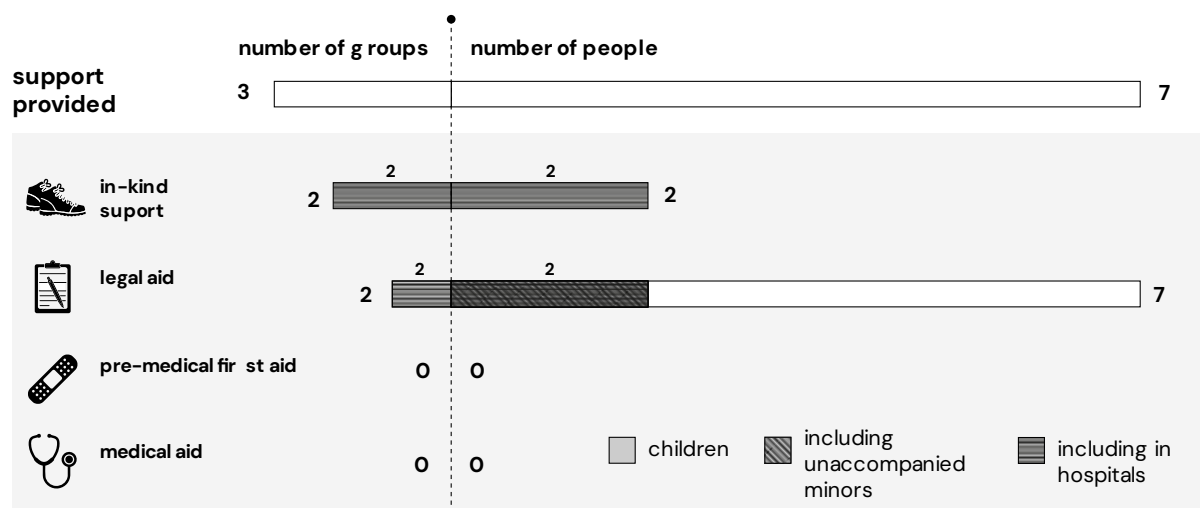


Fig. 2 Number of groups and individuals given a form of support in the reporting period.

<sup>7</sup><https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/12921.Weekend-na-polsko-bialoruskiej-granicy.html> [accessed on 7.02.2004].

Twelve of the 17 groups that requested humanitarian aid in January were located on the eastern side of the barrier when contact was made. Most of them were in contact from larger cities in Belarus, while three were located in the strip between the barrier located on Polish territory and the fortifications on the Belarusian side (the so-called *sistema*)<sup>8</sup>. These groups comprised a total of 36 people, including 14 children and 8 women, one of whom declared being pregnant at the time of contact. We emphasise that these figures are not complete and do not allow us to estimate, at least approximately, the actual number of people residing in the belt between the dams at any given time. We present them because they allow us to identify downward and upward trends and to note moments of increased migration activity in the Polish–Belarusian border area.

According to information provided to us by humanitarian organisations and those working with them, two patients were taken to hospital during the reported period. The two young men were brought by Border Guard officers. At the time of the encounter with the services, they were in the territory of Poland in a group of 5 persons. Neither of the men knew what had happened to the rest of the group. The reason for their hospitalisation was significant hypothermia and weakness, as well as high fever.

Both men received in-kind and legal support during their hospital stay, and both were placed in the Guarded Centre for Foreigners after leaving the hospital.

In January, we were also able to provide legal assistance to a family of five who were in Minsk at the time of contact.

In January, 27 out of a total of 60 requests were from people declaring Somalia as their country of origin. This is the first time since July 2023 that the majority of people reporting a humanitarian need are not from Middle Eastern countries. During this reporting period, 19 people from Syria, five from Iran, four from Eritrea, two from Iraq and one person each from Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Yemen also reported to us.

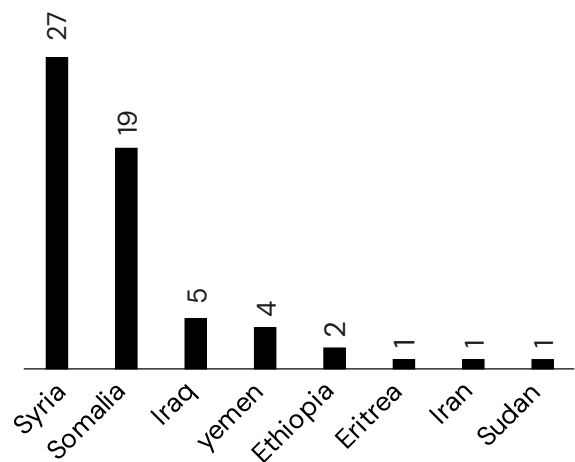


Fig. 3 Countries of origin of those requesting support.

<sup>8</sup> Arabic speakers refer to this area as *muharrama*. *Muharrama* in Arabic means forbidden. Sometimes the longer term *المنطقة المحرمة* – forbidden zone – is also used.



## Pushbacks and violence by services

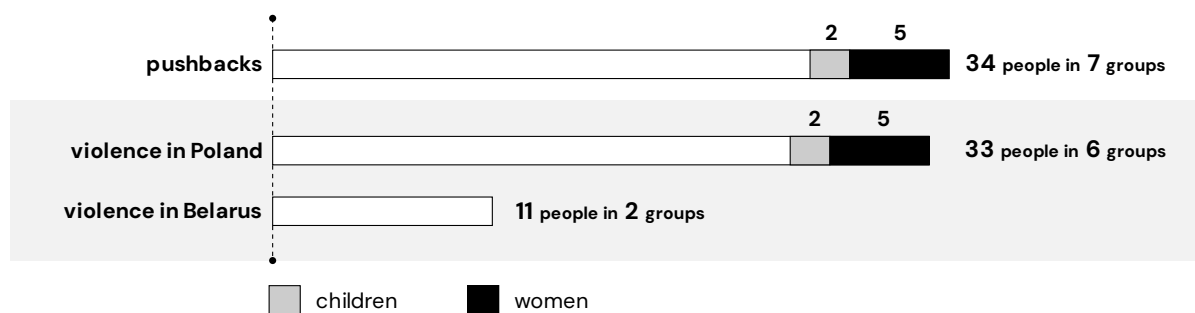
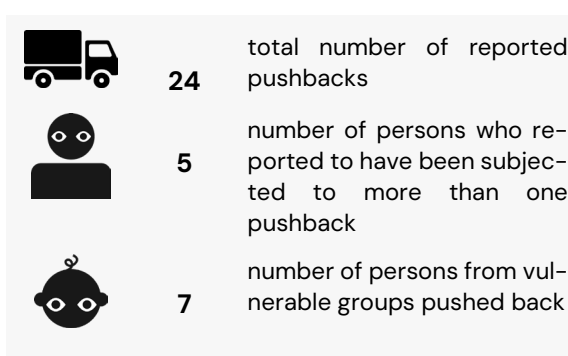


Fig. 4 Number of people who reported experience of deportation and violence by Polish and Belarusian services

The trend of fewer reported border crossings, related to the time of year and weather conditions, continued throughout January. The increased presence of uniformed services at the Polish border also appears to be of significance, as reported by persons on the move. The experience of pushbacks was reported by 23 individuals, including 3 minors and 4 women. This is fewer reports than in December.

Below are two accounts collected directly from people who decided to share their experience of violence by Polish uniformed services. Both of these individuals were pushed back to Belarus — the first in December 2023 and the second in January this year<sup>9</sup>. The respondents reported multiple experiences of pushbacks from Poland (one of them over several months).

The first testimony comes from a man who was detained in Poland in mid-December last year. According to his account, people he identified as Border Guard officers started beating members of his group with a metal baton shortly after his detention. The interviewee described the beating as very brutal. He also stressed that the uniformed and masked officers who



beat him and the other members of the group were said to ignore the fact that his travelling companion was showing that his leg was post-injured and continued the beating, even focusing on the part of his body that was post-operative:

*One of my friends had a problem with his cruciate ligament, which had been operated. When they found us, he took off his trousers in order to show it to the Polish and they hit him in that place with metal [sticks]<sup>10</sup>.*

The beating was to be accompanied by humiliation, which, according to the interviewee, was to continue while the group was being

<sup>9</sup> Information on experienced pushbacks often arrives late; when deciding whether to include them in the monthly reports, we always indicate whether they relate to the reported period.

<sup>10</sup> It was probably a simple service baton; to a person in pain and stress it is difficult to determine the material of the instrument of violence.

transported to the border line. When asked if he had expressed a request for asylum, the interlocutor replied that this was not an option. According to the interlocutor, the officers used English only to formulate threats towards him and the other members of his group. According to the interviewee, any attempt by him or any other member of his group to speak was immediately silenced by the officers and also beaten:

*They wouldn't ever give us a chance to speak. Every time they shouted at us and they beat us.*

When asked about his attempts to apply for asylum, the interviewee mentioned that all the members of his group were handcuffed with plastic tourniquets. As he reports, he tried to convey to the uniformed persons that the bands were put on too tightly, thus cutting off the blood supply to his colleague's hand, but this was ignored:

*When they caught my friend, they tied his hands so hard that his blood stop flowing. I tried to complain to the officers, I told them that his blood stopped flowing. They took batons and they started to hit his hands. I mean, I complained and the answer was beating him with a metal baton.*

When asked if he was transported to the facility, the interviewee replied in the negative. He stressed that neither during this pushback nor

during previous ones had he been taken to an outpost:

*Never, ever. Neither the first time, nor the second. They took us, after beating, after violence, they pushed us back to the forest.*

It is noteworthy that this contradicts the narrative of the Border Guard, who declare that first-time apprehended persons are subjected to identity verification procedures and are given orders to turn back to the border line<sup>11</sup>. The taunts and threats against the detainees did not stop even when they were bundled into a car and transported to the border fence. Before being forced to cross the border, members of his group were to have their property, including money and clothing, taken from them. It is noteworthy that on the day of the pushback, snow was lying in the locations described by the man.

*-How did the pushback look like? [...]*

*- When they brought us there, I mean... We didn't escape injustice. We spent an hour there and they were talking with each other. We don't know what they were talking about. And then they took our shoes and cut them, they took our socks and cut them. They didn't even cut all of the handcuffs<sup>12</sup>. They left them on the hands of one of my friends. They made us cross, they said thank you and went away.*

<sup>11</sup> 4.01.2024r. The then spokeswoman of the Border Guard Headquarters, Anna Michalska, in a statement for the oko.press portal, confirmed that not all foreigners receive an order to leave the territory of the Republic of Poland. This applies to two types of situations – when they are on the other side of the barrier and do not even have contact with the services, but also when it is their next attempt to cross the border at the same or another section, and they have already received such a decision before – source: <https://oko.press/ile-bylo-pushbackow-raport-strazy-granicznej-analiza> [accessed 7.02.2024].

<sup>12</sup> The person who recounts this situation at the beginning of the interview described the handcuffs as plastic. This probably refers to the zip ties used by the Border Guard.

In the account of the second person, which we quote below, the respondent was said to have been photographed against his will before the pushback:

*I was in a very bad state and I was afraid. They [...] took a photo of me and mocked me. I don't want them to publish the picture, as I was in a very bad condition.*

In both in-depth interviews we collected, people on the road were not given the opportunity to ask for international protection. In the first account, the officers did not allow the detainees to get a word in edgewise, while in the second account they directly refused to ask for an application.

*I asked for asylum in Poland and for that they don't push me back to Belarus. But unfortunately, they pushed me back. They told me in English: 'You cannot go to Germany, we will push you back to Belarus.' I asked for asylum in Poland, but they didn't... they refused.*

The second man we were able to speak to told of a brutal apprehension that took place a few days after he had crossed the border wall. During this time, he had been wandering in the forest without food, drinking water and without a working phone. This is how he recalls the moment before his apprehension:

*I had dirty and completely wet clothes, because there were heavy rains these days and I didn't have much to wear. There was blood coming out of my mouth and nose because I was exhausted and because of walking. I didn't have water. I saw water on the dirt road and I started to drink it, even though it wasn't clean.*

Out of concern for the respondent's safety, we have chosen not to disclose details from the very moment of the encounter of the persons he identified as border guards.

However, it is worth noting that he reported practices that could be considered inhumane treatment. The man also recounted being overpowered and beaten. As he recounted, he was intimidated and threatened with weapons:

*The person who took me was armed and held a baton in his hand. He wanted to intimidate me. I was scared and I cried from fear, because he held a gun and he was pointing it at me [...].*

Although our emergency line recorded fewer calls for help from the Polish territory (compared to the warmer months), the caller shared an observation about the situation at the borderland:

There were plenty of people, but most of them were caught near the border. They had their phones broken, they were beaten and they had pepper gas sprayed in their eyes.

## Consequences of push backs in the relations of people on the move

In January, we were able to speak to a person who received humanitarian assistance in Poland in November 2023. Since then, the man has experienced at least one pushback to Belarus, where he was eventually arrested and placed in detention in Russia, presumably due to a lack of residency rights in Belarus<sup>13</sup>. The man is awaiting deportation to his country of origin. He has limited access to a telephone for six hours a day. He reports suicidal thoughts. According to the man, the Russians are conscripting detainees en route to the Russian army and sending them to Ukraine. In a situation where any person agrees to be conscripted into the army, a uniformed man called a general is supposed to appear within 24 hours, who explains the conditions of recruitment into the Russian army and then releases the person from detention.

*I am in prison now. A month and a couple of days passed until now. [...] They want us to go to fight with them. We escaped war, just to go and fight with them. One of them [the detainees] told them before that he wants to go to the army. Not 24 hours passed and a general came to him. And explained him how to join.*

The interviewee provided us with video footage from Arabic-language social media showing Russians recruiting detainees on the road. According to these materials, Russian citizens-

hip and a \$2,400 monthly salary are promised for joining the army. According to the interviewee, some detainees are more likely to agree to join the army than to remain in detention due to their bitterness over their experienced pushbacks from Poland to Belarus, as well as fear of deportation to their country of origin.

This practice was also mentioned in the account by another person who tried to cross into Poland in January.

The man also recounted a situation in which he was the one who experienced a pushback from Poland. According to his words, he was told to sign documents indicating that he was waiving his right to apply for international protection in Poland. When he refused, representatives of the uniformed services were said to have taken him to the border and threatened that if he ever appeared in Poland again his passport would be destroyed:

*They interrogated me in Poland, why didn't they help me? I cooperated with them and I gave them everything they wanted. He tried to force me to sign a document, but I didn't sign it. Then, he exploded with anger and was about to hit me. I read in that document that I was informed about the international protection law and the asylum law on European territory and that I hadn't asked for protection and asylum.*

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<sup>13</sup> Such practices are also confirmed by Russian human rights defenders — e.g. lawyer Valentina Chupik. See: <https://www.dw.com/pl/rekrutacja-imigrant%C3%B3w-w-rosji-gro%C5%B4by-oszustwa-obietnice/a-66794366> [accessed 7.02.2024].

## Definitions

**Total requests** — Total number of reported groups/persons on the move, located in Poland, Belarus, Lithuania or Latvia. It does not take into account persons staying in other European countries during the reporting period, as the report aims to illustrate the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border and the related migration route.

- **Groups** — individuals travelling together at the time of reporting and/or humanitarian/legal/medical intervention. These persons may or may not be related by family or social ties
- **Number of Individuals** — individual members of groups

**Children** — all persons whose confirmed or declared age is 0-18 years

**Unaccompanied minors** — Persons under the age of 18 travelling without an adult legal guardian, and therefore also minors travelling with older siblings or other relatives who are not their guardians under the law of Poland.

**Requests from Sistiema** — reports of groups/persons staying in the strip of land between the border fortifications of Poland and Belarus, commonly referred to as the *sistema*.

**Muharrama** — a term used by Arabic-speaking people on the move for the strip of land located between the Polish border barrier and the fortifications on the Belarusian side. *Muharrama* in Arabic means 'forbidden'. People on the move also use the longer term المنطقة المحرمة "forbidden zone". In Polish, this area is commonly referred to as *Sistiema*.

**Aid provided** — total number of people reached by organisations and entities operating in Podlasie who agreed to share information with us (GG + Ocalenie, unaffiliated

residents and inhabitants of Podlasie, collectives, individuals, POPH)

- **Material aid** — support in the form of basic humanitarian aid packages – food, clothing, water, information
- **Legal aid** — support in procedures relating to the prevention of pushbacks and deportation and enabling the submission of an application for international protection.
- **Medical aid** — professional support provided by medically qualified persons.
- **Medical first aid** — support provided by people with basic rescue training, such as washing wounds or dressing trench foot.

**Reported pushbacks** — pushbacks reported to us during the reporting period by persons who experienced them directly or witnessed them directly.

**Reported violence Poland** — reported cases of violence experienced directly by persons on the road, the perpetrators of which, according to the victims' accounts, were members of the Polish uniformed services: Border Guard, Police, Polish Army, Territorial Defence Forces.

**Reported violence Belarus** — forms of violence directly experienced by persons on the road, the perpetrators of which, according to the victims' accounts, were people belonging to the Belarusian uniformed services.

**Number of interventions** — number of humanitarian interventions undertaken by field teams in response to a report of a need for assistance or a chance encounter of persons on the road in a border area.

**Number of deceased** — number of persons on the move who died between August 2021 and November 2023 on the Polish side of the Polish-Belarusian border and those cases from the Belarusian side of which we are aware. It



does not include all deaths in hospitals or car accidents, linked to the migration route. The

data will be verified and supplemented. We expect that there may be data on more deaths from the period considered here as well.

**Number of missing** – persons whose disappearance has been reported by next of kin or companions on the road, with a declared lack of contact of at least two days.

**Injuries from the wall** – injuries which, according to the declaration of persons on the road, occurred while crossing the security at the Polish–Belarusian border.

**Persons from vulnerable groups** – vulnerable persons on the following grounds:

Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- minors</li><li>- unaccompanied minors</li><li>- persons over 45 years of age</li><li>- senior citizens aged 60 and over</li></ul>
Medical reasons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- pregnancy</li><li>- chronic illness</li><li>- disability</li></ul>
Situational considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- victims of sexual violence or subjected to</li><li>- victims of gender-based violence</li></ul>
Protection Needs*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- victims of torture</li><li>- victims of human trafficking</li></ul>

\* virtually impossible to identify at this stage