



February 2024

Report from the Polish–Belarusian border

They search all my body, and they found I had nothing. Then they said "wear all your clothes and go away."

Statement of a woman who experienced pushback in 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.

Definitions

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



number of deceased

56

Situation on the border

In February 2024, on the Polish–Belarusian border, a significant and long-awaited improvement in weather conditions was recorded, compared to previous months. According to the weather station in Białowieża, for 23 days, the air temperature did not drop below 0°C, reaching even 13°C towards the end of the

month. Similar to previous years (2022–2023), with the end of winter and warming, the number of border crossings between Poland and Belarus increased, along with the number of reported incidents on both sides of the barrier noted by organisations operating in the region.

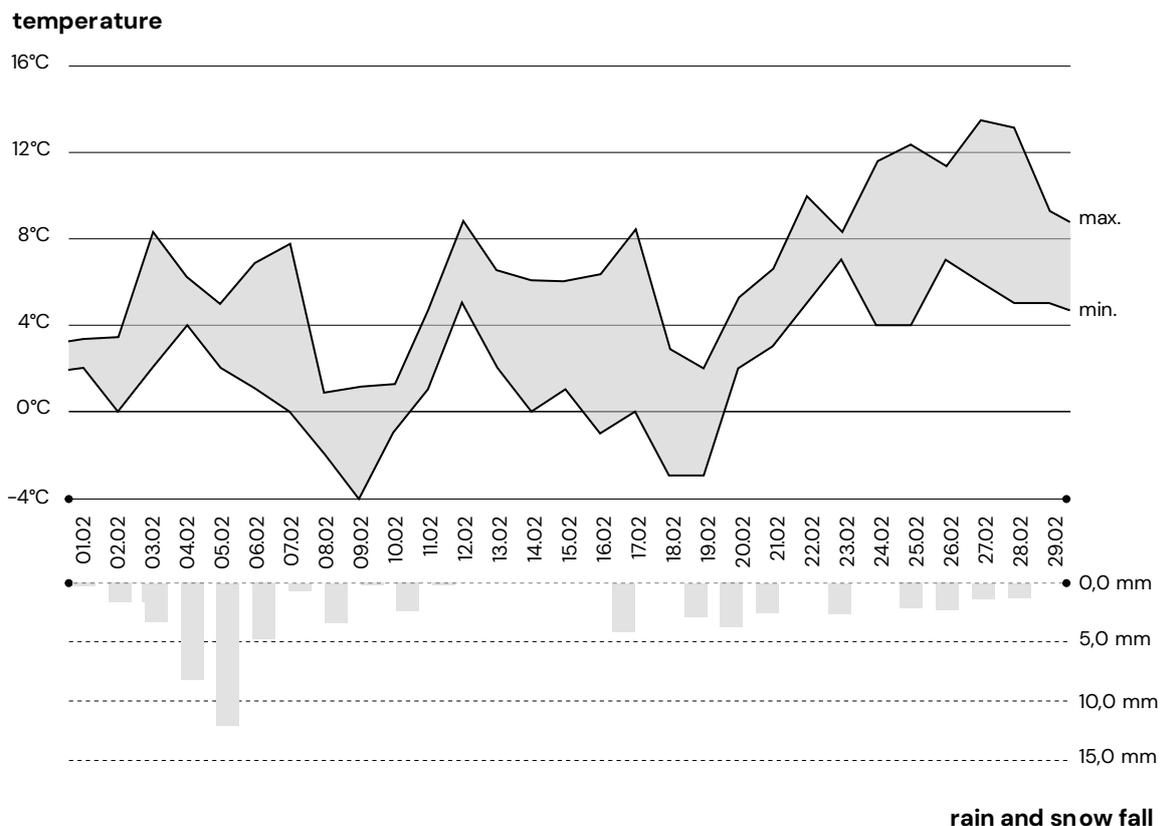


Fig. 1 Daily maximum/minimum temperature in degrees Celsius in Białowieża in February 2024

However, it should be borne in mind that early spring's strong temperature fluctuations are a major threat to the health, and in extreme cases life, of people on the move who, often encouraged by a temporary improvement in the weather for a few days, decide to attempt the

journey. In the event of failure and pushback, this can result in a prolonged several-day stay in the forest, which puts them at serious risk of cold-related medical problems and limited access to clean, potable water and food.

On 26 February, the Border Guard department signed contracts for the construction of electronic barriers for the state border with Belarus on the Bug, Svisloch and Istoczanka rivers. The contractors have 12 and 10 months respectively to complete the task; the total cost of both investments will be over PLN 364 million¹. Both investments are the next stage in the expansion of the continuously expanding border dam. The 5.5-metre-high, 187-kilometre-long fence, topped with razor wire, built in 2022 and supported by a 206-kilometre-long² electronic dam, was reinforced with a third line of razor wire (so-called concertina³) in autumn 2023. In 2024, further works will concern sections of the border running on rivers. It is worth adding both investments are co-financed by the European Union: Integrated Border Management Fund – Border Management and Visa Instrument (2021–2027)⁴.

The trial of Ieva Raubisko, who a year ago supported a group of refugees from Syria, began **on 28 February**. The Latvian migration activist summoned an ambulance and the border services to the Syrians as well as appealed to the European Court of Human Rights, in and on their behalf, for a decision that would prohibit their removal from Latvian territory to Belarus and secure (for the time indicated by the ECHR) the group's stay within the European Union⁵. Wanting to make sure that the Syrians would not once again face a brutal pushback, Ieva entered the Latvian state of emergency zone (similar to the one existing in Poland in 2021 and 2022). There she was detained by the services. She heard charges of organising illegal border crossing. She faces two years in prison.

¹ K. Szwed, Electronic barrier on border rivers with Belarus, 2024.

<https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/12997,Zapora-elektroniczna-na-rzekach-granicznych-z-Bialorusia.html> [dostęp: 15.03.2024]

² The last section of the electronic barrier was commissioned on 15.06.2023.

³ M. Chołodowski, Crisis on the Polish–Belarusian border. Border guards: Fence is not enough, razor wire necessary, 2023. <https://bialystok.wyborcza.pl/bialystok/7,35241,30349763,kryzys-na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej-pogranicznicy-plot.html> [accessed 17.03.2024].

⁴ Department of European Funds of the Ministry of Interior and Administration, Financial Support Facility for Border Management and Visa Policy under the Integrated Border Management Fund 2021–2027, 2021. <https://www.gov.pl/web/dfe-mswia/program-instrumentu-wsparcia-finansowego-na-rzecz-zaradzania-granicami-i-polityki-wizowej-w-ramach-funduszu-zintegrowanego-zaradzania-granicami-2021-2027> [accessed 17.03.2024].

⁵ Front Line Defenders (FLD), Refugee rights defender charged for assisting Syrian asylum seekers at the Latvia–Belarus border, 2024. <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/pl/node/8281#case-update-id-48480> [accessed: 17.03.2024]



Photo: archives of the Egala Foundation

Demography, trends, and humanitarian interventions

	groups	number of individuals	children (unaccompanied minors)	women (pregnant)
Total requests	26	128	2 (1)	17 (1)
Requests from Sistiema	4	53	14	12
Aid provided	4	13	1 (1)	2 (1)
Reported Pushbacks	8	36	2	7
Number of interventions			4	

In February 2024, requests were recorded from 128 people travelling in 26 groups, located on both sides of the border barrier at the time of contact. This compares with 82 requests recorded in the same period in 2023 and 254 in 2022. This is the first month since October last

year in which humanitarian organisations working on the border recorded an increase in the number of requests for support over the previous month's figures. In January, there were reports of 60 people travelling in 17 groups, more than double the number.

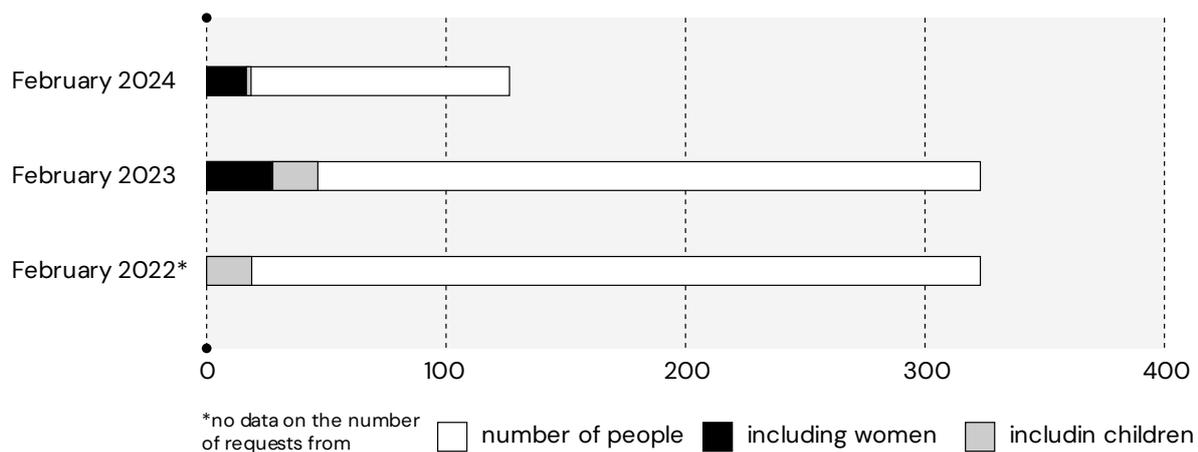


Fig. 2 Comparison of the number of requests in February 2024, 2023 and 2022.

The increase in traffic on the Polish–Belarusian border is also noticeable in the statistics of the Border Guard on the number of attempts made by persons on the move to 'illegally cross the Polish–Belarusian border'. Data published by the Border Guard Headquarters on 5 February shows that from the beginning of 2024 until 4 February: [...] 105 attempts to illegally cross the Polish–Belarusian border⁶ were recorded on the section protected by the Podlachia Unit of the Border Guard. On the other hand, in the publication of 1 March, the following sentence appears: In February 2024, officers from the Podlachia Unit of the Border Guard recorded 356 attempts to illegally cross the Polish–Belarusian border⁷, which is a number almost 2.5 times higher⁸.

During the reporting period, women accounted for more than 13% of the total number of all persons – there were 17 out of 128, one of whom declared being pregnant. There were also re-

ports of two minors, one of whom was traveling unaccompanied by a legal guardian or carer.

In February, the largest number, 44 out of 128, declared Syria as their country of origin. However, the share of applications from people of the Horn of Africa countries, already evident in January, continues. Requests for support from 35 people from Somalia and 17 people from Eritrea were recorded during this reporting period, a total that exceeds the number of reports from people from the Middle East and is a return to the trend recorded by humanitarian organisations in the summer of 2023. There were also 10 people from Cuba, five from India and the Democratic Republic of Congo, four from Sudan, two from Yemen and Algeria, and one person each from Afghanistan, Burundi and Morocco during this reporting period. The country of origin of one of the reported persons could not be established.

⁶ E. Szczepańska, Weekend at the Polish–Belarusian border, 2024. <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/12921,Weekend-na-polsko-bialoruskiej-granicy.html> [accessed 15.03.2024].

⁷ K. Szwed, Illegally to Poland, 2024. <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/13019,Nielegalnie-do-Polski.html> [accessed: 15.03.2024]

⁸ We provide SG statistics only to illustrate the trend, while pointing out that they do not refer to individuals but to situations and that they present data in a selective manner, omitting, for example, the number of people who managed to cross the border barrier.

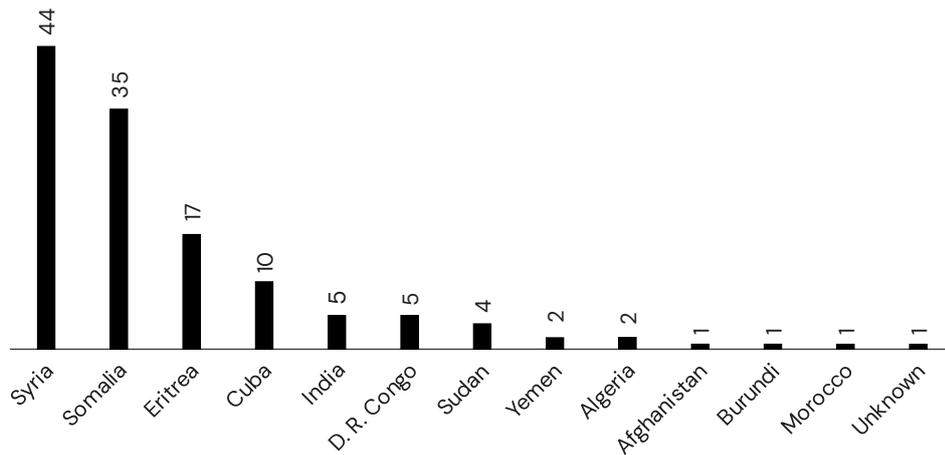


Fig. 3 Countries of origin of those requesting support.

Eight of the 26 groups that requested humanitarian support in the border area in February were located on the eastern side of the barrier when contact was made. Half of them were making contact from larger cities in Belarus, while the other half were located in the strip between the barrier located on Polish territory and the fortifications on the Belarusian side (the so-called *sistiema/muharrama*)⁹. These groups consisted of a total of 53 people, including 10 women. The registered groups were relatively large, ranging from 16 to 10 persons.

The above data was collected from operational data of organisations active in the border area, which do not have full access to or knowledge of all persons residing in the *muharrama*. For this reason, they do not allow us to estimate, even approximately, the actual number of persons residing there during a given period. 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.

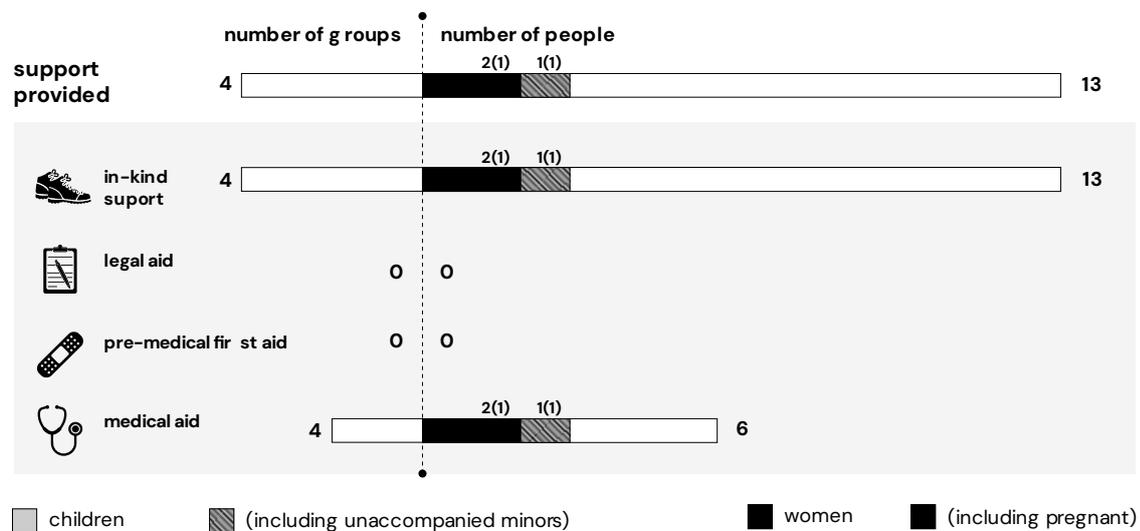


Fig. 4 Number of groups and individuals given a form of support during the reporting period.

⁹ Muharrama in Arabic means 'forbidden'. Arabic-speakers on the move also use the longer term المنطقة المحرمة 'forbidden zone'.



Photo: archives of the Egala Foundation

In February 2024, humanitarian organisations and those working with them participated in 4 successful field interventions, thus providing in-kind support to 13 persons in 4 groups. These included one unaccompanied minor and two women, one of whom declared being pregnant. All persons provided with in-kind support in February were Syrian nationals or citizens. One group, in an interview during the field intervention, declared being in the forest, alternating on both sides of the border fence, for 20 days, the others 10, 5 and 4 days respectively.

6 people – 4 men and 2 women travelling in 2 groups¹⁰ – were given medical assistance, thanks to the involvement of MSF¹¹ team medics, for health problems typical of the winter period.

They were all severely hypothermic and had completely soaked clothes, the oldest man had a temperature of 31°C and the girls 33°C and 32°C¹². Both girls and the youngest boy had strong trench feet, the rest of the men also, but to a lesser extent.

Excerpt from an account of the intervention, February 2024.

¹⁰ Based on operational data on the activities of MSF OCB border teams in Poland in 2023.

¹¹ Medics without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières – MSF).

¹² By definition, Hypothermia is a life-threatening condition in which the body temperature drops to 35°C or lower. – Dr J. Jedrys, Hypothermia and frostbite, 2017. https://www.mp.pl/pacjent/pierwsza_pomoc/165213,hipotermia-i-odmrozenia [accessed 20.03.2024].

Pushbacks and violence by services

They beat in Poland, they beat in Belarus, they beat in Syria.

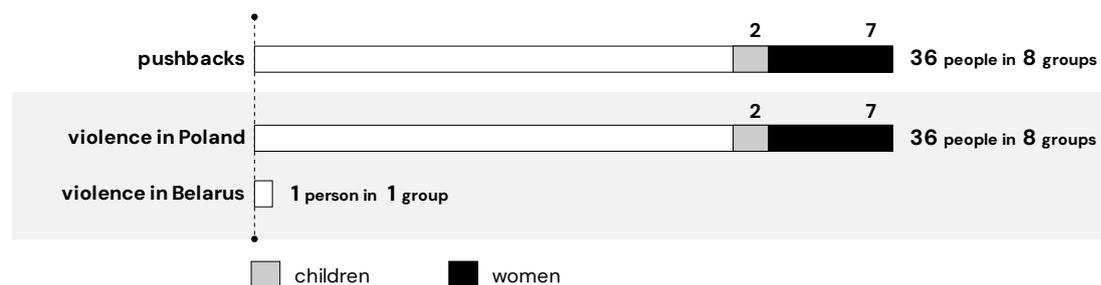


Fig. 5 Number of people who reported the experience of pushbacks and violence by Polish and Belarusian services.

In February, in line with the increased number of crossings, the number of pushbacks reported by humanitarian organisations increased¹³. Reports of experienced pushbacks came from a total of **36 people**, who experienced a total of **51 pushbacks**. Among them were 2 minors and 7 women. 7 people reported having experienced more than one pushback¹⁴.

Data on the number of 'pushbacks to the state border line' was also provided by the Border Guard in response to an enquiry from the Border Group For the period 13.12.2023–04.03.2024 there were said to be **325 pushbacks**¹⁵.

Six of the seven people who reported experiencing multiple push backs were travelling in one group. They included two young women and one unaccompanied minor. The group was pushed back from Poland on three occasions. During the humanitarian intervention, the men in the group reported being beaten by Polish services, their phones destroyed. The humanitarian aid workers at the meeting noticed that one of the men, 53 years old, had

	51	total number of reported pushbacks
	7	number of persons who reported to have been subjected to more than one pushback
	9	number of persons from vulnerable groups pushed back

a large swelling on his forehead, supposedly caused by a beating by a woman officer. A minor, 17 years old, showed the humanitarian workers a broken mobile phone and complained of chest pain. According to the group's account, the women did not experience physical violence; however, one of them had her phone destroyed. According to the accounts of the female workers involved in the field intervention, all of the people were very cold and their clothes were completely soaked.

The seventh person who experienced multiple pushbacks was a man who spent 10 days in the forest. During a field intervention, he reported that before one of the pushbacks, the officers put him on the ground and beat him with their fists. He showed teeth that had been broken during one of the beatings. The

¹³ We write more about this in the subsection: "situation at the border".

¹⁴ Those who reported multiple disposals experienced at least one pushback in February, but some of the previous disposals occurred before the reported period.

¹⁵ The information refers to the number of pushback situations, not the number of pushbacks.

man was also alleged to have experienced verbal violence from the officers, who, he says, called him terrorists. As he stated: *"They beat in Poland, they beat in Belarus, they beat in Syria."*

The following is a first-hand account from a person who decided to share her experience of violence by Polish officers with us in February. Idil¹⁶ was pushed back to Belarus in early January 2024¹⁷.

She attempted to cross the border barrier in a relatively large group that included people from Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia and the Middle East, among others, all in the age range of about 18–22. Those who managed to cross to the western side of the barrier dispersed to avoid being caught. Idil, she says, wandered alone in the forest for days¹⁸. She was cold, some days it rained, and sometimes it snowed. After a few days, she spotted a car passing close to her, which she described as blue and belonging to the Border Police¹⁹, and started running away. According to Idil, the vehicle had arrived because she had been spotted by a drone camera monitoring the border forests. According to the woman's account, officers got out of the car and started chasing her and after catching her, one of them beat her with a baton while asking her questions in English.

So they followed me, and asked me: "why are you running away?" and he was holding a stick or something. He beat my back with the stick.

Idil remembered that there were three officers in total. They were all dressed alike and masked.

So the guys, the tall guys who took me out of the [Polish, annot. WAM] territory, they were wearing military dress. The green one with the military [inaudible] normally wears. And they were also matching with their mask, it was the same colour, all of them.

The officers had to ask in English what she was holding in her hand. Idil, who says that picking up mobile phones is standard practice for Polish services, replied that it was a non-functioning phone.

That's a normal thing, that they will take phones from people. So they ask me: "what are you holding? do you have a phone?" I said yes, and then I added: "my phone is not working", but still they took my phone, and broke it in front of me. Then, they asked me: "what are you doing here?" and I said: "I came here to look for a life. [...] they asked me: "why did you come to our country the illegal way?" and I told them: "I came here so that I can have a good life, and I want to stay here" and then they asked: "why did you leave your country?" and I said: "'I left my country because there is war." When I thought, the conversation was going well.. but they did not respect me. So they still

¹⁶ Name changed.

¹⁷ Information on experienced pushbacks often arrives late; when deciding whether to include them in the monthly reports, we always indicate whether they happened during the reported period.

¹⁸ Due to the difficult conditions and high stress as well as exhaustion, the woman was not able to state precisely how much time had passed between crossing the wall and meeting the Polish services.

¹⁹ It has not been possible to establish whether the car actually belonged to a border guard.

opened the gate and made me go, despite me saying: "I want life here".

Idil reports that despite the absence of a female officer on site, she was searched by the guards, who were additionally said to be impatient and aggressive, to the extent that one of them ripped a jumper on her. Her powerbank, water and food were also taken from her. The woman, showing a great deal of stress, twice stressed that a man was searching her.

When I was being searched, they were being aggressive. When they told me to remove my jacket in order to search me, they were insulting me: "why are you coming here, you are bringing us problems, why don't you just stay where you are from". They were all angry all the time, and when I was trying to open my cardigan, they couldn't wait for me to open, so they just reap it quickly. Not to help, but they were aggressive in the process. And then they open it. But no bodily harm they did to me, just that they were being aggressive in the process. [...] The person who did the body search was a man. A man.

The search was to be very thorough. When the officer finished, Idil was told to get dressed and leave.

They searched all over my body, and they found I had nothing. Then they said "wear all your clothes and go away".

Idil was taken to the car and driven to the border barrier. The drive was to last a very long time, long enough for Idlib to feel that the vehicle had left the border area. She hoped that this meant she was being taken to one of the detention centres for foreigners.

I was very happy and I thought they were taking me back to the centre because the route we took was long. But then I realised I was back at the border.

When the car arrived and the officers opened the gate in the border barrier the woman did not want to return to Belarus. She grabbed onto the spans of the barrier and refused to let go. The guards forcibly, pushing the woman and using pepper spray on her, made her loosen her grip and, succumbing to their force, she fell.

When I was at the gate, I held on to the gate. I didn't want to move. So they turn around and said: "why are you still staring at us?" They pushed me hard, and before pushing hard, they sprayed me with pepper spray, and then they pushed me by force. So I fell down.

On the Belarusian side, Idil met another person who was pushed back, and the services there, who asked her questions about why she was not making another attempt to reach Poland.

I met somebody who was facing the same situation as me, she was [also, annot. WAM] thrown from the Polish border, and the Belarus police guard, took them somewhere else, where they spent three days without water, without anything. [...] When they caught me, they asked us: "Why did you come back? why don't you go to the Polish section?", and then they do not beat us, but this is what they asked us. And then I said that the Polish guard didn't want us, so they threw us back. So because of that, the Belarus guards got mad and took me and my friend somewhere else, where they were lost for three days.

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

* virtually impossible to identify at this stage