

## **WE ARE MONITORING**

**Update PL-BY**

**27.07-09.08.2023**

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).



*17-year old girl after being pushed back to Belarus. Photo: Grupa Granica Archive*

## Quantitative Summary 27.07–02.08.2023

	groups	individuals	children (UASC <sup>1</sup> )	women (inc. pregnant)
<b>Total Requests</b>	42	214	11 (8)	12 (0)
<b>Requests BY / inc. Sistiema<sup>2</sup></b>	9/5	47/39	4 (2)/4 (2)	8/7
<b>Support Provided</b>	26	123	8 (8)	5
• <b>In-kind support / inc. in hospitals</b>	26/2	123/2	8 (8)/0	5/1
• <b>legal aid / inc. in hospitals</b>	1/1	2/1	1 (1)/0	1/1
• <b>medical support PL / BY<sup>3</sup></b>	4/0	8/0	1 (1)/0	1/0
<b>Reported Pushbacks</b>	12	108	3 (3)	11
<b>Reported Missing Persons<sup>4</sup></b>	2	2	0	1
<b>Reported Violence PL / BY</b>	9/13	25/64	0/1 (1)	1/1
<b>Wall Induced Injuries</b>	3	4	1 (1)	1
<b>Field Interventions</b>			28	

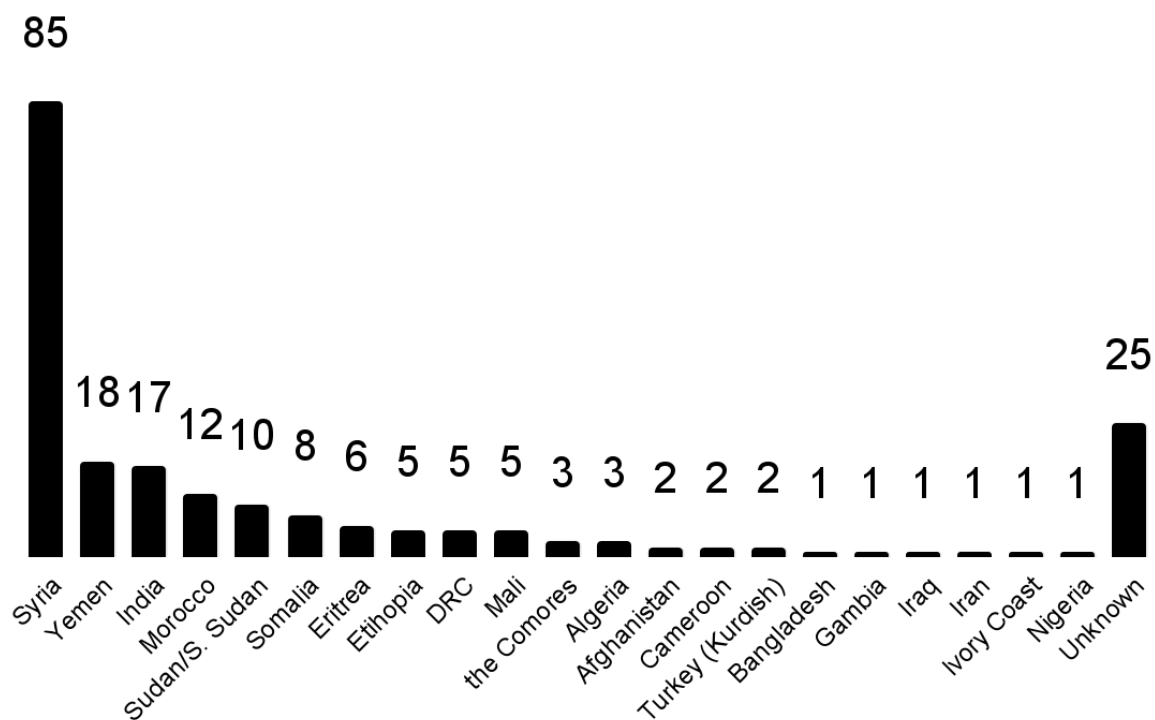
<sup>1</sup> Unaccompanied and Separated Children in this report refers to children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law, is responsible for doing so.

<sup>2</sup> Sistiema is a widely-used term currently referring to the strip of land between the wall recently erected on the Polish territory adjacent to the Belarussian border and old Belarussian border fortifications known under the same name.

<sup>3</sup> BY is used in cases where migrants were referred to MSF Belarus .

<sup>4</sup> Missing Person is defined as a person reported missing by close relatives, who did not have contact with them for at least three days

## Countries of Origin 27.07–02.08.2023



## Quantitative Summary 03.08–09.08.2023

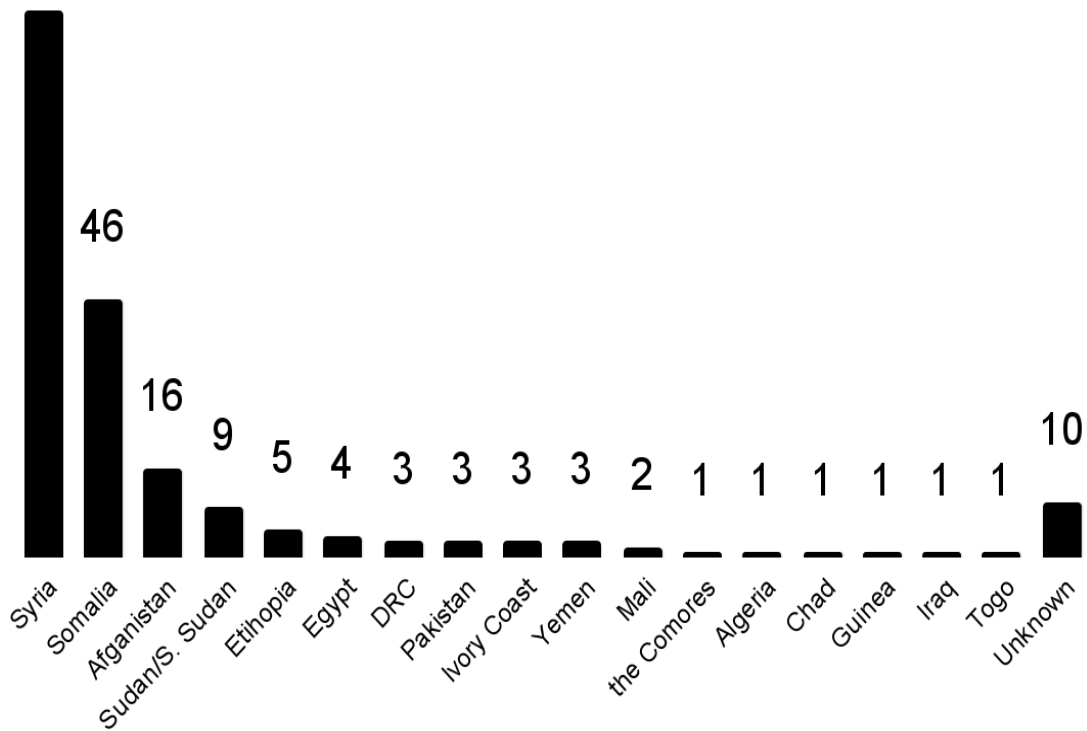
	groups	individuals	children (UASC)	women (inc. pregnant)
<b>Requests Total</b>	35	207	4 (4)	16 (1)
<b>Requests BY / inc. Sistiema</b>	6/4	68/66	0	10/1
<b>Support Provided</b>	22	81	2 (2)	4
• <b>material support/ inc. in hospitals</b>	21/1	79/1	2 (2)/0	4
• <b>legal support</b>	2/1	3/1	0/0	0
• <b>medical support PL / BY</b>	5/0	7/0	0/0	1
<b>Reported Pushbacks</b>	9	76	2 (2)	2



	groups	individuals	children (UASC)	women (inc. pregnant)
<b>Reported Missing Persons</b>	2	2	0	1
<b>Reported Violence PL / BY</b>	7 / 7	29 / 13	2 (2) / 1 (1)	0/0
<b>Wall Induced Injuries</b>	1	1	0	0
<b>Field Interventions</b>			28	

### Countries of Origin 03.08–09.08.2023

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## Context Update

At the end of July and the beginning of August, tensions on the Polish–Belarusian border were higher than usual. A significant increase in the mobilization of Polish uniformed services officially caused by the presence in Belarus of the so-called "Wagner Group" was evident. The incident with the entry of Belarusian helicopters into Polish airspace also received wide publicity. The helicopters were spotted and photographed by residents of Białowieża.

Later that week Minister Wąsik announced that the **5,000** border guards present on the Polish–Belarusian border would be joined by support in the form of **2,000** (rather than **1,000** as previously planned) soldiers, as well as **500** police officers<sup>5</sup>. The narrative about the reasons for the border reinforcement includes increasingly strong accusations made by the Border Guard against migrants. People on the Move are accused of violence and increased aggression, and are credited with attacks on cars and officers<sup>6</sup>. The services present at the border are to receive support in the form of additional equipment: armored Tur VI vehicles and Typhoon IV water cannon vehicles. These actions are undoubtedly not without impact on the current situation of those trying to cross the border, but at this point we are unable to predict their long-term effects on the shape and nature of this migration route.



credit: Białowieża Resident

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<sup>5</sup>

<https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C1592459%2Csamochody-specjalne-tajfun-i-tur-oraz-smiglowiec-bell-skierowane-do>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/12105,Przeciwdziałamy-nielegalnej-migracji-FILM.html>

On July 27, 2023, a press conference was held in Krynki by the representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration and the Border Guard Command. In his speech, Minister Kaminski emphasized the effectiveness of border fortifications and the officers working in the area. Quoting data, he spoke of **17,000** 'illegal but unsuccessful' attempts to cross our border. The minister was most likely relying on outdated statistics from the Border Guard, since the Border Guard reported as early as August 11 that it had detected **19,000** attempts to cross the border since the beginning of the year, 2,000 more than the number mentioned by the minister.<sup>7</sup> Minister Kaminski, however, did not specify the number of people who successfully crossed from Belarus into Poland via the green border. The Polish Border Guard data speaks of thwarted crossing attempts, not individual people. As a result of the common practice of pushbacks, people are turned back, often, according to their accounts, with the use of physical violence and threats, back to the Belarusian border. They often make repeated attempts to cross the border, either of their own free will or under coercion by Belarusian services. There is no information on official Border Guard websites about attempts to cross that have not been thwarted, although it seems not unreasonable to suspect that the services, with border monitoring installed along the entire physical barrier, are aware of them.

We can try to get a more accurate picture of the situation on the Polish–Belarusian border by analyzing data provided by official German sources. In June of this year, the German border states discussed tightening controls on the Polish–German border. The issue of irregular crossings of the Polish–German border was raised at the time, among others, by the daily *Die Welt*, citing the numbers of registered crossings of the Polish–German border, which were respectively:

- January 2023 **1389** irregular crossings from Poland to Germany – more than **1300**<sup>8</sup> attempts to cross the Poland–Belarus border reportedly stopped by Polish Border Police
- February 2023 **1040** irregular **crossings** from Poland to Germany, more than **1200**<sup>9</sup> attempts to cross the Poland–Belarus border reportedly stopped by Polish Border Police
- March 2023, **1584** irregular **crossings** from Poland to Germany, **2042**<sup>10</sup> attempts between March 1–26 cross the Poland–Belarus border reportedly stopped by Polish Border Police
- April 2023 **2427** irregular **crossings** from Poland to Germany **2327**<sup>11</sup> attempts to cross the Poland–Belarus border reportedly stopped by Polish Border Police

The German Bundespolizei, in a report published on June 23 of this year, estimated that **27%** of all irregular crossings into Germany took place across the Polish border<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/12153,Wczorajsza-doba-na-granicy.html>

<sup>8</sup> data compiled from BP daily reports published on [strazgraniczna.pl](https://www.strazgraniczna.pl)

<sup>9</sup> data compiled from BP daily reports published on [strazgraniczna.pl](https://www.strazgraniczna.pl)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/11528,Wbrew-przepisom-przez-granice.html>

<sup>11</sup> data compiled from BP daily reports published on [strazgraniczna.pl](https://www.strazgraniczna.pl)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-06-29/a-surge-number-illegal-border-crossings-germany>

Incomplete data from Polish border services does not make it possible to estimate how many of the people registered by German services after crossing Polish western border came through Belarus. We also do not know what percentage of people crossing from Belarus continues their journey towards Germany. However, from the juxtaposition of the Polish and German services' data, it is clear that the higher intensity of migration across the Belarusian border translates into an increase in the number of irregular crossings of the Polish–German border.

Data collected by humanitarian organizations operating in the area also supports the conclusion that the migration route remains active. From the beginning of January to August 9 this year, we received information of **5907** people on the move. This compares with **4066** requests in the corresponding period last year, from January to August 10, 2022. This means that despite the dynamic geopolitical situation, the huge commitment of military services and the construction of both physical and electronic fortifications along the border, we recorded a **45%** increase in the number of requests compared to last year. It is worth noting here that the data from the corresponding period for 2022 refers to the time before the completion of the physical barrier (commissioned on June 30, 2022) and the electronic barrier, most sections of which were completed earlier this year and the whole was formally commissioned on June 15, 2023.

## Demographics and trends:

Between July 27 and August 9, 2023, we recorded reports from **421** people traveling in **77** groups. This represents an almost two-fold increase compared to the previous reporting period, in which a total of **218** people staying in the Polish–Belarusian border area reported needing legal, material or medical support.

The data collected shows that the temporary decrease in the number of irregular border crossings described in the previous report (a drop in numbers of citizens of Middle Eastern countries such as Syria and Yemen was particularly visible) was followed by another increase in the number of crossings. This is further reinforced by the apparent increase in traffic on the Belarusian side: while we received very little information about people in the so-called Sistema<sup>13</sup> between July 13 and 26, (**3** and **2** people respectively between July 13 and 26,) in the current reporting period the number has increased to **39** people weekly in late July and early August and **66** people between August 3–9. These numbers are not complete and do not allow us to estimate at least approximately the actual number of people staying in Sistema during a given period, but they do allow us to identify downward and upward trends and note moments of increased migration activity in the area of the Polish–Belarusian border

We observed recent changes in the demographics of people on the move; between July 13–26 – a period with less traffic – **46%** of all requests were from people from countries of the Horn of Africa<sup>14</sup>. Now again the vast majority are from countries in the Middle East, particularly Syria, which was indicated as a country of origin by as many as **182** people.

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<sup>13</sup> potoczna nazwa pasa przygranicznego znajdującego się pomiędzy polską zaporą fizyczną a białoruskimi umocnieniami zwanymi Sistiemą,

<sup>14</sup> 96 out of 208 persons whose nationality was stated indicated Ethiopia, Somalia or Eritrea as country of origin,

For more than a month, the percentage of women and children among those requesting support from humanitarian organizations has remained relatively low for the spring–summer period. Between May 5 and July 5, women accounted for **13%** of all those requesting assistance and **15%** of all those directly supported by humanitarian organizations with material, legal and medical assistance. Meanwhile, from July 6 to August 9, women accounted for only just over **6%** of those requesting support and less than **6%** of those successfully reached by humanitarian organizations. The low proportion of women in the groups is more typical to the characteristics of winter months on this migration route. It may be related to the tense geopolitical situation and the large number of military and uniformed services on the Polish side of the border. Fear of a potentially increased risk of failure and violence when attempting to cross the border may cause a desire to wait out this time with the hope that the situation will improve and calm down.

The proportion of minors is slightly above **4%** among those requesting support and **4.5%** among those who received direct support from humanitarian organizations between July 6 and August 9. As many as **87%** of the minors met by humanitarian workers during this period were traveling unaccompanied by a legal guardian or custodian.

## **Belarus and the border zone**

Recent weeks have brought an increase in the number of reports coming from the so-called Sistema area. Also, people met by humanitarian workers on the Polish side of the border confirmed that on the other side of the barrier many migrants and migrant women are still preparing to cross or trying to return to Minsk. The largest group we received information about was **36** people. In the others there were between **4** and **18** people. Some of them declared that Belarusian border guards were not allowing them to leave the border area. Many reported not having enough water and food. One person described their experience this way:

*We have no water or food, and they [authorities] are besieged at the borders, and they are beating us. The Polish is hitting us, and the Russians [probably Belarussians] are hitting us, and we can die of hunger and thirst*

Two photos below show one of the temporary makeshift campsites on the Belarusian side of the wall. The person who sent them have first got in contact with humanitarian organizations after several days spent in this location. He then reported that the group consisting of seven people has ran out of supplies and that the Belarussian forces do not allow them to go back to Minsk.



Photos of a makeshift camp in Sistema thanks to the courtesy of the Author

## Field Interventions

This reporting period humanitarian organizations that provided us with information, managed to deliver in-kind support to **202** people traveling in **47** groups. **15** people were additionally provided with specialized medical assistance thanks to the involvement of Doctors Without Borders and medics residing in Podlasie privately as volunteers. Organizations and individuals providing in-kind and medical support to people on the move in the border regions took part in a total of **56** successful interventions. According to humanitarian workers and people working in Podlasie, people on the road most often asked for water and dry clothes, as well as mosquito and tick repellent.

As for medical interventions and cases of first aid provided by humanitarian workers, these included concussion after falling off the wall, several cases of sprained ankles and other lower limb injuries, wounds from razor wire crowning the barrier, as well as ailments such as: vomiting and diarrhea (after poisoning with contaminated water), prolonged (reportedly lasting more than a month) diarrhea, injuries after being bitten by Belarusian service dogs, dehydration, and injuries caused by beatings by people identified by the victims as Polish Border Guard officers. Medics also supplied a glucometer and tested the person with diabetes. In one case, medics decided that the patient needed to be hospitalized.





Fotografie z archiwum Grupy Granica

## Pushbacks and violence perpetrated by the authorities

As the number of crossings increased during the latest reporting period, so did the number of people reporting pushbacks. Between July 27 and August 9, such reports came from as many as **184** people. Some of them made repeated attempts immediately after being sent back to Belarus. In some cases, this was due to the pressure of Belarusian services, which effectively prevented people on the move from leaving the border zone.

**54** people reported experiencing physical and verbal violence during their pushbacks by people they identified as officers of Polish uniformed services, most often the Border Guard. **77** people reported experiencing violence from Belarusian services. Those accounts often included similarities that occurred regardless of the time of the crossing, language spoken in the group or nationality. The fact that people who never met and who are of different nationalities, different backgrounds from different regions of the world give accounts of the very similar treatment reportedly perpetrated by the Polish uniformed officers, may suggest that the practices implemented by the services are carried out in a systematic way and on a large scale.

Only In the past two weeks, **6** groups of a total of **25** people have reported being stripped down to their underwear by individuals they identified as Polish uniformed services, and then turned back to Belarus without clothing. Below we quote an account of a first-hand witness of such practice. The person, who is an Unaccompanied Child has also reported experiencing at least one pushback and physical violence from the authorities of both countries.



*I am 14 years old. I tried to cross the border three times. [The first time] Belarusian soldiers turned me back and beat me. The second time Polish soldiers caught me, destroyed my phone and abused me, even though I was [...]. They forced me to leave Polish territory. While I was in the forest, for the first time I saw the army strip men and women to search them for phones. I was in shock and I will never forget it, it was horrible.*

Another group of four men from Middle Eastern countries reported a similar situation they experienced from people they described as Polish officers. The perpetrators allegedly stripped them down to their underwear, sprayed them with irritant gas, took away their clothes, documents and telephones, and then sent them back to Belarus, where the men in turn were said to have experienced violence – beatings and dog attacks – from the Belarusian services.

One of the men traveling alone, during a meeting with humanitarian workers, recounted a situation in which he was treated with particular cruelty by individuals he identified as officers of Polish uniformed services. He reported that the officers had not only stripped him naked, but also sprayed him in the face with gas, and then used it on his genitals. The man also experienced violence on both sides of the border.

Another man, from one of the countries of the Horn of Africa, reported that people he described as Polish service officers, in addition to stripping him, carried out a severe beating – he was hit in the neck with a baton and his eye was blackened with a fist. His injuries were examined by a medic present at the intervention.

A different group of men from the Horn of Africa countries reported very similar violence; while they were not sprayed with gas, they were stripped to their underwear, had their SIM cards destroyed and were sent back without clothes.

Humanitarian workers operating on the Polish–Belarusian border emphasize that the context and ethics of their work often do not allow them to obtain information from people on the move. The Psycho–Physical state of many makes it impossible to get information from them without risking retraumatization or making them feel that they owe humanitarian organizations any answers by virtue of receiving in-kind or legal support from them. One humanitarian worker describes an encounter with a lone male traveler this way

*He knew English. In the first contact he was logical [...] he has been in the forest for 30 days. During this time he was pushed back twice. When asked about experiencing violence, he broke into tears and said nothing more.*

One of the pushbacks resulted in the separation of a mother, who was taken to a Podlasie hospital after breaking her leg in a fall from a fence, and her 17-year-old daughter. The minor girl was separated from her mother after her capture and was forcibly returned to Belarus along with a group of people, among whom she had no legal guardians or custodians. The case was reported by Grupa Granica.<sup>15</sup> The girl was then seen for two days near the wall, on the Belarussian side but

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=272854028709693&set=a.156833196978444>

in a close vicinity of the wall which is located on the Polish territory.

The mother was later referred to one of the detention centers despite the injury and tremendous amount of stress she was under after having been forcefully separated from her daughter. The daughter is currently back in Minsk without a guardian.