

WE ARE MONITORING

Update PL-BY

10.08–23.08.2023

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.



Photo: Stowarzyszenia Egala archive

Quantitative Summary 10.08–16.08.2023

| | groups | individuals | children (UASC ¹) | women (inc. pregnant) |
|---|--------|-------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Total Requests | 36 | 150 | 12 (3) | 30 (4) |
| Requests BY / inc. Sistiema ² | 4/4 | 17/17 | - | 4 |
| Support Provided | 23 | 87 | 9 (3) | 7 (2) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> in-kind support / inc. in hospitals | 23/0 | 87/0 | 9 (3)/0 | 7(2)/0 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> legal aid / inc. in hospitals | 1/1 | 1/1 | 0/0 | 1/1 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> medical support PL / BY³ | 5/0 | 8/0 | 3/0 | 4(1)/0 |
| Reported Pushbacks | 5 | 20 | 1(1) | - |
| Reported Missing Persons ⁴ | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Reported Violence PL / BY | 5/8 | 9/18 | 2(2)/1(1) | 2/0 |
| Wall Induced Injuries | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Field Interventions | | | 40 | |

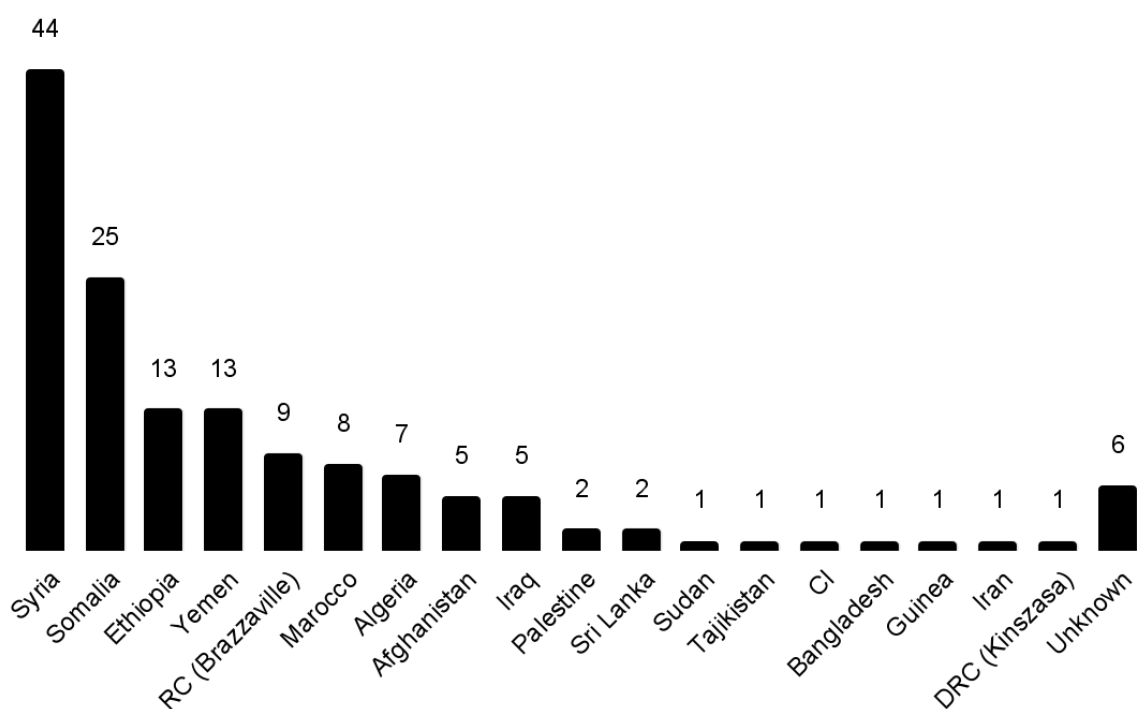
¹ Unaccompanied and Separated Children in this report refers to children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law, is responsible for doing so.

² 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.

³ BY is used in cases where migrants were referred to MSF Belarus.

⁴ 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 10.08–16.08.2023⁵



Quantitative Summary 17.08–23.08.2023

| | groups | individuals | children (UASC ⁶) | women (inc. pregnant) |
|--|--------|-------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Total Requests | 33 | 183 | 14 (8) | 24 (1) |
| Requests BY / inc. Sistiema ⁷ | 8/7 | 84/80 | 4 | 9/8 |
| Support Provided | 20 | 79 | 10 (8) | 14 (2) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> material support / inc. in hospitals | 20/0 | 70/0 | 10 (8)/0 | 14/ (2) |

⁵ The acronym CI stands for Ivory Coast.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.

| | groups | individuals | children (UASC ⁶) | women (inc. pregnant) |
|---|--------|-------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • legal support / inc. in hospitals | 0/0 | 0/0 | 0/0 | 0 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • medical support PL / BY⁸ | 2/0 | 2/0 | 0/0 | 1(1) |
| Reported Pushbacks | 1 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| Reported Missing Persons ⁹ | 2 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| Reported Violence PL / BY | 4/ 1 | 18/ 3 | 4(3) /0 | 0/0 |
| Wall Induced Injuries | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Field Interventions | | | 25 | |

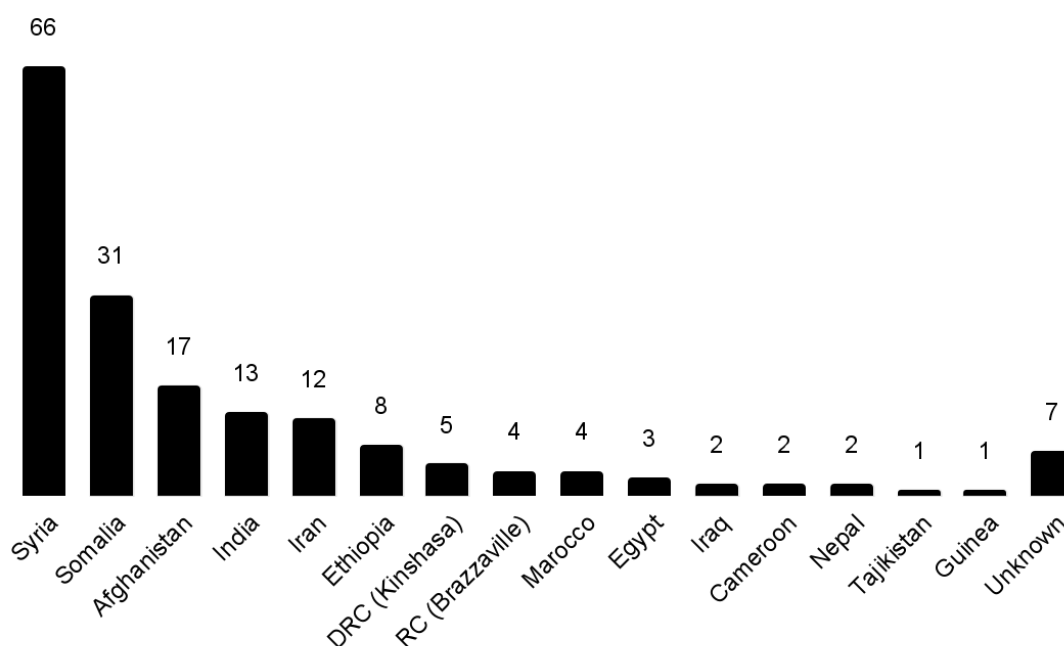


Razor wire underneath the wall, photo by Aleksandra Chrzanowska

⁸ BY is used in cases where migrants were referred to MSF Belarus.

⁹ 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 17.08–23.08.2023



Situation on the border

During the second and third weeks of August, tensions grew over the Wagner Group's presence in Belarus. Residents of Podlasie reported Wolverines and tanks heading towards the Belarusian border, while politicians and observers commented on the role of the Wagner Group, suggesting that it may be training people on the Polish–Belarusian border and helping them to cross the border.¹⁰

At the same time, the journal Nature published an article by scientists from Germany investigating the impact of conducting rescue operations on increasing migration (the so-called pull factor). The authors focused on the so-called Central Mediterranean Route, which has been the most frequent and deadly route of illegal migration to Europe in the last decade. They looked at three periods of intervention – Operation Mare Nostrum launched in the autumn of 2013, search and rescue operations by private actors and actions by the Libyan Coast Guard – which corresponded with changes in laws, policies and search and rescue practices in the Mediterranean. An attempt was made to estimate the impact of these three periods of

¹⁰

<https://www.wprost.pl/kryzys-na-granicy/11347621/grupa-wagnera-zagrozeniem-mateusz-morawiecki-moga-szkolic-migrantow-do-atakowania-polskich-sluzb.html>

and

<https://infosecurity24.pl/za-granica/wagnerowcy-na-uslugach-lukaszenki-czym-grozi-to-polsce> [both sources accessed - dated 26.08.2023].

intervention on migration flows as measured by border crossing attempts (i.e. the aggregate number of arrivals, pushbacks and deaths in the time series). The research shows that the conduct of rescue operations does not affect the number of people who attempted to enter Europe, which refutes the repeated suggestions by populists that aid organisations are responsible for the existence or popularity of migration routes. It should be noted that reference is being made to trends and not to the decisions of individuals. It is clear from the text that on a larger scale, the conduct of rescue operations is insignificant, but contributes to reducing the number of deaths on the routes.¹¹

Demographics and trends

During the reported period covering the time between 10.08 and 23.08.2023, we recorded submissions from 333 people travelling in 69 groups. In both weeks in the reported period, applications came from 150 people in the week of 10–16.08 and 183 people in the week of 17–23.08.2023 respectively. In comparison, in the previous week (03–09.08.223) we recorded submissions from 389 people, which is double the number.

In the period 10–16 August we recorded reports from 4 groups from Sistiema with a total of 17 people. In the following week of 17–23 August, we received information about 7 groups from Sistiema, whose total number of people was more than four times higher – 80 people, including 4 children and 8 women. These numbers are not complete and do not allow us to estimate, even approximately, the actual number of people staying in Sistiema in a given period, but they do allow us to identify downward and upward trends and to note moments of increased migration activity in the area of the Polish–Belarusian border.

The trends already observed in late July and early August continue in the reported period. Whereas in the second half of July – and therefore a period with less traffic – 46% of all reports were from people from the Horn of Africa¹² countries, now once again the vast majority are from Middle Eastern countries, in particular Syria, which was indicated as a country of origin by as many as 110 people out of a total of 333 reported.

In the period 10–23 August, there is a noticeable increase in the share of women in the total number of people reporting the need for assistance at the Polish–Belarusian border. Between 10 August and 16 August, women accounted for as much as 20% of all those reporting and almost 11.5% of all those reached by humanitarian organisations with material, legal and medical assistance. By contrast, from 17 to 23 August, women accounted for just over 13% of those reporting and almost 18% of those reached by humanitarian organisations. In comparison, between 6 July and 9 August, women accounted for just over 6% of those reporting and less than 6% of those reached by humanitarian support. The reported increase is typical of the spring–summer period characterised by better weather and therefore better travel conditions. It is worth mentioning that during the reported period, as many as 5 out of all 54 women who came forward declared being pregnant.

¹¹ Rodríguez Sánchez, A., Wucherpennig, J., Rischke, R. *et al.* Search-and-rescue in the Central Mediterranean Route does not induce migration: Predictive modeling to answer causal queries in migration research. *Sci Rep* **13**, 11014 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-38119-4>

¹² 96 of the 208 who identified their nationality indicated Ethiopia, Eritrea or Somalia as their country of origin.

The proportion of minors between 10 August and 23 August is just over 8% among those reporting a need for support and 11.5% among those receiving support from humanitarian organisations. Which is a significant increase from the 4% reported in July/August. Almost 58% of minors met by humanitarian workers during this period were travelling unaccompanied by a legal guardian or carer.

Belarus and the border area

Between 10 and 23 August, 97 people comprising 11 groups informed us that they were stuck in the strip between the barrier on the Polish territory and the fortifications on the Belarusian side, called the Sistiema. The largest of the groups we received information about was 25 people. The others had between 3 and 18 people. Among the reported groups, there was one consisting exclusively of 6 women, 3 of them declared to be under 18 years of age. The women asked for help several times, reporting that they had been in Sistiema for more than a week and that on the Belarusian side, the services had used gas against them several times. From the accounts of another group, consisting of 4 Iraqi nationals, it appears that invariably (in relation to the accounts we have collected over the last several months or so) the people in Sistiema are deprived of access to food and clean, potable water. One man described his situation as follows:

Please help me and my friends. Seven days have passed without food. Swamp water poisoned some. Please help, we are going to die.

Groups that stay in the Sistiema for long periods of time are particularly vulnerable, often resulting in the loss of health and, in some cases (described by the media and humanitarian organisations), life. Deprived of the support of humanitarian organisations, surrounded by the services of both countries, and facing a 5 metre high wall secured with razor wire, they are dependent on the individual decisions of service officials, who often do not allow them to leave the border area in either direction.

Humanitarian, medical and legal interventions

The humanitarian organisations and their collaborators who provided us with information managed to provide in-kind support to 166 persons travelling in 43 groups. 10 people were additionally provided with specialised medical assistance thanks to the involvement of medics from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and medics residing in Podlasie privately as volunteers, among them 5 women. Organisations and individuals providing in-kind and medical support to people on the move in the border areas took part in a total of 65 successful interventions. According to humanitarian workers and people working in Podlasie, people on the move most often asked for food and water and dry clothes. There are also requests for mobile phones to enable people to contact their loved ones and to ask for support from humanitarian organisations. Very often, from the accounts of people coming to us for help, it appears that their mobile phones are destroyed by people identified as uniformed officers when they are transported behind the barrier.

People in need of support, in conversations with humanitarian aid workers, most often report that they cross the border in larger groups of a dozen or more people, who then split up on the Polish side. The largest group that received in-kind support in the period we reported was 15 people, the others ranged from 1 to 12 people. As many as 13 people travelled alone, all asking for urgent in-kind assistance.

Medical interventions and cases of first aid by humanitarian workers included pregnant women, mechanical injuries to the eye, heart disease and injuries caused by beatings by perpetrators identified by the victims as officers of the Polish Border Guard. During the reported period, there were also numerous cases of diarrhoea and stomach poisoning (as a result of drinking contaminated water), dehydration, wounds from razor wire topping the barrier and injuries after being bitten by Belarusian service dogs.

In the accounts of humanitarian workers and those working with them, there are recurring stories of mutual support among people who accidentally joined groups while in the strip between the barrier on the Polish territory and the fortifications on the Belarusian side. This is how one helper describes an encounter with a group being helped on the Polish-Belarusian border:

The group only got to know each other in the sistemi, but they cared very much for each other. They all cared about the sick man, the younger Guinean boy the most. When we met them they were just walking and two of them were supporting and guiding him, and when he was lying down with an IV one held his hand and checked how he was feeling.

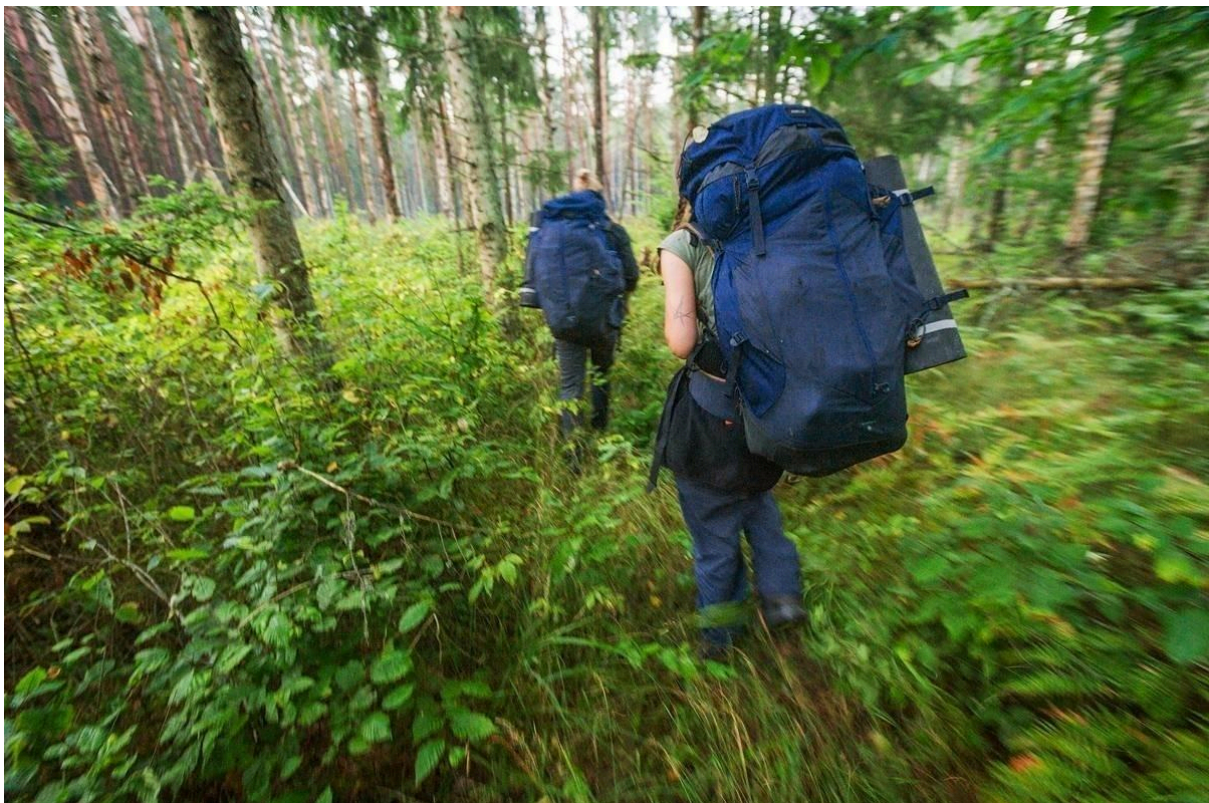


Photo: Stowarzyszenie Egala archive

Pushbacks and violence perpetrated by the authorities

In the period from 10 to 16 August, 20 people in 5 groups provided with humanitarian assistance reported the experience of being pushed back during the intervention, while in the week from 17 to 23 August, one 4-person group reported such information. However, it is worth recalling that humanitarian workers and employees of humanitarian organisations operating in the Polish–Belarusian border area emphasise that the context and ethics of their work often do not allow them to obtain accurate information from people on the move. Many of them are, during the intervention, in a psycho–physical state that makes it impossible to obtain information without exposing them to the risk of re–traumatisation or making them feel that they owe humanitarian organisations any answers by virtue of receiving material or legal support from them.



Photo: Stowarzyszenie Egala Archive

According to those interviewed, the most common forms of violence used by the services of both countries include beatings with hands and tools (batons) and theft and destruction of property, particularly mobile phones and documents. This is how one humanitarian worker describes the members of the group she was able to reach for assistance:

Regarding a mother and a son – they have been at the border for 25 days, they had 3 pushbacks, the last one resulting in the 10cm mildly deep (few cm depth) leg cut of Mohamed. They also explained that they were sprayed, got their phone broken and left in underwear by polish forces.

One of the people who was assisted during the reported two weeks, a 17-year-old African national, showed a bump on his head during a meeting with humanitarian workers and said it was the result of a beating by people he identified as officers of the Polish uniformed services.

Another man reported during the intervention by humanitarian workers that he had been pushed back 15 times, and that he had been additionally robbed before the first of the pushbacks. A few days after the successful intervention, he contacted us informing us that he had once again been taken to the other side of the barrier.

A group of four Syrian nationals, including two women, in the strip between the barrier built on the Polish territory and the fortifications on the Belarusian side describe their experience of trying to cross the Polish-Belarusian border as follows:

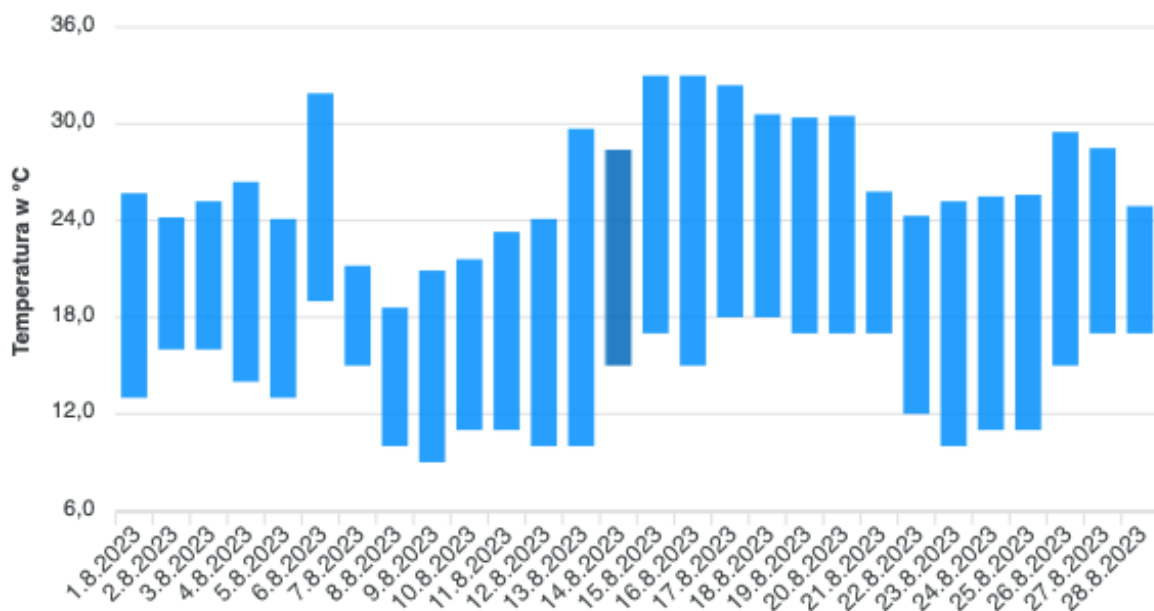
The police Poland hate all person. Kids and woman and man. The police Poland put on my face gas. Now I'm so tired. I want send my photo to government. For see what doing the police Poland. We not tourist. We want new life only. We want not hated us. Poland [push me] back to belarus.

People were exposed to death inside Polish territory at the hands of the Polish border guards. This is a very big matter and we should not be silent about it. There are lives of elderly people, children, women and youth. The border guards no longer differentiate between anyone and beat and break everyone.

We want people to hear our voice and to know that we were subjected to the strongest types of beatings.

Temperatures by weather station Bialystok¹³

The graph shows the daily maximum/minimum temperature on a given day in °C in August this year.



¹³ <https://www.pogodowecentrum.pl/archiwum-pogody/szczegoly-miasta/122950-99999/bialystok> [accessed 31.08.2023].

