

# Situation on the Polish-Belarusian border

**Together against racism and divisions.  
Summary of Grupa Granica's operations in 2022.**

The summary was prepared by the communication team of Grupa Granica.

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**GRUPA GRANICA**

The last year of operation of the informal coalition Grupa Granica, which provides an umbrella for activities related to both the humanitarian crisis in the Polish–Belarusian border area and the war in Ukraine, has brought many changes and challenges. First and foremost, we have had to come to terms with a situation in which our activities will be needed for months and perhaps even years to come. In response to the escalating conflicts, rising violence, human rights violations on the Polish–Belarusian border and war crimes in Ukraine, we brought vital assistance where other support usually did not reach.

Intervention responses and systemic actions were needed all the time. Together, we have engaged in advocacy at both Polish and international levels, and we have networked with international organisations and informal groups conducting similar humanitarian and advocacy work on other European borders for many years. We know that we constantly need to learn and adapt our ways of working to the changing situation. We are building support networks with initiatives similar to ours, including Border Violence Monitoring Network, Rescue Channel, Sea Watch. By learning from each other, we get stronger.

In response to the introduction of the state of emergency in the Polish–Belarusian border area, and later the construction of the wall and the Polish state's policy of double standards, lined with racism and xenophobia, our coalition has grown stronger. In 2022, under its umbrella, we led efforts to bring the perspective of refugees into the public debate. The situation required us to be active in many fields at the same time, including organising humanitarian and medical assistance, as well as the necessary legal, psychological and material support at the borderland, sometimes even 24 hours a day. In Ukraine, we reached out to those groups who were in the worst situation, organising, among other things, safe transports of people and animals to Poland, or items and medicines in the opposite direction. We also carried out educational, monitoring and research, documentation and advocacy activities.

The results of our work to date can already be seen – these include judgements related to strategic litigation; the courts have confirmed in ruling after ruling that providing help is legal and preventing people in need from getting help should not take place. Many cases are pending before the European Court of Human

Rights. More and more international organisations and donors are giving us their support, thereby ensuring the continuity of the coalition's work.

Unfortunately, 2022 has also brought further difficult challenges – related, for example, to the search for missing persons, the assistance of people in hospitals with fractures from falls and hypothermia, among others. In addition to this, 2022 also brought more deaths from the humanitarian crisis. We were in contact with some of their families, helping to organise the transportation of bodies to their countries of origin. We spoke to people with experience of violence and rape, who witnessed torture and death.

You are also an important part of Grupa Granica. Thank you for this year of collective action, for standing up against the violation of rights and the use of violence against forced migrants and applicants for international protection, refugees, and those who help them.

Below there are figures showing our actions in response to the humanitarian crisis in the Polish–Belarusian border region. Behind each of these figures, there is a human story. Today, unfortunately, we are not surprised to hear of yet another push-back of young children or people with disabilities, or testimonies of torture and sexual violence. The humanitarian crisis continues. We continue to act to prevent further deaths, disappearances or further escalation of violence.

- As Grupa Granica, we have been operating since 15 August 2021, so until today (5 January 2022), it has been 508 days and nights of continuous action. From the beginning of the crisis until the end of December 2022, we have helped a total of more than 14,000 people.
- In 2022, we received requests for help concerning a total of at least 6022 people, including at least 396 requests concerning children. We were able to reach with an assistance at least 3672 of them.
- There were certainly many more people in need of assistance. We do not know about all of them. Some groups requesting help consisted of dozens of people.
- Thanks to the cooperation with doctors, both unaffiliated and those employed by professional humanitarian organisations, professional medical assistance is possible. In 2022, it was needed in 544 interventions.
- The number of missing persons reported by their families or others (only directly to the Grupa Granica) from January 2022 to 31 December 2022 is 185.

- 2022 has unfortunately brought further fatalities. Since the beginning of the humanitarian crisis (August 2021), the number of fatalities that were officially confirmed is 30 (by December 2021, the number was 17). We are in contact with the families of some of the deceased and are trying to support them with funeral arrangements, body transport or legal proceedings.
- We exchange action strategies with initiatives working on other European borders, including Sienos Grope, as well as the Border Violence Monitoring Network, Rescue Channel. We are also active in the European Parliament.
- We document illegal push-backs on a daily basis and are active in the legal, advocacy, communication, monitoring and research fields. Some of the exports have been stopped thanks to the interventions of the media, activists, MEPs and the Ombudsman's office.
- We obtained 59 interim measures from the European Court of Human Rights ordering the Polish authorities to refrain from transferring male and female migrants to Belarus. Some of them involved several persons, e.g. whole families.
- We obtained 10 judgments confirming that the manner in which migrants and migrant women were returned to Belarus, is a gross violation of Polish, EU and international law. This confirms our statement that push-back to Belarus is an inhumane practice that should not take place.
- We are also active all over Poland both in guarded and open centres for migrants; we also support people who have been released from them to help them find their way in the new reality.
- The Border Group is an informal coalition, an umbrella that enables many people to be protected and safe. Our aim is first and foremost to de-escalate violence and fight for respect for humanitarian law. Among other things, thanks to our demands, two international medical aid organisations – Intersos and Doctors Without Borders – started operating in Podlasie in 2022. Representatives of international media and politicians also come to the borderland to help us spread the word in their countries that the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border is still ongoing. We also organised conferences, meetings, public debates, educational campaigns, and academic meetings.
- We provided those in need with items necessary for survival in the Polish forests: warm food, winter clothes, insulated boots, thermal blankets, thermoses with hot tea, hygiene products, medicines and portable

chargers. We have also launched the Shop Without Borders platform (Sklep bez Granic), which allows you to directly support people crossing the border by purchasing symbolic packages of products necessary for providing humanitarian and medical aid.

- Every day, regardless of the time of day or day of the week, the staff of the Ombudsman's Office, especially Hanna Machińska PhD, and the representation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Poland, were an indispensable support to us.

**Our main demands remain relevant:**

- 1) Undertaking actions aimed at preventing further deaths and disappearances of people on the border.
- 2) Putting an end to illegal push-backs, which are not only a violation of Polish, international and EU law, but also a direct threat to the health and life of migrants;
- 3) Repealing the provisions of the Regulation of the Ministry of Interior and Administration from August 2021 that introduce the possibility of returning a foreigner to the state border line, and the provisions on issuing decisions on leaving the territory of the Republic of Poland introduced by the amendment to the Act on foreigners from October 2021;
- 4) Creating dignified and safe conditions for lawfully applying for international protection on the Polish-Belarusian border (also outside border crossings), with respect for international and EU law;
- 5) Complying with the procedures provided for by law, consisting in accepting applications for international protection or initiating return procedures against foreigners who crossed the Polish border in an unregulated manner;
- 6) Introducing identification mechanisms to ensure special protection for people belonging to vulnerable groups, including in particular children, victims of human trafficking, victims of torture, pregnant women, the elderly, the sick and people with disabilities;

- 7) Preventing and responding to abuses, including abuse of authority or failure to fulfill duties by officers performing service on the Polish–Belarusian border;
- 8) Providing the public with reliable information on the situation on the Polish–Belarusian border and putting an end to presenting the migration solely as a threat to state security.
- 9) Providing support to the inhabitants of the border areas and implementing recovery programs to reverse the negative effects of the humanitarian Crisis
- 10) Using detention of migrants only as a last resort, in accordance with Polish law and human rights standards, and ensuring dignified and humane conditions while awaiting a status decision. Ensuring special protection for children, persons in poor health and victims of violence.