

SEPTEMBER 2024

Report from the Poland–Belarus border



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Since 2021, we have been collecting reliable information regarding the situation on the Polish–Belarusian border. Your support will allow us to continue this work.

Introduction

The following study is based on first-hand data obtained from persons involved in the described events. Our sources comprise organisations, informal initiatives, as well as individuals—the latter of whom often wish to remain anonymous, hence we do not mention them by name unless they have given us permission to do so. We owe special thanks to all those in transit who chose to share their own experiences with us.

Humanitarian workers and those who collaborate with them emphasise that the challenging context and ethics of their work often prevents them from obtaining more detailed information about the stories and circumstances of people on the move. During interventions, many such people are in such a severe psychophysical condition that it is not possible to obtain detailed information without risking retraumatisation or making them feel obligated to provide answers to humanitarian organisations simply because they have received support.

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.

For additional questions and suggestions from individuals or organisations who might be interested in receiving reports, please contact:

dane@wearemonitoring.org.pl

Definitions

A glossary of terms and the definitions we have adopted can be found at the end of the report.

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Timeline, September 2024

10.09.2024

The head of the Ministry of the Interior signed a regulation¹ that extended for another 90 days the temporary ban on access to a specific area in the border zone adjacent to the state border with Belarus. The regulation took effect on 11 September. Humanitarian organisations working in the border area have been protesting against the restrictions for months, claiming that the declared possibility of receiving permission to enter the zone is a fiction².

The so-called buffer zone has been in place since 13 June 2024. It is located within the territorial range of the Border Guard Posts in Narewka, Białowieża, Dubicze Cerkiewne and Czeremcha. Over a length of approximately 44 km, the prohibited area is 200 m from the state border line, while in several places (a total of 16 km) it is wider and amounts to approximately 2 km.

11.09.2024

A press conference was held in Białystok by the border guard, the police and the Polish army, which summarised the 90 days of the buffer zone. A spokeswoman for the Podlasie Border Guard Unit, Major SG Katarzyna Zdanowicz, stated: 'More than 6170 attempts to illegally cross the border were recorded, while in the corresponding period before the zone was introduced we had more than 17,000 such attempts'³.

¹ Ordinance of the Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration of 9 September 2024 on the introduction of a temporary ban on staying in a specified area in the border zone adjacent to the state border with the Republic of Belarus (Journal of Laws 2024, item 1345).

² Médecins Sans Frontières, statement of 23.07.2024 regarding the operation of the buffer zone <https://lekarze-bez-granic.pl/lekarze-bez-granic-wzywaja-do-zapewnienia-pomocy-potrzebujacym/> [Accessed on: 22.10.2024].

M. Chołodowski, *Government satisfied with buffer zone. Border group opposes violence and lawlessness*, Gazeta. Wyborcza. Białystok, 11.09.2024, <https://bialystok.wyborcza.pl/bialystok/7.35241.31296604.rzad-zadowolony-ze-strefy-buforowej-grupa-granica-sprzeciwia.html> [Accessed on: 22.10.2024].

³ Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration, *Summary of 90 days of buffer zone functioning on the border with Belarus*, 11.09.2024, www.gov.pl/web/mswia/podsumowanie-90-dni-funkcjonowania-strefy-buforowej-na-granicy-z-bialorusia [Accessed on: 22.10.2024].

13.09.2024

According to information published on the government administration portal gov.pl, a meeting of the inter-ministerial Working Group on Migration was held on 13 September⁴. It was reported that during the meeting the planned amendments to the provisions on the issuance of visas and the conditions for admitting foreigners to the Polish labour market and the principles for recruiting foreign students to Polish universities were discussed. The status of work on Poland's Migration Strategy for 2025–2030 was also presented. The meeting was attended, among others, by representatives of the Ministry of the Interior and Administration, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Family, Labour and Social Policy. Due to the governmental nature of the Group, representatives of the social side were not invited to the meeting.

23.09.2024

A statement on the situation on the Polish–Belarusian border was issued by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights⁵. The document was a result of the visit of the representatives of the Council of Europe in Poland on 16–18 September (including a meeting with human rights defenders) and the exchange of letters with the Prime Minister and the Speaker of the Senate on the situation at the border. In the document, Commissioner Michael O'Flaherty noted the government's efforts to improve the quality of the work of the Border Guard (human rights coordinators at Border Guard units and training for officers). At the same time, he outlined precisely the areas in which Poland violates international standards regarding the treatment of foreigners seeking protection and made recommendations to the Polish authorities. He pointed out that the provisions introduced in 2021 to create a legal basis for the practice of pushbacks of people to Belarus do not allow for full respect of international human rights standards, including the European Convention on Human Rights (no consideration of the individual situation of each foreigner). In a statement, the Commissioner also called for dialogue with experts from social organisations and an end to the criminalisation of humanitarian aid.

⁴ Ministry of the Interior and Administration, *In the Ministry of the Interior on migration policy*, 13.09.2024, www.gov.pl/web/mswia/w-mswia-o-polityce-migracyjnej [Accessed on: 22.10.2024].

⁵ Council of Europe, *Poland needs to respect its international human rights obligations on the Belarusian border, says Commissioner O'Flaherty*, 23.09.2024, https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/poland-needs-to-respect-its-international-human-rights-obligations-on-the-belarusian-border-says-commissioner-o-flaherty#S.embed_link-KC-B.1-L.1.z [Accessed on: 22.10.2024].

Demographics, Trends and Delivered assistance

REQUESTS				
	groups	individuals	minors (incl. UASC)	women (incl. pregnant)
Total	177	525	56 (47)	79 (3)
incl. in Poland	157	474	46 (44)	60 (-)
incl. from Muharrama	13	25	2 (2)	6 (1)

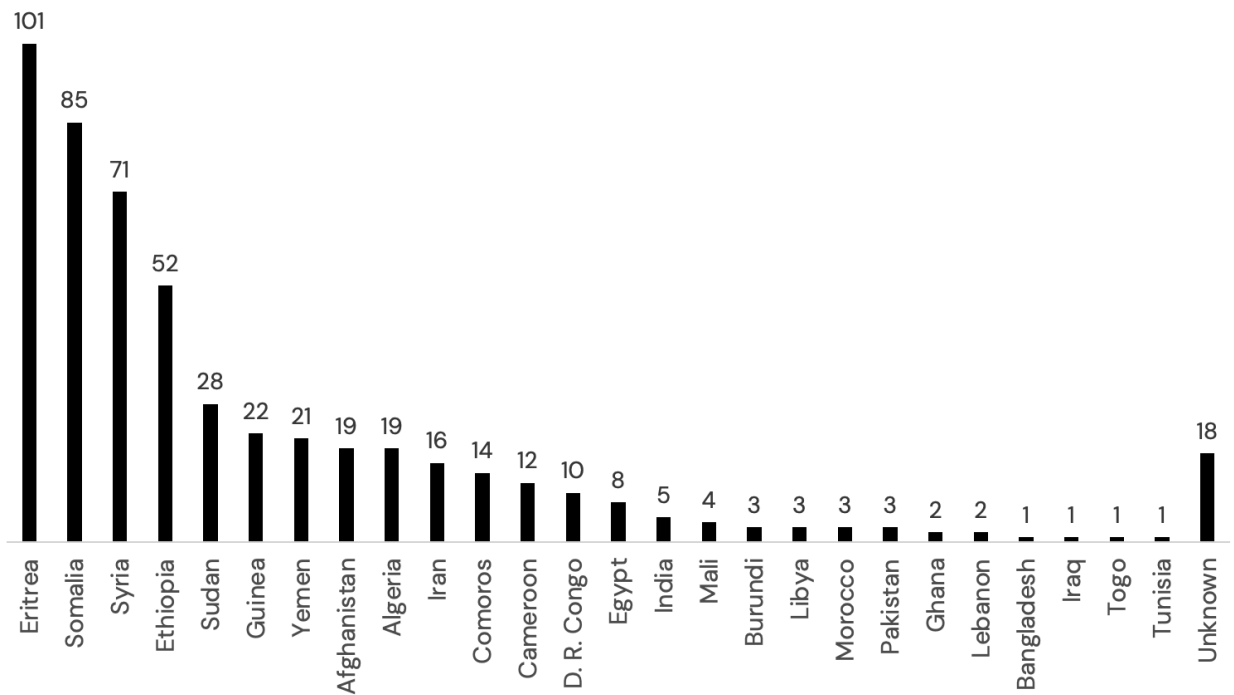


Fig. 1 Countries of origin of those reporting a need for support in September 2024.

In September 2024, there was an increase in the number of requests⁶ compared to August 2024, with requests coming from both sides of the barrier on the Polish-Belarusian border. After the August decrease in traffic, in September there were 525 requests for support from people traveling in 177 groups. This number is roughly a third higher than the number of requests recorded in September 2023. The increased traffic in September this year may be affected by the lower number of requests recorded in the previous month, August this year, compared to August 2023.

There were 150 interventions in September, and 130 of them were successful. The Ambulance Service team was called 3 times.

DELIVERED ASSISTANCE				
	groups	individuals	minors	women
Total	133	386	38	48
Material aid	131	383	18	45
Legal aid	92	280	17	36
Medical aid	6	10	1	3
First aid	32	57	2	8
Hospital assistance	6	8	2	4
Number of successful interventions		130		

⁶ The number of people assisted is always noticeably lower than the number of requests, due to a number of factors. Most of these cases are requests from Muharrama and Belarus, where any assistance is not possible. Other common reasons are the difficult terrain conditions, which sometimes make it impossible to find people on the move in certain locations, and pushbacks in cases where people are captured before meeting humanitarian workers.

During these interventions, material aid was provided to 386 people traveling in 131 groups. Among them were 48 women and 38 minors. As in previous months, individuals contacting from Polish territory most often requested aid in the form of food, water, clothing, and shoes. There were also occasional requests for functional mobile phones. According to the accounts of people encountered during the interventions, their phones are still being destroyed by officers from both Belarusian and Polish uniform services. The destruction of phones occurs not only during pushbacks, but also at border guard stations after applications for international protection are submitted, when individuals are sent to centers for foreigners.

Hospital

In September 2024, we recored 8 patients who were admitted to hospitals after crossing the Polish-Belarusian border in an irregular manner. Among them were 4 women and one child. The most common causes of hospitalisation were injuries caused by falls from heights (probably from the border wall), cuts from razor wire and dehydration.





Photo from the archives of the Egla Association

Pushbacks and Violence

According to the border guard's official response to an enquiry by Grupa Granica, between 4 September and 4 October this year, BG committed **1,649** pushbacks of persons on the move from Poland to Belarus.

In a similar period, from 1 to 30 September, humanitarian organisations received reports of **380** pushbacks involving **180** persons. This data was obtained during encounters in the forest, in interviews and through online communicators. Among these persons were 16 children (including 12 unaccompanied minors) and 24 women.

PUSHBACKS AND VIOLENCE				
	groups	individuals	minors (incl. UASC)	women (incl. pregnant)
Reported pushbacks	64	180	16 (12)	24 (-)
Reported violence PL	25	87	5 (4)	3 (-)
Reported violence BY	26	104	8 (5)	12 (1)

Interviews with migrants and their attorneys⁷ appointed by migrants during field interventions show that since June this year, persons who declare their intention to apply for international protection in Poland are often forced to sign declarations in Polish stating that they voluntarily renounce applying for protection.

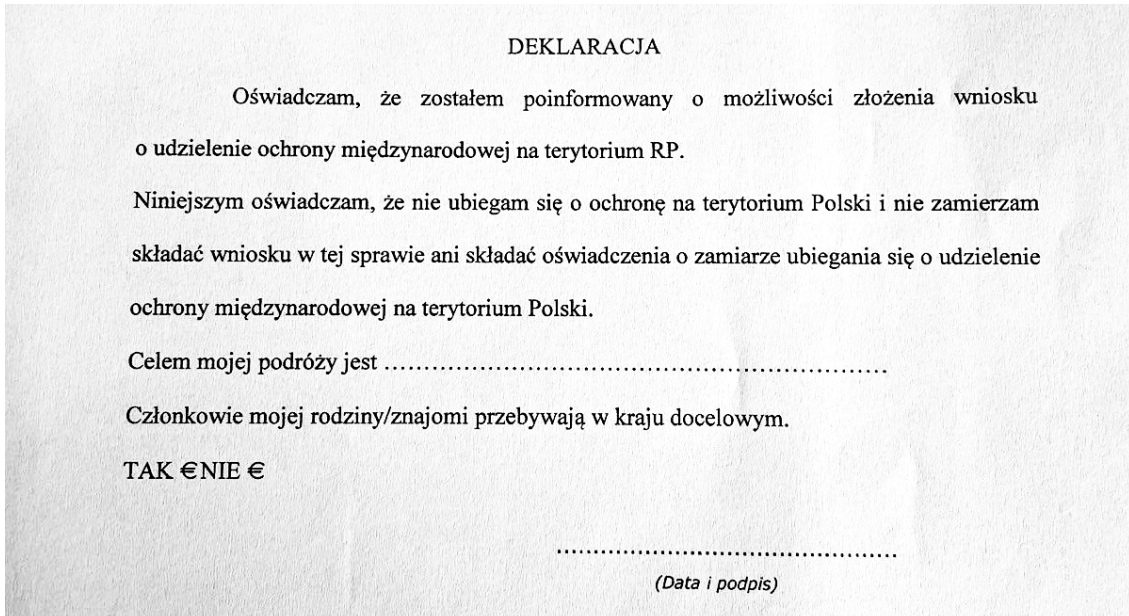


Photo 1 Declaration of unwillingness to apply for international protection in Poland. It states:

I declare that I have been informed about the possibility of submitting an application for international protection in the territory of the Republic of Poland.

I hereby declare that I am not seeking protection on the territory of Poland and I do not intend to submit an application in this matter or to submit a declaration of intent to apply for international protection on the territory of Poland.

The purpose of my trip is

My family members/friends are in the destination country.

YES € NO €

(Date and signature)

Some people, in order to protect themselves in the situation of signing an incomprehensible document and to prevent pushback, add the sentence 'I want asylum' next to their signature. However, we know both from people reporting to humanitarian organisations after pushbacks and from the attorneys that this method is unfortunately not effective either.

In many cases, border guards do not issue any documents and prevent the establishment of an attorney. This was the situation faced by a group of four people from Eritrea and Ethiopia, including two women, who were pushed back in early June 2024. In September we were able to speak to Hiyab⁸ travelling in this group at the time.

⁷ Attorneys do not need to have a legal background. The power of attorney is granted to humanitarian workers so that they can represent and support their principals during administrative procedures carried out by the Border Guard.

⁸ Name has been changed.

Prior to the pushback, all four declared their willingness to apply for international protection in Poland, accompanied by volunteers and in the presence of a police patrol. Unfortunately, the aid group was not allowed to sign powers of attorney with the apprehended persons.

[...] They did not allow us to approach or sign powers of attorney despite clear requests from people that they wanted asylum – they said that it was all up to the Border Guard and that we had to wait for their arrival. They were accompanied by a man, probably from the Border Guard in civilian clothes, who alerted the services.

Excerpt from the humanitarian intervention report

Upon arrival of the Border Patrol, the apprehended persons were cuffed with zip-ties and searched by the officers. According to the aid team's account, the officers were masked. Hiyab recalls that he and the others were transported to the Border Guard post, where they were deprived of access to water and food, and then stripped naked for a thorough search. Hiyab was unable to specify where exactly they were transported. The team that attempted to provide humanitarian and legal support informed meanwhile that the group was transported to the Border Guard post in Białowieża. There too, the aid team was not allowed to sign powers of attorney with the detainees.

When I protested that people had expressed a wish to apply for asylum and we were supposed to sign powers of attorney, I was told that this would be possible at the Border Guard post if people expressed such a wish. Of course, when we arrived later at the BG post in Białowieża, we were refused even to leave our data and they did not let [us – note by WAM] into the post. We saw a prisoner car on the spot, which took them away.

Excerpt from the humanitarian intervention report

Hiyab points out that no documents were submitted to him for signature at the facility. According to him, despite repeatedly expressing his requests for international protection, they were ridiculed by officers.

I was even crying and...Because I, and all of us have seen a lot of suffering and a lot of ...Down the road we have seen a lot of things, so I was asking but they were laughing at us. And we asked for asylum but they didn't give that to us.

Excerpt from an interview with Hiyab

Violence

In September 2024, 104 persons, including 8 children (5 unaccompanied minors) and 12 women (including one pregnant), reported experiencing violence by Belarusian services. Migrants reported beatings, destruction of property, restriction or forced movement. One group, consisting of 13 children and a pregnant woman, was allegedly forcibly thrown into the Bug River in order to force them to try to cross the border.

Violence by Polish services was reported by 87 persons, including 5 children (4 unaccompanied minors) and 3 women. As migrants are usually not able to recognise the formations operating in the Polish–Belarusian border area, the perpetrators could have been officers of the Border Guard, the Polish Army or the Territorial Defence Forces.

Migrants' accounts continue to report being forced to sign documents, as described above, but also being humiliated and denied access to water, food and medical care.

[...] After they came, and they put us in handcuffs, they searched us and took us to a Border Guards station, and in the border guards station we asked to give us food and water, but they refused and said that you [need] to be checked. They made us naked, and we were literally naked, they searched us, everything. And then after two hours, they took us to a car and they pushed us back.

Excerpt from an interview with Hiyab

Among others, a sick woman was taken to the facility who, according to Hiyab and the aid team, was very weak.

Senait⁹ could not get up – only then did we see that she was even weaker than we thought. We demanded that an ambulance be called, but were brushed off with the information that this was a doctor's decision and that she would be examined at the BG post. Senait was gliding with her feet on the ground.

Excerpt from the humanitarian intervention report

Throughout the time spent in the border guard post, those in Hiyab's group (excluding the sick woman) were to be handcuffed, initially with zip-ties, which were removed for the search and then replaced with metal handcuffs. Hiyab recalls that he was forced to kneel on the ground for the approximately three hours he spent in the facility.

⁹ Name has been changed.

- *It's like a jail, and we were kneeling down for like 3 hours with our hands tied, and they didn't even give us food. They pushed us back with empty stomachs, and it's so sad.*
- *So you were on your knees and handcuffed the whole time?*
- *At first it was plastic handcuffs, and they removed those plastic handcuffs to search us, and after they searched us, they put us in handcuffs, like normal ones, metal handcuffs. [...] After they searched us naked, they said put on your clothes and we did.*

Excerpt from an interview with Hiyab

Hiyab and two others from his group were then taken from the post to a car and driven towards the border. According to his account, the ride was supposed to take about 30–45 minutes. The sick Senait, meanwhile, was to remain at the facility. According to the aid team, the woman was then taken to hospital, where she was given legal support.

- *After they took us from the station, there is like a door that you can open in order to get in at the fence, and before getting us into the door they said: "Take off your clothes", and we took off our clothes. And I think they didn't want us to return, so they did that so that we don't return again. So we don't try to do it again. So we were naked and they pushed us back. I was in boxers.[...]*

Even when we were close to the gate, we were holding to the gate and begging them not to push us back, but they used this electrical shock, and they forced us to let [go of] the fence and push us back to the water. [...]

- *And then they pushed [you] inside the river¹⁰?*
- *Yes, they pushed us inside the river, like physically by their hands.*

Excerpt from an interview with Hiyab

Hiyab was unable to identify the exact location of the pushback. As he recalls, during the pushback to the border line, officers were told to stop apprehended persons from looking around.

Even they don't want us to see road, They said put your head down so we don't see the road or anything.

Excerpt from an interview with Hiyab

¹⁰ The interpreter from the Tigrinya language used a word literally meaning river, but the context shows that it can also mean another type of wetland, such as a swamp.

Definitions

Total requests — The total number of reported groups/persons on the move, located in Poland, Belarus, Lithuania or Latvia. It does not consider 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 — number of groups that consist of 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.

Individuals — number of 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. Including support at the hospital.

Legal aid — support in procedures relating to the prevention of pushbacks and deportation and enabling the submission of an application for international protection. Including support at the hospital.

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.

Aid in hospital – material and/ or legal aid

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

Reported violence PL – 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 BY – 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 from August 2021 on the Polish side of the Polish-Belarusian border and those cases from the Belarusian side of which we are aware. 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

Protection Needs*	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- victims of sexual violence- victims or persons subjected to gender-based violence- victims of torture- victims of human trafficking
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* virtually impossible to identify at this stage