

OCTOBER 2024

Report from the Poland–Belarus border



They would threaten me to sign. [...] They use all sorts of threats and violence, and they tell you to sign. One of my friends signed and I didn't, and we thought we would have two different outcomes but they pushed us both back. You sign, they will push you back. You don't sign, they will push you back.

Excerpt from the testimony of Abai, a man from Ethiopia who was pushed back, along with six other Ethiopians – four men and two women, in September of 2024

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 on the move 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 prevent them from obtaining more detailed information about the stories and circumstances of people on the move. During interventions, many of them are in a severe psychophysical condition which makes obtaining detailed information impossible without risking retraumatization 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. Persons in Belarus are provided with information 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:

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Definitions

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

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Context

Work on the border barrier

In October 2024, Poland intensified its efforts to strengthen the physical barrier at the border. In accordance with announcements made by government representatives back in March¹, the vertical poles of the fence have been reinforced with horizontal elements designed to prevent bending the poles with car jacks. Such measures have been identified by the government as important in terms of people crossing the border since the border barrier was installed². At the same time, neither the September extension of the buffer zone on the border³ nor the aforementioned strengthening of the border barrier has translated significantly into decreased border traffic. We write about this below, when discussing demographics and trends during the month in question.



Pic. 1 The image of horizontal elements designed to prevent bending the poles with car jacks.

¹ Transcript of the meeting of the National Defence Committee and the Administration and Internal Affairs Committee on 20.03.2024, <https://orka.sejm.gov.pl/zapisy10.nsf/O/24E25FFD79DA749BC1258AF9003EAE01/%24File/OO33710.pdf> [accessed 3.11.2024].

² Ibid.

³ Ordinance of the Minister of the Interior and Administration of September 9, 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).

Polish Ombudsman's actions regarding irregularities during applications for international protection

On October 2nd, the Office of the Ombudsman published further correspondence between the Ombudsman and Border Guard Commander General Robert Bagan, following the Ombudsman's July and August visits to selected Border Guard outposts on the Polish-Belarusian border. The visits confirmed earlier reports of not allowing attorneys to take part in activities conducted against their principals, and failing to deliver letters and information on case status among other things. Moreover, as the Ombudsman noted, officers question the credibility of declarations of intent to apply for international protection in the Republic of Poland, which foreigners carry with them when detained. Challenging these declarations usually results in a pushback. The Ombudsman once again reminded that the expression of the foreigner's intention to apply for international protection has consequences in the form of the Border Guard's obligation to enable them to effectively submit a written application for international protection as soon as possible and to register such an application⁴. As indicated later in this publication, the actions taken so far by the Ombudsman have changed nothing in the daily practice of the Border Guard.

International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance

On October 10th, the Senate passed a bill authorising Poland's ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. On the 18th of the same month, the president signed the bill. Enforced Disappearance is defined as the deprivation of liberty of a person by state officials or groups acting in cooperation with them, with information about that person's fate being deliberately withheld⁵. Ratification of the convention should force state authorities to look at the pushback procedure as contributing to enforced disappearances. After all, the capture preceding a pushback (often an undocumented detention in practice) and the very fact of a pushback to Belarus (in violation of the principle of non-refoulement) significantly increases the risk of disappearance.

⁴ Ł. Starzewski, The Case of Detained Foreigners Seeking International Protection in the Republic of Poland. Letter to Border Guard Headquarters and response, 2.10.2024, <https://bip.brpo.gov.pl/pl/content/rpo-cudzoziemcy-pelnomocnicy-pushbacki-ksgg> [accessed 5.11.2024].

⁵G. Baranowska, Enforced disappearances in Europe. Formation of international standards for prevention and enforcement of state responsibility, Legal Monographs, Warsaw 2017. Publication available in full at: <https://images.iformat.pl/33A3B10EB/4AA4952F-F697-4E23-B1EA-6FF5F10A7492.pdf> [accessed 3.11.2024].

Definition provided: Helsinki Foundation For Human Rights, How does Poland search for missing migrants? HFHR monitoring, 9.05.2024, <https://hfhr.pl/aktualnosci/jak-polska-poszukuje-zaginionych-migrantow-hfpc-prowadzi-monitoring> [accessed 3.11.2024].

Ratification of the UN Convention on Enforced Disappearance will oblige Poland to:

- treat enforced disappearance as a separate crime included in the Penal Code;
- recognize as a victim of enforced disappearances not only the disappeared person himself/herself but anyone who has suffered directly as a result of an enforced disappearance;
- recognize the competence of the Committee on Enforced Disappearance.

Given the above, human rights activists argue that it is necessary to develop mechanisms to enable and improve effective searches for missing persons and investigations of disappearances and deaths at the border⁶.

Announcement of the suspension of the right to asylum/international protection

On October 12, the Civic Coalition political party held a convention in Warsaw, during which Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced Poland's migration strategy for the coming years. The main controversy was the announcement of the plan to temporarily and/or territorially suspend the right to asylum, most likely meaning the right to apply for international protection⁷. In the days that followed, the idea received criticism from human rights activists⁸, the other parties in the government coalition⁹, as well as representatives of the Belarusian opposition, fearing that the suspension would also hit Belarusians fleeing Alexander Lukashenko's regime¹⁰.

⁶ A comprehensive report on the subject was prepared by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights: G. Baranowska, K. Czarnota, O. Wanicka, M. Czachor, M. Sosniak, The missing on the Polish-Belarusian border. Pushbacks as a factor of enforced disappearances, 2024, <https://hfhr.pl/upload/2024/08/raport-o-wymuszonych-zaginieciach.pdf> [accessed 04.11.2024].

⁷ Civic Coalition convention transcript: <https://www.youtube.com/live/hvYLj2yj8yY?t=2020s>, the topic of migration emerges from 33:40 to 39:10 [accessed 5/11/2024].

⁸ Letter from NGOs to Prime Minister Tusk, dated 14.10.2024, <https://www.amnesty.org.pl/amnesty-international-wraz-z-innymi-organizacjami-apeluje-do-o-premiera-ws-zawieszenia-prawa-do-azylu/> [accessed 3.11.2024].

⁹ Kos/par, Holownia: the right to asylum is "sacred" in international law, 14.10.2024, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/holownia-prawo-do-azylu-jest-w-prawie-miedzynarodowy-m-swiete-Q> [accessed 3.11.2024].

M. Dolak, Wave of comments after Tusk's announcement. Voice of outrage from the Left, 12.10.2024, <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/tusk-chce-zawieszenia-prawa-do-azylu-koalicjanci-odpowiadaja-7080923736574528a> [accessed 3.11.2024].

¹⁰ jB, Latushka hopes Belarusians exiled by Lukashenko to Poland can count on refugee status, 12.10.2024, <https://pl.belsat.eu/82918127/latushka-ma-nadzieje-ze-bialorusini-wygnani-przez-lukaszenkie-do-polski-beda-mogli-liczyc-na-status-uchodzczy> [accessed 3.11.2024].

Publication of the migration strategy

On October 15, at the meeting of the Council of Ministers, the document *Regain Control. Ensure Security. Poland's Comprehensive and Responsible Migration Strategy for 2025–2030*¹¹. At the same meeting, a resolution on its adoption was also passed. The strategy was adopted unanimously, with four ministers from the Left voicing their opposition. The area of divergent views was, as mentioned above, the possibility of suspending the right to asylum. As the ministers later reported on their social media, the immediate reason for the dissenting opinion was that their proposal to write the need to respect the Constitution into the Strategy was rejected¹². In turn, representatives of Poland 2050 political party said that they submitted a proposal for a provision guaranteeing that the temporary suspension of the processing of asylum applications in a situation of serious danger should be possible only under parliamentary control, with special protection for vulnerable groups (children, pregnant women)¹³. The proposal was approved. Two days later, the content of the Strategy was made public.

Criticism of the Strategy

The following days brought further criticism of the document from academics and human rights activists. Among those who spoke out were members of the Committee for Migration Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences. In the spring of this year, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration commissioned a comprehensive study of the needs and challenges of so-called migration management with various stakeholders (including representatives from public administration, migrant support organisations, trade unions, and employment agencies). The report was to form a basis for development of a new migration strategy. The researchers prepared a report titled "Poland's Migration Policy in the Opinions of Institutional Actors"¹⁴, which, as they pointed out in media statements¹⁵

¹¹ "Regain Control. Ensure Security" – Migration Strategy for 2025 – 2030, 17.10.2024, <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/odzyskac-kontrolę-zapewnić-bezpieczeństwo---strategia-migracyjna-na-lata-2025---2030> [accessed 3.11.2024].

¹² Portal X, Anna Maria Zhukowska, https://x.com/AM_Zukowska/status/1846225268618436989 [accessed November 3, 2024].

¹³ Portal X, Katarzyna Pełczyńska, <https://x.com/Kpelczynska/status/1846233364505719111> [accessed November 3, 2024].

¹⁴ M. Lesińska, A. Górny, K. Podgórska, B. Solga, A. Trąbka (eds.), Poland's migration policy in the opinions of institutional actors. Research report, Migration Research Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences, 2024, https://kbnm.pan.pl/images/Raport_KBnM_PAN_dla_MSWiA.pdf [accessed: 3.11.2024].

¹⁵ E. Świętochowska, The right to asylum is barely a slice of migration policy, "Dziennik Gazeta Prawna," 25.10.2025, print version.

and a special statement¹⁶, was not included in the prepared government strategy, particularly regarding the issue of international protection.

Marcin Wiącek, the Polish Ombudsman, has also decided to send questions about the strategy to the Prime Minister. In his letter he asks for an explanation of how the government intends to implement the announced possible temporary and territorial suspension of the right to apply for asylum on Polish territory, taking into account the norms of the Polish Constitution and Poland's international legal obligations. At the same time, the Ombudsman asks for an answer as to how the term "application for asylum" is to be understood in this context. In particular he questioned whether it refers only to domestic protection or if it also includes an application for international protection, as suggested by the title and content of Part Three of the Migration Strategy (especially since in Polish law international protection and asylum are not identical concepts). Marcin Wiącek also expresses doubts about the task imposed on the Ombudsman in the Strategy to monitor the procedure for obtaining protection (and to create a model for such monitoring). He notes that this clause was not consulted with him before it was written into the Strategy¹⁷.

Migration topic at the EU Council summit

The summit of the Council of the European Union was held in Brussels on October 17th–18th. At the meeting, Prime Minister Tusk presented the Polish government's stance on the direction of European migration policies. According to the Prime Minister's Office, the European Council unanimously adopted conclusions on migration, which read that *no country, including Russia and Belarus, can abuse values such as the right to asylum*¹⁸. At the same time, the Prime Minister himself commented on the meeting as follows: *It is reaching the consciousness of European leaders more and more intensely that the methods used so far, including the migration pact, are not the answer to the threat posed by mass illegal migration*¹⁹. This opinion is at odds with the fact that literally a few days earlier a

¹⁶ Committee on Migration Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Position Paper of the Committee on Migration Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Committee on Demographic Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences on the Content of Poland's Migration Strategy for 2025–2030 "Regain Control. Ensure Security," https://kbnm.pan.pl/images/Stnowisko_na_temat_rz%C4%85dowej_Strategii_migracyjnej_KBnM_i_KND_PAN.pdf [accessed: 3.11.2024].

¹⁷ Director of the BRPO Equal Treatment Team, Poland's migration strategy for 2025–2030. Questions from the RPO to the Prime Minister, 29.10.2024, <https://bip.brpo.gov.pl/pl/content/rpo-strategia-migracyjna-pytania-premier> [accessed 3.11.2024].

¹⁸ Prime Minister's Office, Unanimity of the European Council on Migration, 18.10.2024, <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/jednomyslnosc-rady-europejskiej-w-sprawie-migracji> [accessed 5.11.2024].

¹⁹ Ibid

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's letter to the leaders of EU member states was revealed, in which she called for accelerating the implementation of the same Pact²⁰.

Regardless of the discrepancies in the assessment of the Pact itself (even, as it turns out, between the head of the EC and the Polish prime minister, but also other leaders of EU countries), experts on migration policy point out the risks for human rights standards associated with the form of the Pact. Shortly after the publication of von der Leyen's letter, the Migration Policy Group (MPG), pointed out a list of challenges and risks following the implementation of the Pact, focusing on return policy. Among other things, the document mentions:

- providing returnees with pre- and post-return support, including information on rights, legal assistance, material and financial assistance for reintegration;
- treating detention as a last resort; ensuring that detention is used only when necessary;
- verifying the existence of monitoring mechanisms to prevent human rights violations;
- making return decisions in each case after considering the individual situation;
- applying on a larger scale alternatives to return procedures, such as regularisation of stay, in accordance with individual, family and labour market needs;
- engaging stakeholders: involving NGOs, human rights advocates and migrant organisations at all stages of the return process²¹.

MPG also stresses that externalising returns through so-called "return centres" will risk serious human rights violations. Experts also point out that the lack of safe and legal paths to Europe and the EU's restrictive migration policy, contribute to the choice of risky travel methods and the use of smuggling networks.

²⁰ TVN24 BIS portal, Ursula von der Leyen's letter to capitals. 10-point action plan, 15.10.2024, <https://tvn24.pl/swiat/list-ursuli-von-der-leyen-do-stolic-10-punktowy-plan-dzialania-st8135722> [accessed 5.11.2024].

²¹ Migration Policy Group, *Short-term fix, long-term risks: MPG reacts to the letter on migration Ursula von der Leyen sent to EU leaders*, <https://www.migpolgroup.com/index.php/2024/10/17/von-der-leyen-migration-letter-short-term-fix-long-term-risks/> [accessed: 5.11.2024].

Demographics, Trends and Delivered assistance

October 2024 saw a decrease in the number of requests compared to the previous month. The number of people deciding to cross the Belarusian–Polish border in an irregularized manner is not yet as low as that expected in late autumn and winter, when weather conditions mean that few people decide to travel. However, we can already clearly see the typical end-of-year drop in requests. While in September requests from 525 people were registered, in October there were only 227. They travelled in 93 groups, the majority of people – at least 171 – were in Poland. Among all those requesting support were 14 women and nine minors who were travelling unaccompanied. On the eastern side of the barrier, 23 people requested support, as many as 7 of them, including one minor, needed medical care.

REQUESTS IN OCTOBER 2025				
	groups	individuals	minors (incl. UASC)	women (incl. pregnant)
Total	93	227	18 (16)	22 (0)
incl. in Poland	74	171	9 (9)	14 (–)
incl. from Muharrama	10	23	1 (1)	93 (0)

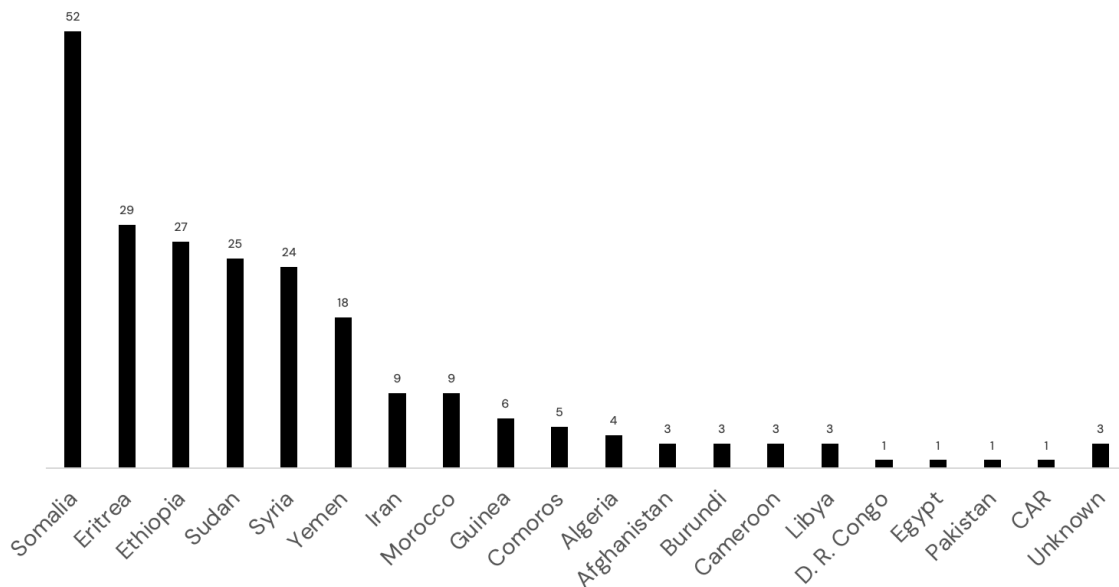


Fig. 1 Countries of origin of individuals who requested support in October 2024

Interventions

In October, 52 successful field interventions were carried out, providing in-kind support to 117 travellers in 50 groups. Among them were eight women and seven minors. As in previous months, those asking for support on the Polish territory most often requested food, water, clothes and shoes. There were also requests for working mobile phones. From the accounts of the people on the move met during the intervention, it appears that their mobile phones are still being destroyed by officers of both Belarusian and Polish services.

DELIVERED ASSISTANCE IN OCTOBER 2024

	groups	individuals	minors	women
Total	50	117	7	8
Material aid	48	115	6	8
Legal aid	36	85	5	6
Medical aid	7	9	0	1
First aid	9	12	0	0
Hospital assistance	8	9	1	2
Number of successful interventions		52		

During humanitarian interventions, people on the move report on the violence they experience at the hands of Polish and Belarusian uniformed services, including inhuman treatment and humiliation. Three men from Ethiopia, reached by the field team in October, spoke about their experiences:

They were on the Belarusian side for 7 days. Two of them crossed the border for the first time, the third was after 5 pushbacks. He recounted being beaten and the use of very strong tear gas by Polish officers and the destruction of phones and sim cards. He reported that other people on the move had their clothes destroyed by Polish officers before the pushback, e.g. by cutting trousers along the legs. His friend was pushbacked in nothing but his underwear.

Excerpt from the field team's field note

Although the Border Guard is the formation responsible for protecting the border and accepting applications for international protection, their operations on the Polish–Belarusian border are supported by other uniformed forces, including the Territorial Defence Forces. The presence of soldiers, trained for a completely different type of operation, is based on a classified decision²². It is therefore unclear what activities on the border they are formally entitled to. However, from the accounts of humanitarian workers, it appears that the military often treats people on the move with more brutality than the border guards. An example of this is a situation that occurred at the beginning of October, when a female soldier, when asked not to put handcuffs on a young person on the move, according to witness accounts replied: *and what will this do to the young whore?*

Muharrama and Belarus

In October, 72 of the 227 people reporting a need for support were in Belarus at the time of contact with humanitarian organisations, including eight women and nine children (seven unaccompanied minors). One of them was a 14-year-old from Syria who wrote:

I lost my mother and father, I'm young and I can't stand the cold.

Excerpt of a message from a 14-year-old from Syria

In mid-October, a 16-year-old from Yemen also described his situation:

Every time I am at the border, the Belarusians beat me and then force me to go behind the Polish fence. The Polish border guards catch me and spray me with pepper spray then send me back. I cannot stay in Belarus because I am afraid of being deported to my country. I cannot live there because of the war. They killed my brother in Yemen.

An excerpt of a message from a 16-year-old from Yemen.
Message originally sent in Arabic

At a similar time a Polish humanitarian organisation was contacted by a family on Belarussian territory who reported that, as a consequence of their attempt to apply

²² M. Piekarski, The military at the border: what it lacks and whether it should be there at all [ANALYSIS], <https://oko.press/wojsko-na-granicy-analiza>, [accessed 05.11.2024].

for international protection in Belarus, they had been detained, beaten and then taken to a forest near the Polish border. According to their accounts the documents they received during detention included an order of deportation from Belarus.

The previously mentioned group of three Ethiopian men also spoke about violence perpetrated by the Belarusian services:

One man reported that Belarusian forces set their dogs on him – he had bite marks on his right arm. Talking about the Belarusian services and the dogs, he repeatedly said ‘very very bad, very bad’. He said that the Belarusian services appeared and asked where people wanted to go. When people answered: Poland they said ok, even gave food and told them to go, when someone said: Minsk, they beat them up.

Excerpt from the team's field note

The violence from the Belarusian services was also described by a man from Sudan who was stranded alone in Muharrama:

I came to the border of Belarus and the army²³ caught me, beat me and caused many problems in my body in my right leg and arm. I [...] want to cross the border to reach Poland to seek protection and save the rest of my life because I miss my home in Sudan because of this hard war. I tried to cross the border to Poland but I failed, they hit me and I couldn't move.

Excerpt of a message from a men from Sudan

Sudanese men who managed to cross the border and apply for protection in Poland in mid-October also experienced an egregious form of humiliation from the Belarusian services:

One of the Sudanese had trench feet and a problem with his right leg. In addition, he had his lip smashed by the Belarusians. [...] Both had been beaten by the Belorussians and had been shaved into a strange Iroquois haircut.

Excerpt from the field team's field note

²³ People on the move do not recognize Polish uniformed formations. We are not sure which formation's representatives the man had in mind when he used the word "Army".



Photo from the archives of the Egala Association

Hospital

In October 2024, Egala Association staff recorded the admission of nine patients who ended up in hospitals after crossing the Polish-Belarusian border in an irregularized manner. Among them were three women, including one minor, travelling unaccompanied. The most common cause of hospitalisation of people on the move was, as in previous months, severe weakness, dehydration and hypothermia, as well as limb injuries.

One of those hospitalised was a man brought to the hospital after falling from the border barrier. He had previously experienced two pushbacks, and after one of them, he was imprisoned in Grodno prison. On the Belarusian side, he was beaten, electrocuted and bitten by dogs. Only the accident and resulting hospitalisation opened the possibility for him to apply for international protection in Poland, which he utilised.

Pushbacks and Violence²⁴

Between October 4th and November 4th of this year, Border Guards perpetrated 700 pushbacks from Poland to Belarus according to their official response to the Grupa Granica inquiry.

During a similar period, from October 1st to October 31st 2024, humanitarian organisations operating in the border area registered information on the pushbacks of 87 persons. Among them were four minors, including two who were travelling without a legal guardian or custodian. One of them was a 17-year-old from Eritrea, travelling alone, who contacted one of the humanitarian organisations while on the eastern side of the border barrier, writing:

We were in Poland border, the police²⁵ threw us. They slapped me. I was alone. Police Poland threw me.

Excerpt of a message from a 17-year-old from Eritrea

Eight of these 87 people were women. Among them was an Ethiopian woman travelling alone who shared her experience with those who assisted her during the humanitarian intervention in the second half of October.

[...] She explained that this was her fifth crossing from Belarus to Poland, as she had been pushed back four previous times. She spent a total of six months in the forest, on both the Belarusian and Polish sides.

Excerpt from the team's field note

Another woman from Syria, travelling in a group of eight, wrote to one of the humanitarian organisations:

²⁴ The quotes used in this chapter are taken from interviews conducted with the people on the move, reports from NGOs working in the Polish–Belarusian border region, and excerpts from messages sent by people on the move to NGOs. Quotes from text messages and reports that are not direct testimonies are described accordingly. Translations of quotes from in-depth interviews are from consecutive translations and, as such, are translators' interpretations. News and reports have been translated in a way preserving the original tone of the statements. Dates, locations and details that could identify individuals have been removed from this paper to preserve the anonymity of our interviewees. All names have been changed.

²⁵ People on the move do not recognize Polish uniformed formations. We are not sure which formation's representatives the man had in mind when he used the word "police".

I am from Syria. The army caught us and we returned to the border. I am a girl who was inside Poland but the army caught me and now they have put me at the border. I asked them for protection, asylum but they refused. [...] I wanted to ask you for protection, but the soldiers entered. After 5 minutes, the young men held me. [...] Now the Belarusian army is putting the girls on the Lithuanian border. We won't know how to get out of there. They put me there twice and told us that if you enter Poland once and come back, they will put you there. And they actually do that. I talked to you before. I have been entering Poland since May, but the army always catches me. I will try again. I hope the army does not catch me. I am very, very tired.

Excerpt of a message from a woman from Syria

PUSHBACKS AND VIOLENCE IN OCTOBER 2024

	groups	individuals	minors (incl. UASC)	women (incl. pregnant)
Reported pushbacks	38	87	4 (2)	8 (-)
Reported violence PL	16	35	2 (1)	6 (-)
Reported violence BY	16	25	1 (1)	0 (-)

Of all those deported, 18 experienced pushback despite expressing their intention of seeking international protection to border guards. This intention was expressed

in the presence of witnesses and representatives²⁶, during the so-called assisted request for international protection²⁷.

One such person was a man in his twenties from Eritrea, travelling with a group of six people. They were all pushed back to Belarus and a few days after the incident he wrote to one of the organisations:

I am in Belarus. I came to Poland a week ago. I called you, you helped me with clothes, shoes, food. Then you handed me over to the police. They told us to sign bad papers, we refused, then they sent us back to Belarus.

Excerpt of a message from a man from Eritrea

The man mentioned in his message about the documents that Border Guards allegedly urged him to sign. A significant number of people who shared their experiences with humanitarian representatives faced a similar situation before pushback.

[...] He said that when they got to the post, they beat them for two days and tried to force them to sign a document saying that they didn't want asylum. They didn't sign it, but they still had all their belongings and phones taken from them and were kicked out to Belarus. Then they were pushed back 3 more times.

Quoted from a field report on an intervention with a man travelling alone from Syria, October 2024

²⁶ Representatives do not need to have a legal background. In the context of humanitarian interventions, the power of attorney is most often granted to humanitarian workers. This allows them to represent and assist the principals in administrative procedures conducted by the Border Guard.

²⁷ Assisted Asylum Request is a procedure adopted by organisations working in the area of the Poland-Belarus border. The objective is to reduce the risk of pushback of an asylum seeker. The process is based on the premise known as 'protection through presence', according to which humanitarian presence might deter the potential risk of abuse and, in this specific context, denial of access to asylum procedures. Migrants expressing the intention to seek asylum to humanitarian workers may choose to be accompanied by aid workers during their encounter with the Border Guard. Aid workers support the asylum seeker during the process by providing information about legal consequences of applying for asylum in Poland, informing Border Guard about a person's location and intention to request asylum, waiting with them for the arrival of the officers and accompanying them during the next stages. Every asylum seeker is also able to choose a representative to support them during the administrative procedures until the risk of pushback is averted. It is done by granting the power of attorney to a designated person.

They came together from Eritrea, one of them was pushed back twice, the other four times. They were in the Border Guard post before seeking international protection, but the guards required them to sign a document waiving their intention to seek asylum. They refused to sign it, so they were pushed back.

Quoted from a field report on an intervention with men from
Eritrea, October 2024

However, this is not the rule. According to reports from people on the move, there are some among them who despite their repeated experience of being pushed back to Belarus were never brought to a Polish Border Guard post nor pressured to sign any documents. According to a report from a humanitarian intervention, one such person was an Ethiopian travelling alone who experienced three pushbacks in a span of five days, all of them directly from the forest.

We do not have information on how many of those pushed back in October had expressed a will to apply for international protection at the time of their encounter with the Border Guards. Some people reported during humanitarian interventions that they had experienced pushback despite verbally expressing a will to apply for international protection. One report from a humanitarian intervention featured a passage on the story of a woman travelling alone from one of the Central African countries.

When she was in Poland before, she didn't know what to do, so she went to the authorities herself and asked for asylum. They took her to a post, gave her food, let her bathe and even let her sleep. After an hour, however, they woke her up. The officer took her to a room where she was asked to sign a document in Polish. The woman refused, but they finally forced her to sign. Immediately afterwards, she was put in a car and taken to Belarus. In the meantime, she lost her phone.

Excerpt from the team's field note

In October, as in previous months, people on the move who reported their experiences of being pushed back to Belarus also described the accompanying violence. The most common incidents in their testimonies are the use of pepper spray and beatings by Border Guards. In this month alone, 35 people reported experiencing violence allegedly perpetrated by the Polish uniformed services. During the same period, 25 people reported violence allegedly perpetrated by

Belarusian services. At the end of October, a humanitarian organisation was contacted by a man from Eritrea who had been on Polish territory a few days earlier. He had reportedly been caught by Polish Border Guards and taken to Belarus. In his message, he described the violence experienced during the pushback:

*What if I need human rights because I have been thrown out by the Army²⁸. I was pushed back yesterday after I called for help.
[...] I told them I have asthma, they don't understand.
[...] And they took my \$800, the one who checked our stuff. They were all with masks. They were using torches, strictly to our faces so that we couldn't see. And they say open up eyes. They yell a lot to open your eyes. They put spray. If you can imagine, for about one hour you don't know what you are doing.
[...] The Belarus army saw that my breathing was so bad. They returned me to Minsk.*

Excerpt of a message from a man from Eritrea

Similar violence – beatings, pepper gas spraying, intimidation – was experienced by Abai, a man from Ethiopia who agreed to describe his experience during an interview conducted by representatives of a humanitarian organisation.

Abai attempted to cross the Belarusian–Polish border five times over the course of two months. As he reports, he was pushed back a total of four times, but only twice taken to a Border Guard post before being pushed back. The last pushback that Abai recounts was supposed to take place around September 7. At that time, the man crossed the border together with six other Ethiopians – four men and two women. They crossed the border at night, separated and dispersed, but after a short time, they were all caught. Abai believes they were targeted using drones he saw flying overhead. He reports that the detention was made by about ten officers, but also highlights that he is not sure about this due to the stress:

There were a lot of police officers there, maybe around 10 people. And when they catch you even two people feel like many and it's scary.

Excerpt of a interview with Abai

During the apprehension in the forest, Abai was only with one of his companions. As he relates, he saw the other five in the car, which transported them to the

²⁸ People on the move do not recognize Polish uniformed formations. We are not sure which formation's representatives the man had in mind when he used the word "Army".

Border Guard post. He describes that his colleague and him were the last to be caught, and both were searched immediately after being detained:

They took our phones immediately when they caught us, before we got into the car. [...] Phones were all we had at that time, money and phones, that's it.

Excerpt of a interview with Abai

Shortly after being searched and having his phones taken away, Abai described him being beaten and sprayed with pepper spray. Asked if he had expressed a request for protection in Poland, he replied:

Once they use the pepper spray it is hard to talk, when they used it on me I couldn't even stand straight, it's so painful so I didn't manage to talk to them. If the pepper spray is in your eye you can't see straight, you can't see clearly even the next day or so.

Excerpt of a interview with Abai

Then, according to the report, all seven were transported to the Border Guard post in a pick-up truck. The trip was to take about 30–40 minutes. Abai notes in his account that this is an estimate of the driving time. He could not verify how long it actually took because according to his testimony, everyone's phones had been taken away. At the post, the entire group was to be kept in one room:

*They put us into like a magazine, something that looked like a jail-cell, and in the next morning they took us and pushed us back.
[...] There wasn't a toilet and anything, it was just so cold.*

Excerpt of a interview with Abai

The man recounts that despite requests, they were given neither water nor food at the facility. He reports that the officers claimed they did not have these products. They were allegedly ignoring the requests he and his companions expressed for international protection in Poland. They were also to ridicule them.

- *And did you also ask for asylum?*
- *We asked, but they didn't listen and didn't care.*
- *So they just didn't answer or did they say something about that?*
- *They would laugh at you and just leave.*

Excerpt of a interview with Abai

Abai does not know exactly how much time was spent at the post. He states that it could not have lasted more than one night, as he remembers that in the morning they were all taken together to the border barrier. There the guards were to open the gate and order the group to cross to the other side. After crossing, Abai and his companions met Belarusian services, from whom they allegedly also experienced violence.

There are all sorts of violence, everything more or less I mentioned here. Even though I didn't experience it in the last pushback, I have experienced all sorts of violence, and when they [polish services] beat you from my experience they are even more harsh than the Belarussian soldiers.

[...]

They [Polish officers] have these shoes that look like they are made of metal and they kick you in the stomach and other sensitive areas.

[...].

They will search you when you arrive at the police station, all we can possibly have is money or phones, and the phones, once they catch you, once they push you back, they break the phones. Even if it's not broken for some reason the phones don't work.

Excerpt of a interview with Abai

Abai further adds that during one of the earlier pushbacks, at a Border Guard post, he was to be given documents to sign. According to his words, he was provided with a translation in a language he could understand. After reviewing its contents, he has refused to sign.

There was a lot of details on that paper, but at the bottom, on the last page it says "I don't want to apply for asylum in Poland, I don't want to live in Poland." so I didn't sign.

Excerpt of a interview with Abai

The man points out that regardless of whether someone signed the documents or refused to do so, they were pushed back to Belarus.

They would threaten me to sign. [...] They use all sorts of threats and violence, and they tell you to sign. One of my friends signed and I didn't sign and we thought we would have two different outcomes but they pushed us both back. You sign, they will push you back. You don't sign, they will push you back.

Excerpt of a interview with Abai



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 *sistiema*.

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 directly²⁹.

Reported violence PL — reported cases of violence experienced directly by people on the move, the perpetrators of which were members of the Polish uniformed services: Border Guard, Police, Polish Army, Territorial Defence Forces, according to the victims' accounts.

Reported violence BY — forms of violence directly experienced by people on the move, the perpetrators of which were people belonging to the Belarusian uniformed services, according to the victims' accounts.

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 people on the move 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 move, 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 move, 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

²⁹ K. Augustová, J. Sapoch, Border Violence as Border Deterrence. Condensed Analysis of Violent Push-Backs from the Ground, „Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies” 2002, nr 5(1), <https://movements-journal.org/issues/08.balkanroute/12.augustova,sapoch--border-violence-as-border-deterrence.html> [data dostępu: 8.04.2024].

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