



APRIL 2025

Report from the Poland–Belarus border

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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. All names used in the report have been changed.

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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One Month On: Legal Ambiguity, Human Rights Risks, and Other Concerns on the Implementation of Poland's Temporary Suspension of Asylum at the Belarusian Border

Legal Ambiguity and Concerns Over Territorial Scope

April marks the first full month of the regulation suspending the possibility of applying for international protection at the border between Poland and Belarus. At the time the regulation was published, on March 27, 2025,¹ experts and human rights advocates raised concerns about the territorial scope of the suspension.² The vague wording—the *suspension [which] [...] applies at the state border with the Republic of Belarus*³—did not clearly specify how far from the borderline the ban on applying for protection would be in effect. In response to journalists' inquiries, the Ministry of the Interior and Administration stated that *the legal provisions are not formulated in a way that designates any specific area where the restriction applies, and that the decisive factor will be the factual circumstances of each case, i.e., the ability to confirm the circumstances [of border crossing]. It is to be expected that in practice, such cases will occur in the immediate vicinity of the border.*⁴ This response suggests there may be a risk of arbitrary decisions when it comes to the fate of people crossing the border. So far cases documented by the civil society in April and first days of May seem to support that concern.

¹ Regulation of the Council of Ministers of 27 March 2025 on the temporary restriction of the right to submit an application for international protection (Journal of Laws 2025, item 390).

² *Opinion of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights on the Regulation of the Council of Ministers concerning the restriction of the right to international protection*, Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 27 March 2025.

<https://hfhr.pl/aktualnosci/rozporzadzenie-zawieszajace-prawo-do-ochrony-miedzynarodowej> [accessed: 19.05.2025].

³ *ibid.*

⁴ A. Kiełczykowska, *Granica z Białorusią zamknięta na wnioski azylowe. Terespol bez wyjątków*, "Bankier", 11.04.2025,

<https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Granica-z-Bialorusia-zamkniete-na-wnioski-azylowe-Terespol-bez-wyjatkow-8923308.html> [accessed: 19.05.2025].

Discretion in Practice: Case Examples Highlighting Inconsistencies

On April 22, the Maritime Branch of the Border Guard reported that it had accepted asylum applications from five Somali men near Szczecin, close to the German border. The men were apprehended after local residents reported them to the Border Guard. In their case, no legal assistance was needed for them to submit their applications for international protection⁵.

In another case, this time in the Podlaskie region, an employee of a non-governmental organization and legal representative of one of the migrants was informed by a Border Guard officer that the man would only be allowed to submit an application for international protection after being transferred to a guarded detention center⁶. The man was among those who, after crossing the so-called “green border” from Belarus, requested assistance from the civil society.

Thanks to the coordinated efforts of the activists and iNGOs involved in the intervention, he was granted an *interim measure* by the European Court of Human Rights, which prevented him from being pushed back to Belarus. However, due to the lack of a legal basis to accept his asylum application on the spot (according to the current interpretation of the law by the Border Guard), he was sent to a detention center for the initiation of return proceedings.

Interim Measures from the European Court of Human Rights

The man mentioned above is one of 12 people who, between March 27 and May 12, 2025, were successfully protected from being pushed back after crossing the border irregularly, thanks to interim measures issued by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR)⁷. The Court granted these 12 measures after concluding that sending the individuals back to Belarus could pose a real risk of violating their right to life or their right to be free from torture or other inhuman or degrading treatment.

⁵ Kurier Szczeciński, *Somalijczycy zatrzymani koło Buku złożyli wnioski o ochronę międzynarodową*, 22.04.2025, <https://24kurier.pl/aktualnosci/wiadomosci/somalijczycy-zatrzymani-kolo-buku-zlozyli-wnioski-o-ochrone-miedzynarodowa/> [accessed: 19.05.2025].

⁶ WAM operational data.

⁷ up until 12th of May.

Medical Facilities as Points of Uncertain Protection

Notably, 11 of these individuals were in hospitals in Hajnówka or Białystok while they waited for the Court's decision. At the same time, according to the Association for Legal Intervention, in the case of two people who tried to apply for protection at the official border crossing in Terespol, and had already been granted interim measure, Poland failed to comply with the Court's ruling.⁸

The average waiting time for a decision of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) on interim measures was in this period typically between several hours and one to two working days. However, while awaiting the decision, individuals remain at risk of being returned to Belarus, even while receiving medical care in hospitals.

For example on April 11, Grupa Granica reported that a young man from Mali, who had been hospitalized, was pushed back to Belarus. He had been brought to a hospital in Hajnówka by ambulance, where medical staff noticed signs of confusion—he repeatedly asked where he was and which country he was in. He told them he was 17 years old and wanted to apply for international protection. He signed a power of attorney with a legal representative from European Lawyers in Lesvos and expressed his intention to seek asylum.

Since he had no documents and had declared himself a minor, he was scheduled for an age assessment the next day⁹. However, the following morning, around 11 a.m., Border Guard officers discharged him from the hospital. The legal representative sent all the necessary documents to the Border Guard post in Białowieża and asked for information about the boy's situation.

Worried that he might be pushed back, the legal representative requested an interim measure from the ECHR. With no response from the Border Guard, she called the post around 3 p.m. and was told that the boy was already on his way back from Białystok. The officer assured her that she would be kept updated about what was happening. However, no one followed up with her, and she received no information about the results of the age test or what steps were being taken next.

Later, around 6:30 p.m., the ECHR issued a decision in favor of the boy, prohibiting Poland from sending him back to Belarus. The legal representative emailed the decision to the Border Guard post around 7:00 p.m. and called again, but the officer refused to provide any information, advising her to call later.

⁸ Association for Legal Intervention, *Polska nie zastosowała się do decyzji Trybunału w Strasburgu i zawróciła uchodźców do Białorusi*, 18.04.2025, <https://interwencjaprawna.pl/polska-nie-zastosowala-sie-do-decyzji-trybunalu-w-strasburgu-i-zawrocila-uchodzcow-do-bialorusi/> [accessed: 19.05.2025].

⁹ A method most commonly used by the Polish Border Guard is the bone x-ray: it is not compliant with the EASO age assessment recommendations.

The next morning, when she called again, she was told that the ECHR decision had arrived too late—the boy had already been pushed back to Belarus. The officer expressed regret, stating, "Unfortunately, time cannot be turned back."

Shortly after, the boy reached out to Grupa Granica from Belarus, saying that before being pushed back across the border, Polish officers had beaten him. He reported: *"Polish police officers beat me and broke my foot and finger."*¹⁰

This case is one of three similar incidents recorded so far involving individuals hospitalized in the Podlaskie region. In each case, the ECHR issued interim measures, but the decisions were delivered to the Border Guard only after the individuals had already been pushed back to Belarus.

Situation at the Terespol Border Crossing

The suspension of the right to international protection also applies to the only open for passenger traffic border crossing between Poland and Belarus – the Brest–Terespol border, which since the 1990s has been a main escape route for citizens of former Soviet Union countries fleeing persecution.

As lawyers supporting individuals reaching the Belarusian city of Brest point out, on the first day of the new regulations, individuals claiming to have experienced political repression (including torture) were turned away at the border crossing, despite declaring to Polish authorities that they feared persecution if returned to their home countries. Over the next few days, there were also documented cases of refusals to accept asylum applications from a citizen of a Central Asian country, who had been living in the Russian Federation in recent years and had documentation regarding the violence he had suffered at the hands of Russian authorities. He also reported receiving threats of being drafted to the Russian army and sent to the front in eastern Ukraine. In the case of two women traveling together from the Caucasus, an application was accepted from one who was pregnant, while the other, traveling with a young child, was told to get out of the car and return to Belarus.¹¹

Due to geographical and geopolitical reasons, for citizens of Russia and Central Asian countries, the escape route from areas where they face danger often passes through Poland. Additionally, Russia, to which around 10% of Tajikistan's citizens have been migrating seasonally for work in recent years due to economic collapse, has intensified

¹⁰ Grupa Granica, <https://www.facebook.com/grupagranica/posts/pfbid02sQ26C7WuELePEY8nBUb3MyUK2dcZbtCZMxpUNkF2uw9GmLgc2E2NDmTljZ5qmN7gl?rdid=UQcgzbwf3XkyskCB#> [accessed: 19.05.2025].

¹¹ Z. Kaciupska, T. Sieniow, *Zawieszenie prawa do azylu - realia prawne i konsekwencje dla rozwoju sytuacji na granicy polsko-białoruskiej*, referat wygłoszony na 25 seminarium grupy Badaczki i Badacze na Granicy, 12-13.04.2025 r.

its persecution of migrants¹² over the past year. This affects both those migrating seasonally or permanently for economic reasons, as well as those who left Tajikistan due to political repression. The pretext for this persecution was initiated by the media reports from the spring of 2024, that reported that several men from Tajikistan claimed responsibility for a deadly attack at the concert near Moscow¹³.

For women arriving at the border crossing in Brest–Terespól, one of the key reasons for their flight is the widespread domestic violence, which has been intensified by deliberate actions of the Russian authorities. These include the decriminalization of domestic violence and the lack of systemic support for its victims¹⁴. In recent years, a significant number of women seeking international protection in Terespól have come from the North Caucasus region, which is part of Russia.¹⁵

Government's Future Plans Regarding the Suspension of the Right to Apply for Protection

On May 6, 2025, Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced at a press conference that the government plans to extend the suspension of the right to apply for international protection beyond the initial 60-day period. He stated that, *over a month into the suspension, pressure on the border has not decreased, and that the suspension is intended to apply to those who cross the border illegally*¹⁶. This may seem surprising in the context of the content of the Council of Ministers' request for the Sejm's consent to extend the restriction on the right to submit an application for protection, which was submitted to the Sejm on the same day. The request states that the extension of the suspension would apply to the same territorial scope as before – thus affecting not only

¹²M. Popławski, *Tadżykistan: migracyjny wentyl bezpieczeństwa*, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, 4.06.2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2024-06-05/tadzykistan-migracyjny-wentyl-bezpieczenstwa> [accessed: 19.05.2025].

¹³P. Sauer, *'I noticed nothing strange': suspect's colleagues express shock at Moscow attack*, "Guardian", 26.03.2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/26/moscow-concert-hall-attack-tajik-gunmen-russia> [accessed: 19.05.2025].

¹⁴J. E. Johnson, *Russia's Authoritarian Policymaking: The Politics of Domestic Violence after Partial Decriminalization*, "Problems of Post-Communism", Volume 71, 2024 – Issue 6, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10758216.2023.2274074> [accessed: 19.05.2025 r.].

¹⁵M. Szczepanik, *Republika strachu. Prawa człowieka we współczesnej Czeczenii*, Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, 2019, <https://hfhr.pl/upload/2025/02/czeczenia-raport-prawa-czlowieka.pdf> [accessed: 19.05.2025].

I. Kaliszewska, *The Situation of Women in the North Caucasus (Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia)*, Office for Foreigners, 2019, <https://www.gov.pl/attachment/03e0dc75-96f1-497d-ba53-e1ec00fdcb4a> (accessed: 19.05.2025)

¹⁶Statement by D. Tusk before the Council of Ministers meeting, 06 May 2025, time: 9:30 min, YouTube platform. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mkh-PYt_Oac [accessed: 19.05.2025].

those who cross the border irregularly, but also those who present themselves at a border crossing.¹⁷

Summary of findings:

This initial assessment of the first month of implementation of the new regulation as expected, confirms previous significant concerns:

Access to international protection is effectively blocked for those crossing the border between the two countries both irregularly and through the border crossing. The few individuals who succeeded in applying for asylum were predominantly hospital patients who had received interim measures from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) granting them temporary protection from pushbacks.

Despite the very efficient work of the ECHR, in at least three cases individuals had been discharged from hospitals in Hajnówka and Białystok and pushed back before the rulings reached the Polish Border Guard. In one case the delay was only about 20 minutes.

The existence of an effective mechanism for identifying individuals belonging to vulnerable groups—who, according to the regulation, should be exempt from its application—appears doubtful. This confirms concerns that the exceptions set out in the regulation are not being effectively applied in practice.

The suspension also impacts the Brest–Terespol road crossing—historically a vital route for political dissidents and women fleeing domestic violence from post-Soviet states. Civil society actors have documented cases of individuals being denied the opportunity to apply for asylum at this crossing, despite clear indicators of vulnerability. At least one incident was reported where an ECHR interim measure was not respected by the Polish authorities at the crossing.

Demographics, trends and requests

In April 2025, we recorded reports from 355 individuals traveling in 226 groups. Women accounted for nearly 24% of all reported cases—there were 54 of them, 5 of whom were pregnant. Reports concerning minors made up over 15% of all requests for assistance (34 out of the 35 minors we were in contact with in April were traveling without a legal guardian). The number of support requests registered in April 2025 is 335, which is

¹⁷ Request for the approval of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland to extend the temporary restriction of the right to submit an application for international protection at the state border with the Republic of Belarus, 6 May 2025, Sejm document no. 1225.

significantly lower than those recorded in 2024 (1,066), 2023 (1,320), and 2022 (782¹⁸). Of all 355 reports received in April, 56 came from individuals from Somalia. During the same period, 37 people from Afghanistan, 36 from Sudan, 31 from Eritrea, 29 from Ethiopia, and 16 from Cameroon also reached out. Due to difficult communication conditions, it was not possible to determine the country of origin for 104 individuals.

REQUESTS APRIL 2025				
	groups	individuals	minors (incl. UASC)	women (incl. pregnant)
Total	226	355	35 (34)	54 (5)
incl. in Poland	39	73	12 (12)	3 (0)
incl. from Belarus	144	201	17 (16)	37 (4)
incl. from Muharrama	28	55	6 (6)	11 (0)

¹⁸ The data for 2022 covers the period from March 29 to May 2, 2022. This shift is due to the fact that the data was collected on a weekly basis at that time.

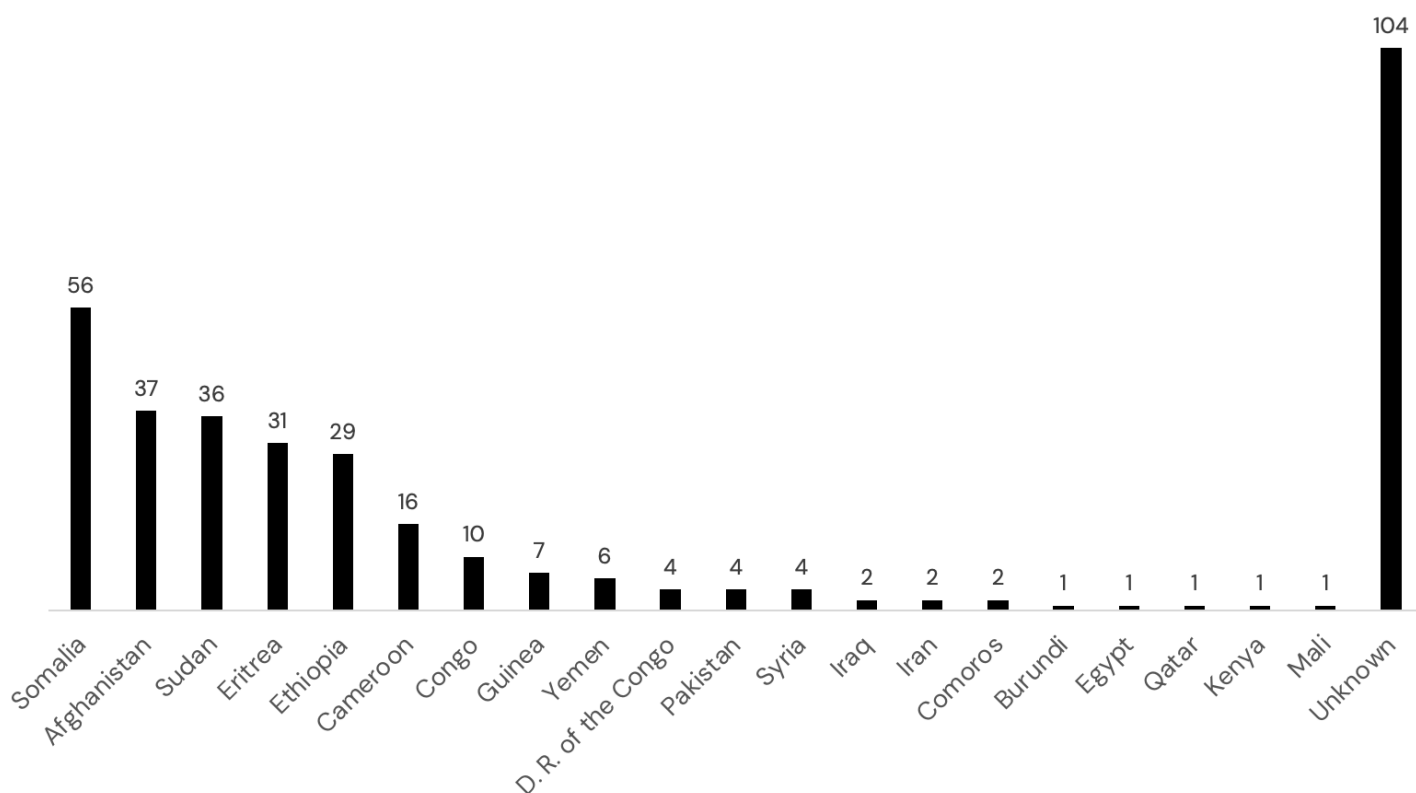


Fig. 1 Countries of origin of those reporting a need for support in April 2025

Despite a significant improvement in weather conditions compared to the typically harsher winter months, in the reporting period in Białowieża, the average daily temperature remained below 10°C for 13 days and dropped below 0°C for 11 days. On one day, the temperature did not rise above 0°C at any point. Rain or snow fell in the Białowieża Forest on 9 out of the 30 days in April. Thus, although the improvement in weather—and consequently, in travel conditions—is both visible and tangible, it is important to remember that people attempting to cross the green border in spring remain at risk of serious health complications, hospitalization, or even death due to hypothermia.

A major issue faced by all individuals attempting to migrate across the Polish–Belarusian border is the extremely limited access to medical care. More than 25% of all people who requested assistance in April reported health problems during conversations or meetings with humanitarian workers or activists. The most frequently reported issues remain: general physical exhaustion caused by prolonged stays in the forest;

gastrointestinal problems, often linked to the consumption of contaminated water; skin and eye irritation resulting from exposure to harmful substances such as pepper spray; and injuries caused by dog bites or by beatings, reportedly inflicted by Belarusian and Polish border authorities.

I was in the forest for 3 weeks, I was very hurt. One eye was severely damaged. My arm is broken and my leg is injured. When I was in the woods, I was eating one snickers in 2 days, I was very hungry. I was drinking dirty water, I have a stomach ache.

Excerpt from a conversation with a minor from Ethiopia

Do wyjątkowo często spotykanych w ostatnim czasie urazów zaliczyć można liczne i rozległe rany szarpane drutem żyletkowym. Zwiększająca się skala ich występowania jest bez wątpienia związana z nieprzerwanie rozbudowywaną barierą graniczną, której istotną częścią są właśnie wielopiętrowe zwoje concertiny.

[...] deep lacerations on the fingers of his right hand. The hand might also be broken (he fell from a fence). He reported radiating pain throughout his body and limited mobility.

Excerpt from a field intervention

Muharrama and Belarus

At the time of establishing contact, 28 groups were located in the area between the barrier on the Polish side and the fortifications on the Belarusian side. These groups comprised a total of 55 individuals, including 11 women and 6 minors. All minors were traveling without a legal guardian¹⁹.

Migrants often decide to retreat from the muharrama back into Belarus, primarily due to poor health conditions. However, not all of them manage to leave the border zone, which is guarded by Belarusian security forces.

When the Polish border guards sent me back to Belarus, the Belarusian guards took me to the border between Belarus and Lithuania. Then, they threw me into a river and told me, "This is Europe, go into Lithuania." But Lithuania sent me back to Belarus. Each time, the Belarusian guards forced me back into the river. I tried to return to Minsk, but it was impossible because every road was guarded by the

¹⁹ The figures we present do not allow us to estimate—even approximately—the actual number of people present in the area between the barriers during a given period. However, we publish them because they help identify upward and downward trends and highlight moments of increased migratory activity along the Polish-Belarusian border.

Belarusian forces, who showed no mercy. For 8 to 9 days, I slept in the wilderness without shoes, suffering immensely. At times, I questioned whether this was real life or just a nightmare. I lost hope and believed I was going to die. Now, I'm alive, but I still don't know what to do.

Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Somalia

However, even a successful return to a larger Belarusian city does not guarantee safe access to medical assistance for people on the move.

When I reach Belarus I found the place to difficult to live in, so I tried to cross the border to Poland for 5 times. In the 6th time the Belarusian police broke my one leg and made a big fracture in the other leg also made me to suffer in the forest for days. Then they sent me with an ambulance straight to the hospital after days and the doctor told me that there is a fracture and one broken bone, due to which my legs had been plastered. I have been advised to take bed rest for 6 weeks to recover my injuries. But I can't afford the expenses for my medical bills because I don't have insurance also money at all any. Even though the doctor advised me kindly to stay there for weeks I can't make it due to shortage of money. I left the hospital and came home. I'm in such pain and can't sleep all the day and night because of the fracture in my legs.

Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Eritrea

April 2025: Confirmed Deaths in the Border Region

In April, reports of the deaths of as many as seven individuals reached the public. Six of them were recovered from the Bug River. As we reported last month, NGOs and individuals involved in humanitarian efforts at the border had, since mid-March, been documenting accounts of violence by Belarusian authorities, who, according to testimonies, were forcing people to cross the river—either by swimming or using inflatable boats.

On April 6, near the village of Woroblin, the body of a young man was recovered from the Bug River. It is likely that he was one of the men who drowned in mid-March after being pushed into the river by Belarusian border forces.

On April 15, near Janów Podlaski, the bodies of two individuals were recovered from the Bug. The remains were discovered by border officers during the apprehension of a group of Afghans attempting to cross the border at that location.

On April 18, on the Belarusian side of the Bug River, the body of a man was recovered. On the same day, on the Polish side near Janów Podlaski, two additional bodies were found in the river. The identities of the deceased remain unknown.²⁰

On April 28, a forester came across human remains in a forest near Straszewo. The deceased was carrying identification documents. At this time, the family in the country of origin does not wish for his personal details to be made public.

Delivered assistance

DELIVERED ASSISTANCE APRIL 2025				
	groups	individuals	minors	women
Total	26	49	12	1
Material aid	24	46	11	0
Legal aid	6	6	3	0
Medical aid	7	10	1	0
First aid	9	11	1	0
Hospital assistance		4	3	0
Interventions undertaken		32		
Successful intervention		27		

²⁰ The list of deceased individuals found since 2021 is provided below:

Border Death Monitoring Group (BDMG), *List of the Deceased*,

<https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/en/list-of-the-deceased/> (accessed May 19, 2025).

Piotr Czaban, author of the blog *Czaban robi raban*, reports a higher number of deceased persons found in April of this year (8 individuals).

In April, NGOs and their collaborators were able to provide support to 49 individuals traveling in 26 groups. The total assistance offered to people on the move included humanitarian interventions in the field—often accompanied by medical support—as well as legal interventions. In April, legal support primarily involved assisting individuals in requesting an interim measure from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). This measure generally protects people from being pushed back to Belarus and allows them to apply for international protection despite the current suspension of the asylum procedure. Such support is provided both in the field and in hospitals in the Podlaskie region, where people in need of hospitalization after crossing the Polish–Belarusian border are admitted. Nearly 25% of all those supported in April were minors, at least 12 of whom were traveling without a legal guardian.

People contacting humanitarian actors from within Polish territory most often requested food, water, clothing, and shoes. There were also occasional requests for working mobile phones. Accounts collected during interventions indicate that migrants' phones are still being destroyed by officers of both the Belarusian and Polish border services. In April, 23 of the 49 individuals supported during humanitarian interventions had health-related issues. Twelve of them were patients of the medical team from the humanitarian organization Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).

Five out of the 32 field interventions undertaken in April were unsuccessful, meaning the support teams were unable to reach the group's reported location in time. Such cases are usually the result of difficulties in determining the group's exact whereabouts or a loss of contact—often due to a phone battery dying or the group being apprehended by border forces before help could arrive. In some cases, it was later confirmed that the individuals had been pushed back, as they re-established contact from the eastern side of the border barrier.

Pushbacks and Violence²¹

²¹ The quotes used in this chapter come from interviews conducted with people on the move, reports from non-governmental organizations working on the Polish–Belarusian border, and excerpts from messages sent by individuals on the move to NGOs and advocates. Quotes from text messages and reports that are not direct testimonies are appropriately described. Translations of quotes from in-depth interviews are based on consecutive translations and, as such, inherently include a degree of interpreter interpretation. Translations of messages and reports were carried out to preserve the original tone of the statements. Dates, locations, and details that could identify individuals have been removed from this work to ensure the anonymity of our interlocutors. All names have been changed.

PUSHBACKS AND VIOLENCE APRIL 2025				
	groups	individuals	minors (incl. UASC)	women (incl. pregnant)
Reported pushbacks	51	75	7 (7)	4 (0)
Reported violence PL	24	32	2 (2)	2 (0)
Reported violence BY	27	48	4 (4)	2 (1)

During the period, humanitarian organizations received reports of pushbacks from 75 individuals traveling in 51 groups. Among them were at least 4 women. Twenty-three of these individuals had experienced more than one pushback. In total, 128 pushbacks to Belarus were recorded in April.

During the same period, the Podlasie Branch of the Border Guard reported carrying out 1,055 pushbacks²². Of these, 74 individuals on the basis of a decision ordering them to leave the territory of Poland (pursuant to Article 303b of the *Act on Foreigners* of 12 December 2013), while 981 individuals in accordance with the Regulation of the Minister of the Interior and Administration of 13 March 2020.

People on the move who reported violence accompanying pushbacks described beatings, the use of chemical irritants and stun guns by officers, as well as being attacked by dogs. Theft and destruction of personal belongings were also commonly reported.

In April alone, 32 individuals reported experiencing violence allegedly perpetrated by Polish uniformed services. During the same time, 48 individuals described violence they attributed to Belarusian authorities. In total, 82 cases of reported violence at the Polish-Belarusian border were documented during the reporting period.

*I was subjected to a lot of violence. I was electrocuted, my phone was broken [...]
He sent me back to the border with Belarus without my phone, clothes, or food.*

Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Sudan

²² Response from the Podlasie Branch of the Border Guard to a public access to information request, received on 19 May 2025.

We have tried a lot to enter Poland through Belarus more than 7 times. Every time we get hit and take our money and crack our phones and we don't have anywhere to go.

Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Sudan

Among those who reported experiencing a pushback in April were at least 7 unaccompanied minors. According to their accounts, the circumstances of their detention and subsequent pushbacks did not differ in any way from the experiences described by adults who had been pushed back.

The border [guard] of Poland they make very difficult also. Poland soldier beat me very bad. One eye, I can't see now. [...] I will turn 18 after 2 month.

Excerpt from a conversation with a minor from one of the West African countries

I was 14 [days] in Poland without any food and cold clothes. And Polish army were killing me. They sent me back to Belarus. I lost a lot of blood, these are some of the injuries inflicted on me by the Polish army. I also have allergies and they used poison and I have asthma. My age is 17 so also... They brought me back to the Belarusian border.

Excerpt from a conversation with a minor from Somalia

“Before any contact they would always start with the pepper spray” – Nuruddin’s pushback

Nuruddin from Somalia has been in Belarus for over 10 months. During the interview, he describes the last time he had crossed the Polish border with Belarus: about two weeks earlier, in mid-April. He was travelling in a group of ten or eleven²³ adult men from Somalia. Together they used transport in Belarus to approach the Polish border. Cars brought them to a point about 10–15 kilometres from the border, from where they continued on foot. Nuruddin and his companions were met by Belarusian officers, who placed them in a forest military camp for two days, after which they were allowed to continue their journey. At the camp they experienced physical violence.

When they caught us, they initially questioned us, so they would ask us questions where we're coming from, where we're headed, and they would also hate us, but nothing that would cause or has caused a substantial damage, it was

²³ Nuruddin is unsure how many people were in the group when he crossed the border.

normally a few punches and kicks... and afterwards they would detain us, we would let them know that where we're headed would be Poland, they would let us go.. and regarding the conditions of the place, it's like an army barracks or a small camp for the officers.. and at night we would have a toilet to keep warm and we would eat our own food, so no food was provided.

Nuruddin reports that all of them managed to cross to the other side of the border barrier near the border post number 514 or 515. This took place at night; he does not remember the exact time. Almost all the men were injured as a result of crossing the border fortifications. Nuruddin broke his right arm during his fall from the barrier.

When we were starting the trip to cross the border the last time, we were all fine, but due to the journey and due to the attempt of crossing the border, this would be the encounter with the guards as well as like the metal... injuries from the wires. Most of us were injured after the attempt. [...] So when the officers would be coming, you were shocked and while trying to run or trying to rush, we fell over this wall and most of us sustained injuries.

As reported, immediately after crossing the border, all the men were apprehended by Polish authorities. The officers arrived in four or five vehicles. Nuruddin recalls that the first to arrive were dressed in black uniforms bearing an inscription he remembered as "Polish Guards". They were followed by officers in what he described as military-style clothing. According to Nuruddin, the Polish officers were violent from the outset, using pepper spray and allowing the aggressive dogs accompanying them to lunge at the apprehended men.

Immediately we fell and we were injured, some of us screamed and this is when the officers were already near us and so immediately they started spraying the ones that were screaming in pain, they started spraying us with pepper spray and some attempted to run but they let the dogs on them and they started beating us. I showed them my injured arm and was trying to ask for help and on this while showing them the arm they immediately put the bracelets on it and they put me in the, they put us in a tiny vehicle and they led us to a station or a holding area whereby they had us for three nights and this is where they would also beat us multiple times and whenever we would attempt to ask for help they would pepper spray us.

Approximately 20 minutes elapsed between the moment Nuruddin and his companions were apprehended and their transport to the facility. During this time, in addition to beating them, the officers searched them and destroyed their phones.

They searched us immediately, and they also asked us if we were carrying anything like knives or weapons. And once you said „No, you were not“, they

would take your phones and they would break them, and this would happen on the spot.

Nuruddin recalls that the officers ignored all of their requests for help.

Whenever we would attempt to ask for help, they would say that: 'we are Polish Guards and we cannot offer assistance'.

The apprehended men were divided into groups of four or five and transported to the facility in separate cars, each carrying a small group. The transport lasted about 30 minutes. Nuruddin recalls that they were not given anything to eat.

When we got to the station, they handed us to another group [of officers], which was wearing a similar uniform, but they weren't as equipped as the group that caught us at the bottom. And this group initially started asking us questions, but then after a bit they started hitting us, and they beat us for a while, then took us to a room. I will not say it was big or small, I will describe it as mid-sized. And this is where we were held without any food for the next slightly more than 24 hours.

They spent about 36 hours at the facility.²⁴ During this time, they were each given a litre of water. Nuruddin recalls that upon reaching the facility, he and the others were sprayed with pepper gas as well as beaten and kicked for about 15 minutes by the officers who received them there.

This was when the previous officers handed you over to this new officers and they took you to the room first, so when you all together taken to this room this when the beating were take place. [...] So I would like to mention that before anything or before any contact they would always start with the pepper spray. So this is the first item that they would use and then immediately they followed it up with punches and kicks and afterwards they started hitting us with this [inaudible], the black [inaudible] that they carry.²⁵

Initially, upon arrival, all individuals were held in one room, from which they were then taken one by one to a separate room for interrogation. During the interrogations, which lasted about 5–10 minutes each, no Somali language interpreter was present—they were conducted using broken English and Google Translate.

The questions that they would ask you, I would generally describe them as, where are you coming from, how did you get here, who brought you, how much money did you pay? And those would be the kind of questions that they would ask you in the separate room. [...] Initially, they would start off with talking to you

²⁴ Although Nuruddin mentions 'three nights' earlier, he later specifies that he meant one day, a night and another day spent in the facility.

²⁵ Nuruddin specified later in the conversation that the tool used was: a *the black stick that they carry*.

calmly, and this is when they would be telling you that they would be granting you amnesty [asylum]²⁶, but then towards the end, this is when they would talk to you a bit rougher, and they would give you a bit of an insult. [...] I do not remember the exact words, but I remember something to the tune of "kurwa".

As he recalls, neither he nor the other men were presented with any documents. They repeatedly requested international protection in Poland. Nuruddin notes that the officers initially deceived them by saying that they would not be pushed back to Belarus.

Initially they would give you some hope, they would tell you, you will never go back to Belarus, it's a terrible country, we will give you asylum, but then thereafter they would throw you back. [...] Yes, multiple times, me and the group I was with would tell them multiple times that we were trying to seek asylum in Poland, but in the end it appears that nobody listened.

During their second night at the facility, the men were separated and transported to the Belarusian border in two smaller groups. According to the report, the transport took about two and a half hours. Each group was forced to cross the border at a different location. Nuruddin and his three travelling companions were pushed back near the border post No. 275.

They did not give us any explanation. They just picked us up, took us there and then took us out.

Nuruddin says that, at the facility, the detainees had their hands bound with plastic zip ties, which the officers only cut open during the pushback.

When they are taking you from the station, you still have the plastic handcuffs and when they take you to the border, they would cut the handcuffs and while cutting the handcuffs, they would also punch and kick you.

Nuruddin never recovered his shoes, and his phone had been destroyed. After he and his companions were forced back into Belarus, they encountered Belarusian border services.

When we crossed the Belarusian border, we were caught by the Belarusian guards and we told them what happened to us...Because they would ask us what...Where we are going and what happened. We told them that we are crossing from Poland and we have been beaten by the Polish guards. Here they would provide us with food, some assistance and after a while, after questioning us, they would let us go.

²⁶ Nuruddin specifies later that he was indeed referring to asylum, to providing protection in Poland.

Despite the fracture of his right arm, Nuruddin is unable to get medical attention in Belarus, where he is still located at the time of the interview.

When I would go and ask for medical assistance, they would ask for documentation. And once they do and I do not have any legal documentation, they would call the officials and I would get deported.

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