



GRUPAGRANICA

December 2023

Report from the Polish–Belarusian border

Why would they beat us? Why would they break our phones?

Why would they hit us in a very inhumane way?

Even the European Union said that they would accept every human being if they have a case. But why would they do such horrible things to us?

Because we're not criminals. We didn't do anything. We were beaten like dogs.

Statement by a man who was pushed back four times in December.

We Are Monitoring

Photo: Egala Foundation's archive

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Introduction

The following study contains first-hand data from people participating in the events described. We would like to thank all humanitarian organisations operating in the Polish-Belarusian border area and individuals working with them for providing us with reports of their interventions. Our sources include organisations, informal initiatives as well as individuals, often wishing to remain anonymous, so we do not mention them by name unless they have given us permission to do so. Special thanks are due to all those on the move who have chosen to share their own experiences with us.

Humanitarian workers and those working with them emphasise that the difficult context and ethics of their work often prevent them from obtaining more detailed information about the stories and situations of people on the move. During interventions, many are in such a poor psycho-physiological state that it is not possible to obtain more data without putting them at risk of retraumatization or making them feel that they owe humanitarian organisations any

answers to their questions by virtue of receiving material or legal support from them.

The described interventions and support provided to persons on the move took place on the territory of the Podlaskie and Lubelskie Voivodeships. For persons in Belarus, information is provided on the legal situation and access to procedures for applying for international protection in Poland and Belarus.

We hope that this brief outline of the context will help you to better understand the current dynamics of events in the border region with Belarus. For additional questions and recommendations from individuals or organisations who might also be interested in receiving the reports, please contact wearemonitoring@gmail.com.

Definitions

At the end of the report you will find a list of terms and definitions we have adopted.



number of deceased

55



Photo from the Egala Foundation archive

Situation at the border

In December 2023, the temperature in Podlasie did not exceed 0 °C for 10 days, sometimes reaching as low as -12 °C. It rained or snowed in Podlasie for 22 out of 31 days in December. With the change in weather, the number of people known to have tried to cross into Poland has dropped significantly. Only 118

people asked for support, of whom as many as 91 were on the eastern side of the border fence. We have observed a similar downward trend in winter in previous years, when, as the temperature dropped and snow fell, so did the number of people who tried to cross the border.

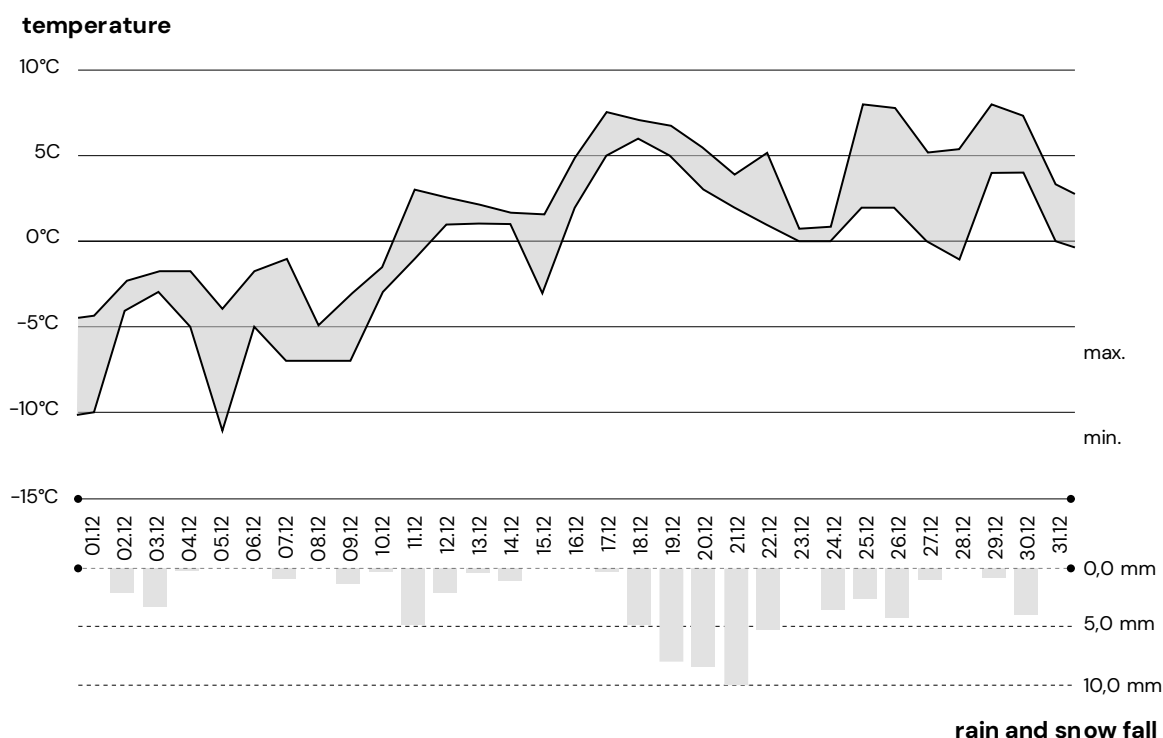


Fig. 1 Weather conditions in December 2023 according to the Białystok weather station.

Due to bad weather conditions, many people retreated to Belarusian cities to wait out the winter there. From the accounts of those who managed to cross the border, however, and were willing to share their observations with us, it appeared that Belarusian border guards only allowed people to retreat to the city after they showed them a recording proving that they had been to Poland at least once and had been pushed back. Those who were unable to provide the evidence were, according to the testimonies of our respondents, forced to try to cross the Poland border, often experiencing violence from the Belarusian services, including being barked at and bitten by dogs. Due to the small number of testimonies, we are unable to determine the scale of these occurrences. In December, there were also further testimonies showing that after unsuccessful attempts to cross the Polish–Belarusian border, some people decided to try to cross the border to Latvia or Finland.

In December 2023, news of a further two border fatalities reached us.

On 25 December, we received information from the family about an Algerian man who died in Belarus. The man is the 54th known victim of the Polish–Belarusian border.

On 28 December, Belarusian media reported the death of a man under the border fence on its eastern side. Witnesses to the death were said to be random men from Afghanistan who came upon the dying man. According to their statements, quoted in the material, the man was extremely exhausted.¹ The man is the 55th known victim of the Polish–Belarusian border.

Due to the subordination of the Belarusian media to authoritarian rule, we have no way of verifying this information.

Quantitative summary December 2023

	groups	number of individuals	children (unaccompanied minors)	women (pregnant)
Total requests	19	118	–	–
Requests from Sistiema	9	91	–	–
Aid provided	3	13	–	–
Reported Pushbacks	7	34	2	5
Number of interventions			4	

¹ <https://gpk.gov.by/news/gpk/154514/> [accessed on 8.12.2023.]



Photo from the Egala Foundation archive

Demographics, trends, and humanitarian interventions

In December we recorded requests from 118 people travelling in 19 groups. This is a decrease of 60.8 % on the 301 requests of people travelling in 72 groups recorded in November. The reduction in the number of crossings and thus in the number of requests is characteristic of the autumn-winter period. The main reason for this is the marked deterioration in weather conditions – lower temperatures and snowfall effectively make it more difficult to move and stay in the forest for long periods of time. Those who decide to travel or are forced to do so are at much greater risk of serious injury, hospitalisation or even death from hypothermia.

The decrease in border movement is also noticeable in the Border Guard statistics on the number of 'disclosures of foreigners who attempted to illegally cross the Polish-Belarusian border'. A comparison of the numbers from November and December 2023

presents a similar decrease (66%) – according to subsequent announcements published on the website of the Border Guard Headquarters:²

- 1,385 prevented crossings in November, of which more than 1,100 between 1-15 November,
- 471 prevented crossings in December .

In December, there were only four successful humanitarian interventions – the humanitarian organisations and those working with them who provided us with information managed to reach 13 people travelling in three groups. One of them, counting 10 people, was supported twice, and one of the men was additionally provided with medical assistance thanks to the involvement of Médecins Sans Frontières' medics. All the people we met declared Syria as their country of origin.

² <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci>

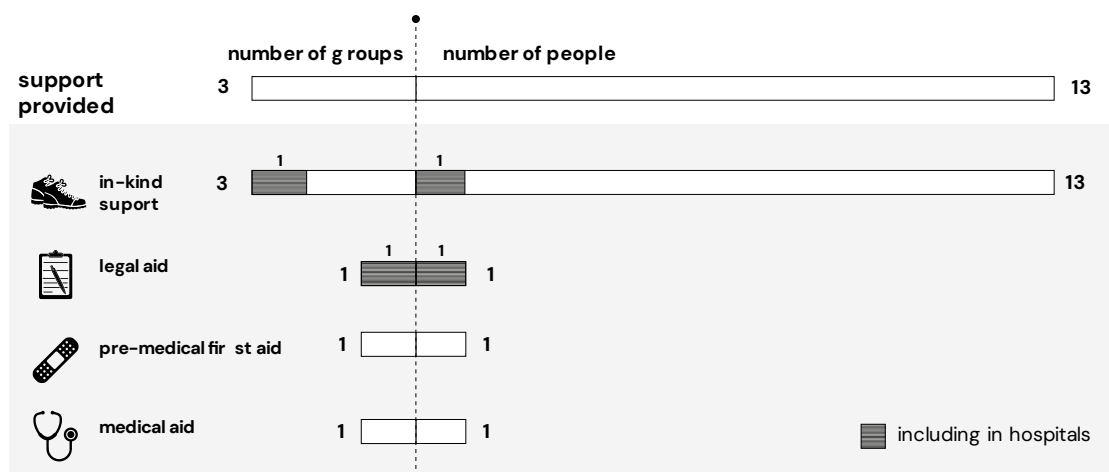


Fig. 2 Number of groups and individuals given a form of support in the reporting period.

As many as nine of the 19 groups that requested humanitarian support in December were, at the time of contact, in the strip between the barrier located on Polish territory and the fortifications on the Belarusian side (the so-called *systiema*), by people on the move called *muharrama*.³ These groups comprised a total of 91 people. This is close to the 103 people reported in November. We emphasise that these figures are not complete and do not allow us to estimate in a given period, even approximately, the actual number of people present in the strip between the barriers. We quote them because they allow us to identify downward and upward trends and to note moments of increased migration activity in the Polish-Belarusian border area.

In December 2023, there were five women and five minors among those reporting a need for support, all of those remained in the strip between the borders at the time of contact. The decrease or absence of participation from vulnerable groups is a characteristic feature of the autumn-winter period characterised by worse weather and thus much more difficult travel conditions..

One patient was admitted to hospital. The young man was brought in by Border Guard officers. At the time of the encounter with the services, he was in the territory of Poland in a group of 10 persons, eight of his companions were taken to Belarus, he was hospitalised. The reason for his hospitalisation was severe hypothermia and exhaustion.

In December, we received information about 24 people from Syria, 14 from Somalia, 11 from Iran, five from Eritrea, three from Iraq, one each from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Yemen and Sudan and 53 people of unknown origin.

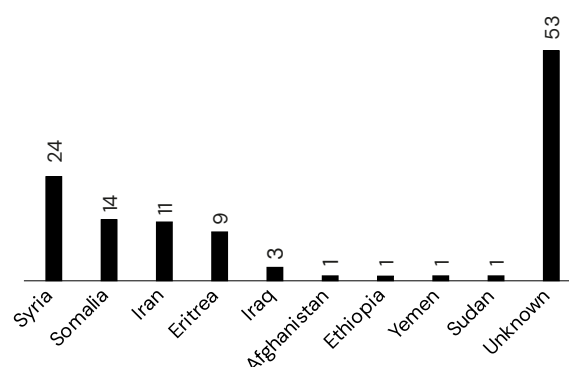


Figure 3. Countries of origin of people who reported need for support in November 2023

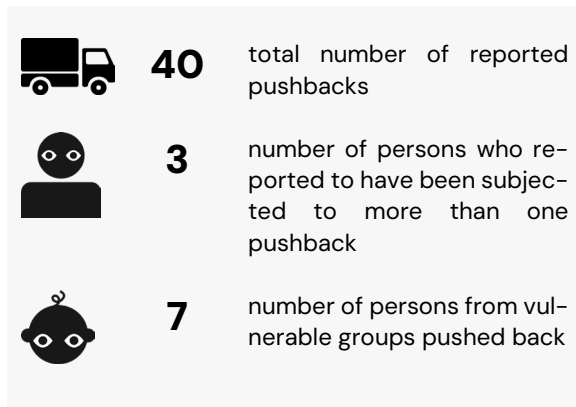
³ Muharrama in Arabic means 'forbidden'. Arabic-speakers on the road also use the longer term المنطقة المحرمة 'forbidden zone'.

Pushbacks and violence by services



Fig. 4 Number of people who reported experience of deportation and violence by Polish and Belarusian services.

As few people attempt to cross the border in winter, it is difficult for us to talk about clear trends. However, in the context of the huge political changes in Poland and the new government coming to power, we note that there is little indication of a change in the way Polish services treat people on the move on the Polish-Belarusian border.



Below are two testimonies in which individuals experienced direct violence and constraint from people they identified as representatives of the Polish uniformed services. At least one of the situations took place after the new government took power. Both testimonies are similar; in both, individuals were forced to undress in the cold and experienced verbal and physical violence. In addition, in one of them the clearly expressed wish to seek asylum in Poland was ignored.

One man described experiencing four pushbacks, all of which happened in December. During the first pushback, he was not taken to a Border Guard post. According to his account, upon the apprehension in the forest he was only beaten and then taken directly back to Belarus:

He beat me and four of my friends a lot. When he said "where are you from?" I said "from Syria". "Are you a muslim or a christian?". When I said I'm christian he beat me a lot.

The man reported that it was only after the fourth apprehension, before his last pushback, that he was taken to a Border Guard post. He accounts that first, on the spot, he was searched and his documents were checked. He relates that, his and all detainees' phones were searched and then destroyed. Later, after being taken to the station, attempts were also made to force the man to sign documents submitted to him. However, he consistently refused each time until he succumbed to pressure from one of the officers:

I didn't sign the first paper that they brought to me, it was in Polish. Then they brought one in Arabic and we read it, three pieces of paper. The

first one was saying that I will not enter Poland, I will not ask for asylum or for international protection in Poland. And the second one was saying you have 7 days in Poland, you should get out of Poland in 7 days. And the third one was saying, if I come back another time and they will catch me they will put me in prison for 3 years. But I didn't sign it. He was trying to force me (...)

Okay. And then you signed it?

O: Yes, I signed it.

In the past, we have repeatedly described situations where people on the move were coerced with threats or violence to sign documents, often in languages they did not understand. It is worth noting that the situation described by the man took place after the change of government.

When asked what the officers who stopped him looked like, the respondent said:

They were wearing soldier uniforms. Like the army.

Asked if he had noticed any emblems or inscriptions on the uniforms, he denied explaining:

Your eyes should be on the floor, nowhere else.

The events took place in the afternoon at the end of December. The man recounts staying at the facility for several hours. However, he is unsure of the accuracy of this time as he did not have his watch or phone with him, which was taken from him and destroyed.

Everytime time they caught me they would break my phone.

According to his testimony, he was said to have expressed a desire to seek asylum, which resulted in a beating:

I said I want to stay in Poland. I don't want to go outside Poland or to go to Belarus. I just want to stay in Poland. When I said I just want to stay in Poland he beat me a lot.

After the events at the station, before the fourth pushback, he and all the other men in the group were forced to undress:

They forced us to be naked. Without any clothes, without any shoes, full naked.

The respondent reports that they were also told to remove their underwear:

Can you just describe how it happened?

They forced me to be naked. They forced [us] to be naked and without even shorts to wear, anything. Full naked.

All this group who were with them?

Just the men.

[...] And they left you at the border without clothes?

They throw it away. They didn't give them back [to us].

At the time of the events described by the respondent, the temperature in Podlasie remained below freezing. Polish officers did not return the clothing to the group, instead they pushed them back to Belarus.

On the Belarusian side, the group was spotted by Belarussian officers:

And the Belarusian border guards saw us and they gave us clothes, food and water, everything. But they didn't let us leave the forbidden area. And I found someone I don't know who this person was, in the forbidden area, he was holding a phone and that's how we found a way to order a car and run from the forbidden area to go back to Minsk.

The second testimony we wanted to quote concerns pushback of a man who was thrown to Belarus in the second half of November.⁴

Why would they beat us? Why would they break our phones? Why would they hit us in a very inhumane way? Even the European Union said that they would accept every human being if they have a case. But why would they do such horrible things to us? Because we're not criminals. We didn't do anything. We were beaten like dogs. If Belarusian soldiers didn't find us, one or two people might have died. And they beat us in a very harmful way that breaks our arms and our legs. And why is that necessary?

The man had experienced multiple pushbacks, the last time he tried to cross the border in a group of eleven people. After crossing, six managed to escape and the other five, after running about 300 metres from the border barrier, were detained on Polish territory, among them two women.

Out of all the people in group two were beaten up very badly and very harshly. And it was snowing, the weather was not good.

The respondent reports that, in addition to being brutally beaten, he also experienced being bitten by a dog:

(...) that first place that they hit me was my head. And after my head they beat up me in the face, then my legs, my hands, my arms, then the dog bit my hand.

Despite the snowfall, officers ordered people to lie on the ground:

It was snowing this day and they were supposed to lay on the ground. They made us lay on the ground (...) for like 15 minutes or more.

As a result of the beating, the man allegedly lost consciousness just before being thrown to the Belarusian side:

Because I was beaten I lost consciousness, I do not remember well, but I layed down for around two hours.

⁴ Information on experienced exports often arrives late; when deciding whether to include them in the monthly reports, we always indicate whether they relate to the reported period.

Close to the border, not far from where the group was pushed back, the respondent described a small structure he referred to as a 'little house'. Officers were said to be inside this small building while the group, about to be pushed to the eastern side of the barrier, lay beaten on the ground.

All persons had their phones taken and destroyed, including chargers and powerbanks. Only the respondent's phone was destroyed while he still had it in his pocket, from being hit with a baton where his mobile phone was. One of his companions had \$300 taken from him, which he was carrying. In addition to the items mentioned above, sleeping bags were also taken from the group:

They took our sleeping bags for the cold, for the weather, winter weather.

After the pushback, on the Belarusian side, the group was found by, to use the respondent's words, the Belarusian army. The officers were told to put them in a building where they could get warm and change their clothes. Probably due to the fact that two people were in a serious condition as a result of the beating, they were all allowed to return to Minsk:

Two of us were badly injured and the Belarusian army found us. Then they put us in their house where it was warm, there were clothes and fire and everything and after that they let us go back to Minsk to heal at the hospital.

In both of the testimonies cited above, the post-pushback people did not experience violence by the Belarusian services. However, it should not be assumed that violence on the eastern side of the barrier does not occur or is now far less frequent. 11 people out of 25 who were pushed back in December reported experiencing violence by Belarusian services. It should also be noted here that the in-depth interviews we conduct with people on the move are mainly about experiences on the Polish territory, not every time we manage to collect material on what happened on the eastern side of the wall.

Thirty-four individual people reported a pushback experience in December. Of these, two, whose testimonies we cite above, reported that they had been pushed out more than once. In the case of one person, not all of the multiple pushbacks occurred in December.



Military truck, photo from Egala Foundation archive

Definitions

Total requests — Total number of reported groups/persons on the move, located in Poland, Belarus, Lithuania or Latvia. It does not take into account 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** — 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
- **Number of Individuals** — 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
- **Legal aid** — support in procedures relating to the prevention of pushbacks and deportation and enabling the submission of an application for international protection.
- **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.

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

Reported violence Poland — 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 Belarus — 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 between August 2021 and November 2023 on the Polish side of the Polish-Belarusian border and those cases from the Belarusian side of which we are aware. It does not include all deaths in hospitals or car accidents, linked to the migration route. 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	- minors - unaccompanied minors - persons over 45 years of age - senior citizens aged 60 and over
Medical reasons	- pregnancy - chronic illness - disability
Situational considerations Protection Needs	- victims of sexual violence or subjected to - victims of gender-based violence - victims of torture - victims of human trafficking

* virtually impossible to identify at this stage