

11 Months of the Nightmare at the Polish–Belarusian Border

Briefing by Grupa Granica

Questions and answers about our
humanitarian crisis-related activities,
August 2021 – June 2022

Contact persons (media):

Monika Matus +48 698 791 300
Katarzyna Czarnota +48 697 097 604

Introduction

By June 2022, the humanitarian crisis at the Polish – Belarussian border, which started in Usnarz, had been continuing for nearly 11 months.

The crisis has affected refugees who, acting on the promises by the Belarussian regime, have been trying to reach Europe. Violent treatment begins on the Belarussian side of the border, where people had been subjected to beatings, intimidation, detention in inhumane conditions, rape and dog attacks. Following that, they have been repeatedly forced back and forth across the border by the Polish and Belarussian guards. Even those who ask for asylum or international protection are being brutally pushed back and out of Poland. Very young children, elderly persons, people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, pregnant women, old and young men are removed to Belarus, where they are, once again, subjected to violence. Such a nightmare may continue for weeks or even months. On many occasions, we have been asked to assist people whose lives were at risk due to injuries, poisoning, lack of medication or untreated medical conditions.

The situation has been exacerbated by very difficult conditions in the densely forested areas alongside the border, full of marshes, streams and big fallen trees. For the last 10 months, the border-zone could only be accessed by local residents.

Rather than provide assistance and enable applications for international protection in line with international law, the Polish authorities have – from the very beginning – introduced measures to increase militarisation of the border and isolation of the region. A restricted zone has been established along a 418-kilometre stretch of the border. The authorities have condoned violence by border guards and other armed forces and the practice of pushing the migrants back across the border has been deemed “legal”. At the same time, a massive propaganda campaign was launched to enforce a narrative of migration as a crime, criminalizing the humanitarian aid and emphasising the defensive role played by the Polish guards. For 10 months since the emergence of the “patozone” (a no-go restricted area created by the Polish government), the area was out of reach of both Polish and international media and humanitarian organisations.

Tens of thousands of security forces were deployed in the region: including the border guards, soldiers, police officers and members of the Territorial Defence Forces. From the very beginning, refugee women and men were regularly pushed back to Belarus, regardless of their age or health. We could not remain indifferent and had to take action: in August 2021 we started our activities as Grupa Granica (the Border Group).

We could not remain indifferent and had to take action: in August 2021 we started our activities as Grupa Granica (the Border Group).

Grupa Granica's operations in the border zone for the last 11 months

For eleven months now as Grupa Granica we have been assisting refugees who decided to cross the European border within the border zone between Poland and Belarus.

We operate as a grassroots movement relying on the work of many volunteers, residents of the Podlasie region and supported by NGOs from many Polish cities. Over the last 11 months, several hundreds of volunteers were involved in our activities in Podlasie. Meanwhile, thousands of people across Poland have organized collections and other forms of support.

Grupa Granica is a movement which, apart from humanitarian aid, offers legal, medical and mental health-related assistance. We also conduct research and monitor the situation. We are funded through contributions of tens of thousands of individual donors.

Over the last 11 months, we have collaborated with several hundred local residents in the border zone, dozens of lawyers who assisted migrants during on-call duties via telephone and in person. We also provide interpretation assistance – over this period we have worked with several dozens of translators speaking about 20 different languages.

The medical help we provide in the border zone has been enabled first through collaboration with Medycy na Granicy (Doctors at the Border), the PCPM team, as well as many individual doctors. Dozens of psychologists have provided support to both refugees in Poland and the Group's activists. Initiatives such as Zupy na Granicę (Soups for the Border), Rodziny bez Granic (Families without Borders) and the legal collective Szpila have also been tremendously helpful.

Over the last 11 months, our activists have also been involved in:

- several other grassroots initiatives, offering assistance in guarded centres for foreigners;
- Biblioteki Bez Granic (Libraries Without Borders): an initiative to ensure access to books in different languages in centres for foreigners.

It should be noted that Grupa Granica also assists Ukrainian refugees and migrants across Poland, offering continuous social, legal, psychological and logistical support – both in and outside guarded centres for foreigners. For example, we organised buses to evacuate the most vulnerable people (who, for various reasons, could not travel on their own) from Ukraine to Poland, and set up a reception point at the Central Railway Station for non-Ukrainian people fleeing Ukraine.

We are also involved in a wide range of communication and advocacy activities. With a total of over 63 thousand followers on social media, we are also constantly in touch with several hundred journalists and editors around the world.

We have organised multiple press conferences and have been reporting on the situation in the border zone. We strive to inform as many people as possible about the ongoing humanitarian crisis on the Polish–Belarussian border. As part of our advocacy activities, we have been liaising with representatives of the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe and UN. Our work has been recognized on several occasions, e.g. we are the recipient of the prestigious Human Rights First award.

Numbers

The data presented below are not comprehensive. Keeping a record of all interventions during a humanitarian crisis is very difficult. In the first months of the Group's activities in the Podlasie region, we were not able to accurately account for all humanitarian interventions we made or people who were involved. Being a grassroots movement without access to systemic support, we had to develop all data collection and aggregation procedures on our own. A great deal of data on violence or trauma experienced by refugees in the border region proves difficult to verify or even record, precisely because of the traumatic nature of such an experience. This is particularly relevant, e.g., for data related to rape.

In our publications or communications, whenever we provide specific figures, they always refer to cases that we have been able to record and verify beyond doubt. Therefore, the data provided probably does not reflect the full scale of the problem.

01:

11 000 people

have asked for our help over the last 11 months.

TIME FRAME	NUMBER OF REQUEST
by the end of 2021	7700
01.01– 31.01.2022	206
01.02– 28.02.2022	254
01.03– 04.04.2022	738
05.04– 02.05.2022	652
03.05– 31.05.2022	478
01.06– 22.06.2022	452

Around **700 children***
where among people who asked for our help

* As we have not always been able to verify age, this number, in fact, may have been higher.

02:

On many occasions we have assisted persons with disabilities, very young children and pregnant women.

The youngest person we assisted was a several month-old baby.

03:

We have assisted people of various origins, including from

Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, India, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Cameroon, Rwanda, Ghana, Senegal, Palestine, Togo, Algeria, Morocco and Cuba.

04:

16 bodies have so far been found in the border zone – casualties caused by the policies adopted by Polish and Belarusian authorities.

The exact number of casualties in the border area is not known, here we report only confirmed deaths. However, people have also reported seeing dead bodies on the Belarusian side of the border.

05:

We received information on

187 persons missing after making an attempt to cross the Polish–Belarusian border.

Most of them are still missing. The exact number of missing persons in the border zone is also unknown; many affected families simply do not know where to look for information or help. The data we receive does not always specify the nationality or gender of a missing person.

Violence and pushbacks

In the 11 months of the continuing crisis, we have witnessed increasing levels of violence used both by Belarusian and Polish guards.

We have repeatedly published accounts by people who have experienced violence, as well as posted shocking photographs and footage of violent acts (or their aftermath): beatings, torture, dog attacks, appropriation of migrants' money, phones or official documents. There were also accounts of rape perpetrated by Belarusian guards. Many migrant men and women, and often whole families, were being detained for months in "warehouses" turned into temporary shelters in Belarus – in Bruzgi or Grodno – from where they also reported various forms of brutality and violence.

Our activists have been treating wounds from razor wire and dog bites, broken ribs and limbs due to beatings, huge bruises, but also frostbitten toes and trench foot cases.

Unfortunately, similar incidents also occur on the Polish side of the border. We have received reports of beatings, destruction of phones and appropriation of official documents.

Month by month, the scale of violence has increased. There are ongoing pushbacks of whole families, including very young children, people with disabilities or in need of immediate medical care. Contrary to the assurances offered by the Polish authorities, anyone attempting to cross the border is being pushed back. We know of documented cases of people who have already declared their wish to apply for asylum or have just been released from a hospital, who were nonetheless pushed back to Belarus (also in the presence of media or, for example, Polish MPs).

Criminalization of aid

Since August 2021, the Polish government has been involved in a relentless propaganda campaign to criminalise aid provided to refugees. In practice, in the militarised border zone, we have constantly been faced with many kinds of harrasment by the Polish guards, whose aim was to discourage aid: unjustified detentions and vehicle searches, officers entering private properties, violent entry and searches of humanitarian aid facilities, intimidation of male and female activists through detentions and threats of imprisonment, multiple inspections, fines, keeping people for hours on end in the freezing cold or scorching sun, instructing people as to the alleged illegality of aid, threatening with dog attacks, etc. Criminal charges, e.g. for organising illegal border crossing, have also unjustifiably been brought against aid workers

Area devastation and wall-building

Since August 2021, we have been witnessing gradual devastation of the region, previously known for its unique primeval Białowieża forest, exceptional architecture and monuments. The costs – not only financial, but also social, environmental and cultural – are incalculable.

Much of the border area has been cut off as a restricted zone, dubbed 'patozone', effectively preventing all tourism in the region. Many people have been completely deprived of their livelihoods. Residents have been subjected to systematic intimidation, particularly those who decided to provide humanitarian aid. Turning the region into a military zone has driven away tourists, and instead populated it with armed guards.

Over the months, further dramatic losses have resulted from the construction of a 186 kilometre-long barrier along the border, supposedly to stop the migrants from entering the country. Damaged roads, logging of the Białowieża Forest (a UNESCO heritage site!), purchasing local land for military use – these are just a fraction of the damage suffered by local residents. Despite declarations that the area designated as a "special" zone will eventually be significantly reduced, the crisis is bound to have an everlasting effect in the Podlasie region.

More about Grupa Granica:

grupagranica.pl
facebook.com/grupagranica
instagram.com/grupagranica
twitter.com/grupagranica

You can support us:

zrzutka.pl/2n7rs4

We wish to thank all the people, organisations and initiatives who have supported our work; Medycy na Granicy, PCPM, Zupy na Granicę, Podróżnych Ugościć, Nie dla Muru, Greenpeace Polska, Rodziny bez Granic and many, many others – without you our activities would not have been possible. We also express our great admiration and respect for the residents of Podlasie – for it was their courage and sacrifice that prevented many tragedies. Thank you!