

Migration crisis on the Poland-Belarus border (update)

CRISIS OVERVIEW

Since July 2021, thousands of people have been attempting to reach the EU by crossing from Belarus into Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania (BBC 15/11/2021; JRS 01/06/2022; MSF 06/01/2022). Following an increase in the volume of crossing attempts, Poland declared an emergency status in September, preventing people from crossing and limiting humanitarian organisations' ability to reach people in need (Polish Republic Service 31/08/2021). The Polish Government has announced lifting the emergency status on 1 July 2022 (ABC News 09/06/2022; InfoMigrants 10/06/2022). Despite this development, crossing into Poland will remain impossible because of a newly constructed steel wall at the border (InfoMigrants 10/06/2022). Lifting the state of emergency, which has been heavily restricting access for humanitarian responders, should allow them better access to crisis-affected areas. That said, the areas in direct proximity to the border will remain inaccessible, and access to the affected population will likely remain highly constrained.

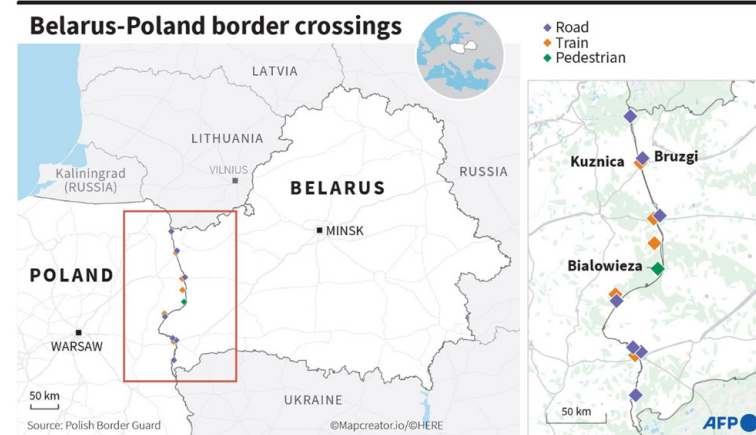
Migrants and asylum seekers stranded at the Poland-Belarus border continue to be in critical need of shelter, protection and legal assistance, medical care, food, and water. With the weather becoming warmer towards the end of June, border crossing attempts are expected to increase, likely driving an increase in humanitarian needs (TNH 26/05/2022; Schengen Visa 15/06/2022). Shelter needs have specifically increased following the closure of the camp at Bruzgi in Belarus in March, expelling about 700 people and leaving them stranded in the forests under extreme weather conditions (TNH 26/05/2022; AI 11/04/2022). Images show people staying in small tents or in sleeping bags between trees. Others are in geographically remote areas, such as a swampy land near River Narew (Al Jazeera 05/06/2022).

About this report ¹

Aim: this report outlines the living conditions and needs of migrants and asylum seekers stranded in the Poland-Belarus border area as a result of a political crisis and migration policies. It is an update of a similar ACAPS report published in December 2021 (ACAPS 02/12/2021).

Method: this report relies mainly on the secondary data review of publicly available sources. It also includes information obtained through key informant interviews conducted in November 2021 for the previous ACAPS report on the Poland-Belarus migration crisis.

Limitations and information gaps: access to information on the crisis is limited on both sides of the border. Both Polish and Belarusian authorities have imposed policies restricting access to border areas, making it impossible to independently verify figures and information about conditions in affected areas. There is limited information on the number of migrants and asylum seekers and their needs.



Source: Daily Sabah (11/11/2021).

¹ In this report, ACAPS may have used the terms 'migrant' and 'asylum seeker' interchangeably at times, but we refer to people at the Poland-Belarus border as both migrants and asylum seekers.

CONTEXT

The crisis started when Belarusian authorities, through travel agencies, began promoting tours with accompanying tourist visas to Belarus in the Middle East (BBC 22/10/2021). Smugglers also spread misinformation through social media to encourage travelling to Belarus (NYT 22/11/2021). Once people arrived in Belarus, misinformation led them to believe that they could easily enter the EU by crossing the Polish, Latvian, or Lithuanian border.

Between July–December 2021, thousands of migrants and asylum seekers (mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen) arrived at the Poland-Belarus border in an attempt to cross Poland to reach the EU countries (BBC 15/11/2021; JRS 01/06/2022; Vox 14/11/2021). In November, border control stopped a group of people who attempted to reach Poland through Ukraine (KII 23/11/2021 a). In October 2021, Belarus reported stopping 5,000 border crossing attempts, while the Polish Border Guard stopped 11,300 attempts (DW 09/11/2021; Schengen Visa 11/10/2021). These numbers are much higher than the 88 attempts in 2020 (BBC 16/11/2021). At the end of November 2021, around 7,000 people were stuck on the Poland-Belarus border, lacking shelter, food, water, and medical care (InfoMigrants 06/12/2021).

The Polish Government, the EU, NATO, and the US criticised Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko for manufacturing the crisis in retaliation for the EU sanctions imposed over the arrest of dissidents. These arrests happened amid disputed elections in Belarus and a crackdown against the opposition (CNN 09/11/2021; DW 13/11/2021; AP News 11/11/2021; BBC 19/11/2021).

State of emergency (Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania)

In response to the increasing number of attempts, these three countries have deployed border patrols and put up fences to dissuade crossing (The Economist 09/11/2021).

Polish authorities have reinforced border control to prevent people from entering the country. On 2 September, Poland declared a state of emergency covering 183 localities in Podlaskie and Lubelskie provinces, in a 3km strip along the border with Belarus (Polish Republic Service 31/08/2021). Restrictions included a ban on staying in the area covered by the state of emergency; the prohibition of recording and photographing objects and areas, including border infrastructure, border control officers, police, and soldiers; and limited access to public information on activities carried out in the area (bne IntelliNews 01/10/2021). The declaration allowed only Polish Border Guards, ambulances, and residents entry into the zone (The Guardian 31/10/2021; Al Jazeera 13/11/2021). There have been documented instances of ambulances failing to enter the area. Reasons include unclear locations and the ambulance used by activist doctors being refused entry (KII 23/11/2021 b).

Lithuania also declared a two-month state of emergency between 10 November 2021 and 15 January 2022 (CNN 11/11/2021; InfoMigrants 17/01/2022). Before that, Latvia had declared an initially three-month state of emergency starting 11 August 2021, which lasted until 10 May 2022 (France 24 10/08/2021; LSM 09/05/2022).

Poland's state of emergency is scheduled to be lifted on 1 July (ABC News 09/06/2022; InfoMigrants 10/06/2022). A 5.5-meter-high steel wall with barbed wire fencing that runs for more than 180km will continue to stop people from crossing the border. The Polish Government has also stated that it will continue to stop people from approaching within 200m of the border (InfoMigrants 10/06/2022).

2022 developments

Polish border control's 'pushback' policies and coercion from Belarusian officials for people to cross back have kept them stranded in the border area since July 2021. As at the first half of 2022, the migration movement and crossing attempts had de-escalated. Between January–April 2022, the Polish Border Guard reported around 4,200 attempts to cross the border (JRS 01/06/2022). This number is much lower than the 11,300 in October 2021 alone (DW 09/11/2021). Repatriation flights have also decreased the number of people stranded at the border area. Beginning November 2021, Iraq has been arranging flights for its citizens stranded on the border and wishing to leave Belarus (DW 15/11/2021). IOM has also been providing the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programme on the Belarus side (UNHCR 12/11/2021; IOM 17/05/2022). By mid-January 2022, about 5,000 migrants had been repatriated to their countries (InfoMigrants 14/01/2022). There is no information on whether repatriation flights are continuing or not.

HUMANITARIAN CONCERNS

Clashes with the Polish Border Guard

In 2022, there were no reports of clashes escalating between the Polish Border Guard and migrants, but the latter continued to report violent behaviour and inhumane pushbacks from Polish and Belarusian guards (HRW 07/06/2022; Schengen Visa 31/03/2022; ECRE 17/06/2022). Security along the border has tightened with increased government funding to stop the migration. There are reports of the Polish Border Guard using drones to catch people coming too close to the Polish border in the woods (Al Jazeera 05/06/2022; ReMix 21/02/2022). There were reports of clashes between border guards and migrants in November 2021, but there is limited information about injuries (France 24 16/11/2021; CNN 17/11/2021).

People that manage to enter Poland, mostly with asylum documents, are held in detention centres that are overcrowded, filthy, and closed to outside visitors (AI 11/04/2022; Al Jazeera 05/06/2022; HRW 07/06/2022). A group of Kurdish asylum seekers detained at a Polish detention centre in Lesznowola, near the capital Warsaw, has been on a hunger strike since 4 May 2022. They are protesting the conditions they are facing, such as a lack of food, limited telephone and internet access, and difficulties contacting lawyers (InfoMigrants 30/05/2022; NFP 29/05/2022).

A lack of safety

The nature of the area where people are stranded increases the safety risks for migrants and asylum seekers. They are staying with a very small population group in swampy forests that are often flooded and in the presence of wildlife (Britannica accessed 27/06/2022; PTO accessed 27/06/2022).

From the beginning of the crisis until early 2022, at least 24 people died, including two children (JRS 01/06/2022 IRC 22/11/2021; Save the Children 17/11/2021; The Guardian 18/11/2021). In most cases, no information is available about the cause of death. At least one person died of hypothermia, while another died attempting to cross a river between Poland and Belarus (Euronews 16/11/2021; News18 13/11/2021). In March 2022, at least one person drowned, and another disappeared (HRW 07/06/2022). The exact number of people who have died is difficult to determine because of the length and remoteness of the border. Governments also continue to deny media access to some areas on both sides of the border (InfoMigrants 10/06/2022; CBS News 18/11/2021; Al Jazeera 18/11/2021).

Impact of the war in Ukraine

Since the start of the cross-border movement from Ukraine following the Russian invasion on 24 February, the number of volunteers helping at the Poland-Belarus border has decreased. As at the end of June, the state of emergency was still in place, meaning Polish volunteers could still face arrest and receive charges reaching up to eight years in prison for providing aid to people in need at the Belarusian border (TNH 26/05/2022; Al Jazeera 05/06/2022). To avoid harassment or the risk of any charges, many volunteers have moved to instead receive Ukrainians into Poland (Al Jazeera 05/06/2022). It is unclear whether the situation will remain the same or improve upon the lifting of the emergency status.

Impact on Polish citizens

The situation also affects Polish citizens living inside or close to the emergency status zone. There are reports of children feeling scared because of the constant presence of soldiers. Adults also struggle between their desire to help the people in need with medicine, food, or water and their fear of detention and facing human smuggling charges. Movement restrictions also affect livelihoods related to tourism, as only residents living in the emergency

zone are allowed to enter. Hotel owners still recovering from the impact of COVID-19 on their livelihoods have had to close their hotels again as the emergency status continues to affect local tourism (MSF 03/02/2022; Money.pl 30/09/2021).

ACCESS CONSTRAINTS

The emergency status imposed over 183 localities has prohibited NGOs and INGOs from entering the emergency zone and reaching people in need. Some humanitarian organisations have had to suspend operations and leave following several failed attempts at receiving permission to enter the restricted area (MSF 06/01/2022; DW 06/01/2022; RMF24 17/11/2021). Humanitarian access is likely to slightly improve upon the lifting of the emergency status on 1 July 2022, but areas within 200m of the border will remain restricted, meaning access to the most affected areas will remain challenging (InfoMigrants 10/06/2022).

Humanitarian access in Belarus is also restricted. Between August–October 2021, authorities shut down 270 NGOs (HRW 24/11/2021). No information is available on whether humanitarian access has improved or deteriorated in Belarus in 2022.

Migrants and asylum seekers avoid accessing essential services and health assistance out of fear of being exposed and pushed back by border guards (TNH 15/03/2022). Communication disruptions have also prevented contact between migrants and responders. People in need would usually communicate with activists in Poland via text message and transmit their location to the activists in hopes of receiving assistance (Al Jazeera 05/06/2022). This method puts them at risk of exposure as the Polish Border Guard has started tracking activist groups. It may unintentionally lead the guards to their location and result in them being pushed back to the Belarusian side (KII 24/11/2021).

Since the declaration of the state of emergency in September 2021, humanitarian access to the affected zones, where most people are stranded, has been highly restricted. The media has been denied access to some of the main areas on the Polish side of the border. Some journalists have reported receiving violent treatment from the police and being detained for violating the state of emergency (Al Jazeera 18/11/2021; IPI 19/11/2021; Euronews 20/01/2022).

HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

Since the beginning of 2022, the number of requests for assistance has decreased. As reported by a network of Polish NGOs, they received 120–200 requests for assistance from people in need every week from March–April 2022 (TNH 26/05/2022). This number is lower than the 1,000 requests per week they received between the end of October and early November 2021 (KII 23/04/2021 b).

Shelter

In March 2022, shelter needs increased following the expulsion of almost 700 people from the camp in Bruzgi in Belarus, where they used to take refuge in winter (TNH 26/05/2022; AI 11/04/2022). The expulsion has left people stranded in swampy forests without shelter (TNH 15/03/2022). They are sleeping outdoors in sometimes harsh weather conditions, which they are unprepared to withstand. They need shelter and other materials for warmth and protection from the elements (AI Jazeera 21/11/2021).

Protection

Reports of Polish and Belarusian border guards committing violence against migrants and asylum seekers have continued in 2022 at the same level as in 2021 (HRW 07/06/2022; InfoMigrants 18/11/2021; HRW 12/11/2021). As the weather becomes warmer, attempts to cross the border will likely increase, potentially exposing people to more violence (TNH 26/05/2022; Schengen Visa 15/06/2022). Grupa Granica, a Polish activist group that often receives support requests from people in need, has said that five people between 9–15 June 2022 reported experiencing violence and sexual harassment at the hands of border guards on the Belarusian side (Grupa Granica Facebook 21/06/2022).

Volunteers at the Poland-Belarus border report that, in 2022, there have been more families (women and children) than single young men at the end of 2021 (AI Jazeera 05/06/2022). The demographic includes mothers with children born during the last winter and people with disabilities or chronic diseases (TNH 26/05/2022). Children, including infants, have been pushed back or detained at the border between the two countries, putting their lives at risk. They lack protection, child-friendly accommodation, food, and water (UNICEF 09/11/2021; EU Observer 05/10/2021; Humanium 08/02/2022).

Health

Stranded migrants and asylum seekers continue to need medical care (MSF 03/02/2022). Current health needs assessments are unavailable because of access restrictions following the declaration of the emergency status (MSF 06/01/2022). Grupa Granica has reported that between June–May 2022, they assisted people suffering from wounds, seizures caused by dehydration, gastrointestinal infections, general exhaustion, hunger, hypothermia, and poisoning resulting from the lack of access to clean drinking water and food (Grupa Granica Facebook 21/06/2022 and 17/05/2022; AI Jazeera 11/11/2021). People have also sustained wounds from violence and attempts to cross barbed wires in the forest (AI Jazeera 11/11/2021; KII

23/11/2021 b). People will likely attempt to cross the border or pass through the new steel wall built by Poland, increasing the risk of physical injuries and healthcare needs.

Asylum seekers held at overcrowded detention centres in Poland without contact with the outside world have reported increased physical and mental healthcare needs. A number of people suffer from anxiety, insomnia, depression, or frequent suicidal thoughts while having no access to psychological support (AI 11/04/2022; The National 01/06/2022).

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Sanctions on Belarus

Living conditions in Belarus are deteriorating because of sanctions imposed following the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In March, the EU approved sanctions that banned 70% of Belarusian exports (Reuters 02/03/2022). The ban has affected the country's economy and people's livelihoods. Money transfer services, such as Western Union, have also been suspended since 24 March (WU 14/03/2022). As a result, migrants and asylum seekers are unable to receive money from their families abroad to support their needs in the short term. There are also fears that Belarusian soldiers will push the stranded people towards the war zone in Ukraine, with some people reporting that Belarusian soldiers have told them to cross to either Poland or Ukraine (The Guardian 14/03/2022).

Terrain

Podlaskie province on the border with Belarus is the coldest and least populated region of Poland, which increases safety risks for migrants and asylum seekers as well as humanitarian constraints for responders (Britannica accessed 24/11/2021). The Białowieża Forest that people pass also covers both the Polish and Belarusian territories. Wet grounds and swampy meadows occupy the biggest portion of the forest, and it experiences periodical flooding. Some migrants and asylum seekers have reported walking through swamps, marshland, and difficult forest terrain in an attempt to reach Poland. There is also a constant presence of wildlife in the area (PTO accessed 24/11/2021; HRW 12/11/2021). The composition of the forest poses a safety risk for the people stranded in the forest; Polish tourist regulation forbids staying in the forest at night for safety reasons (BPN accessed 24/11/2021). It also makes access difficult for humanitarian responders trying to provide assistance. Lastly, the Bug River going through Belarus and Poland forms the southern section of the natural border between the two countries; at least one person has died trying to cross the river (Euronews 16/11/2021).