

**REPORT**

# A TALE OF TWO BORDERS

**DOUBLE HUMANITARIAN STANDARDS IN REFUGEE RECEPTION:  
THE CASE OF POLAND**



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## DOUBLE HUMANITARIAN STANDARDS IN REFUGEE RECEPTION: THE CASE OF POLAND

## Research Team

This research is the result of a collaboration between the Humanitarian Leadership Academy (HLA), part of Save the Children, and Konsorcjum Migracyjne, a consortium of organisations working on behalf of migrants and refugees in Poland.

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## Table of Abbreviations

CBOS	– Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej (Centre for Public Opinion Research)
CSO	– Civil Society Organisation
EU	– European Union
FGD	– Focus Group Discussion
HLA	– Humanitarian Leadership Academy
INGO	– International Non-Governmental Organisation
IOM	– International Organisation for Migration
KII	– Key Informant Interview
LGBTQI+	– Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and More
MHPSS	– Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MSF	– Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders)
NGO	– Non-Governmental Organisation
PAH	– Polish Humanitarian Action
POPH	– Podlaskie Ochotnicze Pogotowie Humanitarne (Podlaskie Voluntary Humanitarian Aid)
RRP	– Refugee Response Plan
UN	– United Nations
UNHCR	– United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WAM	– We Are Monitoring

## Table of Definitions

<b>Aid Workers</b>	In this report, an umbrella definition encompassing a variety of local actors, from registered organisations, NGOs, coalitions, non-formal groups, grassroots organisations, private citizens, solidarity movements, activist groups, faith-based groups etc.
<b>Borderscape</b>	The border area, as well as other spaces related to migration and displacement beyond the border (but within the territory of the country), such as refugee detention centres or border guard facilities.
<b>Criminalisation of Solidarity</b>	A form of systemic and legal harassment of social movements or human rights defenders, particularly involved in supporting people on the move.
<b>Enforced Disappearance</b>	The arrest, detention, or forced return of people on the move with the involvement of state authorities, followed by a lack of acknowledgment of their presence in the country. This often results from pushbacks and the absence of proper registration and identification before the return of people on the move, or, in cases of detention, the denial of their right to notify relatives or other designated persons of their detention.

<b>The New Facilitation Directive</b>	The New Facilitation Directive, proposed by the European Commission, aims to prevent unauthorised entry, transit, and stay in the EU, replacing the previous legislation from 2002 (Facilitation Package). One of its goals is to stop the criminal networks facilitating illegal migration.
<b>Ombudsman</b>	Polish Commissioner for Human Rights, a constitutional authority responsible for safeguarding human and civil rights and freedoms.
<b>EU Pact on Migration and Asylum</b>	A set of ten legislative measures within five mechanisms aimed at reforming the EU's migration and asylum system by creating a unified EU approach to migration challenges.
<b>People on the Move</b>	General term including migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and people who continue their journeys to other countries.
<b>Pushback</b>	State or interstate measures that forcibly return people on the move across a border, violating international human rights and asylum law, such as non-refoulement principle.
<b>Sistiema</b>	The heavily militarised strip of land between the Polish border fence and the Belarusian border. Also known as the "no-man's land".
<b>Solidarity</b>	In this report: actions for or with people on the move, including the provision of humanitarian or integration assistance, advocacy and public campaigns.
<b>Third Country Nationals</b>	Individuals who are not citizens of the country in question. In this case, people who were fleeing Ukraine but without Ukrainian passports
<b>Temporary Protection and PESEL UKR</b>	Special form of protection guaranteed to Ukrainian citizens in EU countries. In Poland, it is obtained based on the Act on assistance to Ukrainian citizens fleeing war. PESEL UKR is a unique identification number issued to Ukrainian citizens in Poland, confirming their legal stay under Temporary Protection.
<b>Zone of Exclusion</b>	Also known as the "buffer zone", a specific area in the border zone between Poland and Belarus with restricted access to non-residents.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the summer of 2021, a humanitarian crisis emerged at the Polish-Belarusian border, marked by a sharp increase in the number of people on the move attempting to cross the border in search of protection in Poland from countries such as Syria, Eritrea and Iraq. In early 2022, another crisis unfolded at the Polish-Ukrainian border, as millions fled the war in Ukraine, seeking protection in Poland and in other countries.

This report looks at how local organisations and aid workers (including volunteer groups, grassroots organisations, activist groups, and individual citizens) organised the provision of aid differently depending on what border they operated at. The research looked at the extent to which the two responses differed during the period between 2021 and 2024, investigating the potential implications for the quality and credibility of humanitarian responses in different contexts, but in the same country.

Regardless of the differences, both responses highlight the centrality of the work of local organisations and informal initiatives in responding quickly and with agility to the needs of people on the move. At the Polish-Belarusian border, they operated under significant legal and logistical obstacles. The introduction of a territorial ban at this border, coupled with hostility from authorities and criminalisation of humanitarian aid, forced aid workers to work in secrecy. International organisations, United Nations (UN) agencies, and the media were denied access and mandate to operate at this border and did not seek cooperation with local organisations because of the perceived reputational and operational risks. This response mostly received material and monetary support from public donations, foundations, and charities, with very limited help from international organisations.

In contrast, the assistance at the Polish-Ukrainian border was met with broad solidarity by a wide range of actors, including national and local governments, local and international organisations, the private sector. The Polish government organised systems to ensure legal stay, access to employment, health care, education, and other social welfare. Local governments and municipalities coordinated and provided humanitarian aid at the local level, while local organisations and volunteer groups provided support based on their previous expertise, including education, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), support to vulnerable groups, and transportation. The response to the Ukrainian crisis is considered a positive example of localisation in practice from a funding perspective, as International Non-Governmental Organisation (INGOs) relied heavily on the work of local organisations.

By looking at both responses, the research also poses crucial questions regarding the ability of international organisations to uphold humanitarian principles in all crises, even when access and mandate are denied. The duplicity of the Polish situation interrogates the role of international organisations in the current and restrictive asylum European Union (EU) regime by describing the challenges in negotiating access to certain populations, while trying to maintain their role and presence in a country. In Poland, international organisations also struggled to adapt to the specificity of the Ukrainian crisis and had to recalibrate the standard approach for humanitarian crises, as it was not fit for purpose.



The research looked at the motivations of individuals to take part in this work, as understanding reasons for participating in relief efforts reveal interesting aspects of the response itself. The initial motivations are often related to a strong sense of injustice and humanitarian imperative, which in turn lead to burnout and exhaustion after a long period of engagement in the crisis. At the Belarusian border, burnout was exacerbated by the risks of criminalisation, fear of violence and intimidation.

While at the Ukrainian border there are no known cases of criminalisation of solidarity, at the border with Belarus criminalisation and violence are described as an inevitable part of this assistance. Aid workers have resorted to covert tactics to deliver life-saving aid, but harassment and criminalisation are a daily occurrence. Five individuals currently face up to five years in prison for providing life-saving aid. In addition, aid workers have reported persistent harassment by extreme right-wing and nationalist groups.

Although humanitarian needs remain high at both borders, the future of the humanitarian response in Poland is uncertain. The drastic reduction in funding, growing anti-migrant rhetoric, the criminalisation of solidarity and general fatigue have affected local actors' ability to deliver aid, pushing some to consider discontinuing activities.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

### International Organisations and UN Agencies:

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1. Uphold humanitarian principles and save all lives.
2. Recognise the highly valuable knowledge and professionalism of local organisations even when their skills are learned outside the humanitarian sector.
3. Find innovative solutions to support local organisations involved in life-saving assistance in less visible or politically sensitive crises.

### International Donors:

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4. Enhance the flexibility of humanitarian funding to address less visible emergencies within the same country or region, aligning with the principles of humanity and impartiality.

### Local Organisations:

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5. Recognise resources, advantages and limitations during or in preparation for a crisis and communicate them clearly in partnerships and arrangements with stakeholders.

### State Actors:

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6. Provide unified protection to refugees in line with the international standards and treaties.
7. Recognise the central role of civil society in humanitarian crises by including civil society organisations in decision-making processes on humanitarian responses.
8. Decriminalise the lifesaving humanitarian assistance and provide access to people in need.



# 1

## INTRODUCTION

Poland was historically an emigration country, receiving only a few thousands asylum applications every year.<sup>1</sup> In 2020, nearly 460,000 registered migrants lived in the country, mainly from Ukraine (244,000), Belarus (28,800) and Germany (20,000).<sup>2</sup> However, starting from 2021 with the crisis at the Belarusian border, there has been an increase in the number of people on the move<sup>3</sup> seeking protection in the country. In 2022, following the mass displacement of people fleeing Ukraine, Poland became one of the top refugee-receiving countries in the European Union (EU).<sup>4</sup>

The scale of arrivals from Ukraine was unprecedented: in the first six weeks of the crisis Poland received 2.8 million refugees.<sup>5</sup> The refugee population consisted mostly of women, children and older people, as generally men could not flee due to the compulsory conscription to the Ukrainian army. This mass displacement has led to social, institutional and demographic changes in Polish society,<sup>6</sup> and it has shaped the country's recent political narratives – from the growing fear of a potential Russian threat to the initial solidarity with Ukrainians.<sup>7</sup> The emergence of an international and local humanitarian sectors, previously absent from the country, has also profoundly marked this period in Poland.<sup>8</sup>

Preceding this exceptional situation, the summer of 2021 featured the beginning of an acute crisis<sup>9</sup> at the Belarusian border with people on the move from the Middle East and Africa attempting to cross irregularly the so-called 'Green Border': a vast, thick and swampy forest between Poland and Belarus.<sup>10</sup> Even though the numbers of crossings were – and still are – much smaller compared to the Ukrainian crisis, this border is of particular significance as it has become one of the most violent and militarised borders of the EU.<sup>11</sup>

As a result of these rapid changes in the migration and asylum landscape, the Polish government introduced emergency legal, financial and systemic measures. A new legal status (the so-called Temporary Protection) was introduced for Ukrainians, facilitating access to social benefits, the labour market, education and health services.<sup>12</sup> On the Belarusian border, following the first documented pushback<sup>13</sup> in Usnarz Górny in August 2021,<sup>14</sup> the government imposed a state of emergency, banning access to the border area, or so-called 'exclusion zone', for ten months to anyone but local residents.<sup>15</sup> In 2024, the government reinstated the exclusion zone after a soldier was fatally stabbed by a person attempting to cross the border while on duty. News of this incident coincided with media reports about the detention of three soldiers for firing warning shots at the border. This measure was followed by legal amendments justifying the use of weapons by the law enforcement.<sup>16</sup> In March 2025 the President of Poland signed a bill that temporarily suspended the right to seek asylum.<sup>17</sup>

This research looks at the extent to which the humanitarian responses at the two borders have differed. The focus of this report is on how local organisations and aid workers (including Polish non-governmental organisations (NGOs), volunteer groups, grassroots organisations, activist groups and individual citizens)<sup>18</sup> organised the provision of aid differently depending on what border they operate at. Further, the research reflects on the role international humanitarian actors play in countries with multiple crises, where access and mandate are negated. The duplicity of the Polish situation asks broader questions around the role of humanitarians in the current and restrictive asylum EU regime, which is bound to deteriorate with the implementation of the EU Directive on Facilitation and the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.

The period looked at for this research is 2021-2024 because of its particular significance in Poland. It is important to note that the focus of this report is on the work of aid workers and international organisations at the borders, rather than on the experiences of people on the move in crossing the borders. We recognise that their voices are central to any type of research in displacement and migration, so we have inserted testimonies collected by various organisations involved with people on the move in Poland, Ukraine and Belarus.<sup>19</sup> These additions are invaluable as they provide first-hand accounts of specific challenges at the two borders, such as the treatment of Roma refugees at the Ukrainian border; the repression of civil society in Belarus and its consequences for people on the move; the militarisation and securitisation of the Polish-Belarusian border; and the response at the Ukrainian side of the border.

**The report is divided as follows:**

**Section 2** will outline the methodology adopted for this research;

**Section 3** will provide an overview of the situation at the Polish-Belarusian and Polish-Ukrainian borders;

**Section 4** will discuss the role of local organisations and aid workers involved in both responses, issues around humanitarian access of international organisations, cooperation between different entities, funding, and motivations and exhaustion of aid workers;

**Section 5** will discuss the criminalisation of solidarity at the Polish-Belarusian border;

**Section 6** will discuss the challenges for the future of these organisations;

Finally, the last chapter will provide recommendations for international organisations, international donors, local actors and state actors.

# 2

## **METHODOLOGY**

## 2.1 Research Questions

The research was guided by the following questions:

1. Are Poland's humanitarian responses and refugee reception different depending on specific borderscapes<sup>20</sup> and migration routes, particularly in the context of the new EU Pact on Asylum and Migration? If so, to what extent and how?
2. Where there are differences between humanitarian responses, what are the implications for: a) the quality and credibility of humanitarian response; b) the safety of the responders; c) the contribution of non-formal actors in the humanitarian response?
3. To what extent have different groups of aid workers coordinated efforts for humanitarian aid? What are the experiences and challenges of cross-sectoral cooperation between different actors?

## 2.2 Approach and Sampling

This research employed a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. Our methodology integrated a desk review, key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs) to address the research questions.

The desk review analysed existing literature, reports, and data to establish a solid foundation, identify knowledge gaps, and learn from previous research. This step was crucial for understanding the context and building on existing work. Additionally, a total of 49 respondents were consulted; 34 KIIs and 6 FGDs were conducted between August and September 2024, mostly in-person at the two border areas and in Warsaw. A handful of KIIs and FGDs were conducted online or by email due to the tight schedule of interviewees. The stakeholders interviewed are outlined in Table 1 (for a full list of stakeholders see Annex 2).

Type of Stakeholder	Number of Individuals Interviewed
Representatives of local NGOs, grassroots organisations and volunteers	30
Representatives of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies	13
Representatives of legal associations	3
Representative of central government	1
Representative of municipality	1
Academic	1

**Table 1** Types of stakeholders interviewed

The team used purposive sampling, selecting respondents operating at both borders or at one of the two borders, reaching a wide spectrum of actors. During the data collection phase, the team expanded the original KII list to gather additional insights deemed valuable for the research. Given the sensitive nature of this research, the team leveraged their pre-existing networks to gain access to participants. Considering the high risks of criminalisation at the Belarusian border, it would not have been possible to gain the trust of participants without those pre-existing relationships.

The coding book for analysis was developed following a mix of inductive (codes based on the data) and deductive methods (using an existing framework with pre-defined set of codes), finding themes and patterns within the data. Data was analysed and synthesised using the MaxQDA software. The team presented and validated preliminary findings with research participants via an online participatory workshop, ensuring they reflected the experiences of those included in the study and sought inputs for recommendations.

## **2.3 Ethics**

Given the sensitivities of this research, we applied high ethical standards and a ‘do no harm’ approach, ensuring that interview questions and the presence of researchers did not put participants or the research team at risk. The research at the Polish-Belarusian border required strict safety measures to protect the research team from being stopped and/or interrogated by authorities, given the extremely tense situation at that border.

We sent respondents an information sheet in advance of each interview, outlining the purposes and main areas of research, to ensure that they were fully informed. During the interview, we read consent forms and sought written or verbal consent from participants. All signed informed consents were stored safely in a password-protected drive. To protect research participants, we ensured interviews were conducted in a safe space, where they felt comfortable and where they did not risk being overheard by others, preserving their privacy and confidentiality. All data sets were anonymised and stored securely and will be deleted upon completion of the project.

## **2.4 Limitations**

The research team was not able to obtain interviews with specific stakeholders, such as government representatives in relevant Ministries, and key international actors despite multiple requests for interview. Interviews with these stakeholders would have deepened the understanding of decision-making around engagement (or non-engagement) at both borders. However, the sample of stakeholders is diverse and representative of a variety of views.

# 3

## CONTEXT



### **The two crises faced unique sets of challenges:**

- People on the move crossing the border from Belarus were met with hostility and pushbacks from the Polish border services. They have been supported by local organisations, activist groups and local residents, who have delivered aid and legal assistance in the general absence of state actors and the international humanitarian community.
- The scale of displacement from Ukraine was unprecedented in recent history. Refugees were met by a huge mobilisation spearheaded by local and international actors, including public administration, the private sector and the Ukrainian diaspora. Nevertheless, minorities – such as Roma, transpeople or third country nationals – faced obstacles in accessing aid and many experienced discrimination or security risks at the border areas.

## **3.1 The Polish-Belarusian Border**

### **3.1.1 The Border**

The border between Poland and Belarus is characterised by one of the oldest forests in Europe, the Białowieża forest, and by a tall fence built to deter irregular crossings. The outbreak of the crisis at this border in 2021 gradually changed this area due to increased militarisation, checkpoints, military outposts and heavy police presence in public spaces (see Box 1).<sup>21</sup>

#### **Militarisation of the Polish-Belarusian Border**

##### **We Are Monitoring Association**

The physical border between Poland and Belarus was completed in June 2022: a 186-kilometre-long and 5.5 meters high structure, topped with razor or concertina wire. The heavy border infrastructure raised significant controversies over environmental damage, human safety, and the actual efficacy of these measures in reducing the scale of irregular border crossings. Shortly after its construction, Grupa Granica raised alarms about injuries caused by the border, causing razor blade cuts, fractures and injuries as a result of climbing and falling off the wall. In April 2023, a Syrian man died in a hospital in Białystok after falling from the border fence.

**Box 1** Militarisation of the Polish-Belarusian Border

### **3.1.2 The Journey to Poland**

It is difficult to provide exact figures of how many individuals have crossed this border as there is no official data available. However, from September 2021 to November 2024, WAM – a local organisation gathering data at this border – documented over 10,000 pushbacks and over 22,000 requests for help from people on the move.<sup>22</sup> The main nationalities are from countries in Africa and the Middle East, including Syria, Eritrea, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and South Sudan.

The militarisation of the Polish border and the lack of basic support to people on the move from state actors is widely considered to be one of the factors leading to enforced disappearances<sup>23</sup> and to the strengthening of networks of intermediary agents, such as human traffickers and smugglers.<sup>24</sup> Almost all the testimonies of people on the move indicate the emergence of the so-called ‘intermediary agents’ in the countries of origin,<sup>25</sup> who offer to facilitate the route through Belarus (and/or Russia) as a ‘safer route to Europe’ compared to the dangerous journeys via the Mediterranean Sea or the Balkans.<sup>26</sup> However, this route is far from safe (see Box 2): there have been reports of people on the move being grouped by Belarusian border forces in ‘camps’ where abuse and torture occur, and then pushed into Poland using excessive force and coercive methods.<sup>27</sup> There have also been reports of border guards destroying phones and documents, confiscating food, water, essential medicines and money, misinforming, starving, exposing people to freezing temperatures, including minors, pregnant women, and older people.<sup>28</sup> At the time of writing, there have been 93 recorded border deaths of people on the move in Poland<sup>29</sup> as a result of violence, hypothermia, drowning, injuries, malnutrition and polluted water.

### 3.1.3 Pushbacks and Access to Asylum

The first pushback at the Polish-Belarusian border was documented by Amnesty International in the summer of 2021.<sup>30</sup> A group of 32 Afghans, including one minor, were detained in Poland for two months in abysmal conditions, and then pushed back into Belarus by the Polish authorities, contrary to international standards and the principle of *non-refoulement*.<sup>31</sup> Since 2021, there have also been reports of forcible removals from Polish hospitals, even in cases where individuals had serious health conditions.

In theory, those who cross the Green Border can apply for international protection under national law. However, Polish and international watchdog organisations have documented systemic obstacles to access to asylum procedures, including multiple instances of asylum applications being ignored, or the deliberate provision of misleading information.<sup>32</sup> In cases where asylum claims are registered, the individuals are sent to refugee centres while waiting for the outcomes for up to fifteen months.<sup>33</sup> Detention centres lack or have very limited access to psychological, legal and medical support. Together with the prolonged procedures and uncertainty, this ‘detention limbo’ often leads to severe deterioration in mental health, particularly affecting individuals from vulnerable groups and those with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>34</sup> If there is a positive outcome in the claim, the person is released, often without early warning and adequate assistance;<sup>35</sup> whilst a rejection of the claim usually means extending the detention and initiating the return procedure. In Poland, asylum is granted only for 13% of the claims for protection. In most of the other cases, individuals are granted subsidiary or humanitarian protection that have limited scope in comparison to refugee status<sup>36</sup>

#### Testimonies of Border Violence

##### We Are Monitoring Association

Since 2022, WAM has been conducting interviews with people who crossed the Polish-Belarusian border and experienced pushbacks. The quotes below are fragments of testimonies collected by WAM between August and November 2024.

Faris was pushed back into Belarus in July 2024, he describes the moment when Polish officers found him:

*‘Just when they catch you, they spray your eyes and your face with pepper spray. From that moment you aren’t able to see anything for about 20 minutes. [...] Then, they start to beat you and they take you from the forest to the road. [...] Then they start interrogating you: ‘Where are you from?’ ‘Where are you going?’ ‘What do you want to do?’ After that, they put you in the car’s trunk, of course the trunk is closed and they spray the pepper spray inside, so you are suffocating’ (Faris from Syria).*

The testimonies of Dahir and Claude, pushed back to Belarus in October 2024, confirm the violence:

*‘When the Syrian boy shared his live location, shortly a drone came to where we were, and it stood still, facing us for a while and I realised that they found us, this was when I started running, and I was shot with rubber bullets and they came and they sent the dog on the Syrian guy. He didn’t run, he was lying down, and they came and started beating him’ (Dahir from Somalia).*

*‘They told me that if I tried to come back or thought about Poland again, if they saw me in Poland again, they would kill me. They said that I didn’t have the right to come to Poland again. And I stayed near this river for an hour or so, I was paralysed, I didn’t know... I always thought that Europe has human rights. And I only saw the opposite of it. I saw the barbarity, people who think we are animals’ (Claude from Cameroon).*

Often, people apprehended after crossing the Polish-Belarusian border are taken to Border Guard facilities before they are sent back into Belarus. There, according to various testimonies, officers force them to sign documents declaring they do not wish to apply for international protection, often using threats or manipulation. Nashwan from Yemen, who was pushed back in August 2024, reported:

*‘They gave us a document. They were shouting at us. They gave us a blank piece of paper, they covered up the papers, they covered up all the words. At the end of the page there were two lines, ‘Write your name and sign’. I told them that I wanted to read the document. They refused. But I took the paper, I pulled the paper. There was a sentence written on it: ‘The suspect does not want asylum in*

#### Box 2 Testimonies of border violence

### 3.1.4 Belarus – Shrinking Space for Civic Engagement

The complexity of the situation at the Polish-Belarusian border is compounded by the nearly complete lack of information regarding what happens to people on the move in Belarus. On this side of the border, no organisation has access to people on the move, despite the attempts to gain access done by the Belarusian Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders (MSF), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (see Box 3).<sup>37</sup> The situation of people on the move here has mostly been reported by the Belarusian civil society organisation (CSO) Human Constanta (see box 3). However, in 2021 they were liquidated, together with most CSOs, and its representatives fled Belarus following a wave of arrests.

### Snapshot of Belarusian Civil Society

#### Human Constanta

Repressions against the Belarusian civil society make it extremely challenging to provide any type of support to people on the move. Since 2020, the Belarusian civil society came under prolonged and systematic attack by the authorities, with 1,870 public organisations liquidated, and volunteers risking criminal prosecutions. As of December 2024, there are 1,259 political prisoners in Belarus, currently held in detention. People who give monetary or other material donations to solidarity funds or opposition organisations are labelled as "extremist formations" and can be prosecuted, facing up to eight years' imprisonment.

This situation has led to a significant decrease in the assistance to people on the move, also due to a lack of access to border regions for monitoring and rescuing missions. The liquidation of all independent human rights organisations has led to a *de facto* criminalisation of human rights work in Belarus and to a vast number of Belarusian human rights defenders leaving the country.

Independent volunteer groups also provided support to people on the move: employees of a Belarusian IT company helped with shelter; anarchist groups prepared and distributed food; and one charitable project collected clothes. There were a handful of international organisations in the country: UNHCR aided people seeking international protection; International Organisation for Migration (IOM) provided assistance to people participating in voluntary return programs; Belarusian Red Cross and MSF provided medical assistance. However, all these organisations have now left Belarus.

Human Constanta, the main legal and humanitarian CSO working at the border since 2015 in support of people on the move in Belarus, was liquidated in 2021. After its liquidation, the organisation was forced to work in secret, without employment contracts, registered funding, and no access to state institutions. As other human rights defenders and civil society representatives, the organisation faced stigmatisation and hate speech in pro-government mass media and public statements by government officials. Currently, the organisation does not operate in Belarus as all its members left the country due to fear of persecution.

Box 3 Snapshot of Belarusian Civil Society

## 3.2 The Polish-Ukrainian Border

### 3.2.1 The Border

Both Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the number of people fleeing the war were unprecedented events in recent European history. Overall, there were over 19 million crossings in and out of Poland between February 2022 and October 2024.<sup>38</sup>

With the outbreak of the war, the dynamics of the border region completely shifted, both along the border and in nearby cities: humanitarian infrastructure was set up overnight, including INGO and UN Agencies' field offices, reception points, the United Nations Agency for Children (UNICEF) Blue Dots, and collective accommodation.<sup>39</sup>

### 3.2.2 The Journey to Poland from Ukraine

Poland received the biggest number of refugees from Ukraine in the EU in the initial stages of the war;<sup>40</sup> some remained in Poland, others moved to other European countries, and others returned to Ukraine. As of December 2024, nearly one million Ukrainian citizens were registered in Poland.<sup>41</sup>

Most refugees from Ukraine arrived by train through railway crossings, mainly in Medyka, Korczowa, Przemyśl and Hrubieszów (see Box 4). After registering at reception points, they received the so-called UKR PESEL (ID number in Poland) and temporary protection, guaranteed by EU regulations and Polish law under the Act on assistance to Ukrainian citizens, extended until September 2025.<sup>42</sup> They were given the option to move to other Polish cities, and stay in collective accommodation centres, private accommodation, or travel to other EU countries.<sup>43</sup>

#### **Solidarity and Humanitarian Aid on the Ukrainian Side of the Polish-Ukrainian border**

##### **Open Space Works Ukraine**

In the early months of the war, humanitarian aid on the Ukrainian side of the border was marked by an extraordinary level of solidarity and grassroots mobilisation. Volunteers, local communities, and NGOs set up aid stations at key border crossings, such as Lviv and Shehyni, providing shelter, food, transport and medical assistance to those fleeing. Ukrainian refugees reported that the solidarity they experienced was overwhelming, as strangers, despite facing their own hardships, stepped up to offer transportation to Poland, temporary housing, and emotional support. These acts of solidarity reinforced a sense of unity and resilience that carried many through the difficult journey into Poland and beyond.

Despite the overwhelming support, the sheer scale of displacement meant that aid was not always sufficient. Some refugees also noted gaps in coordination and accessibility – long waits at aid points, inconsistent information about available services, and shortages of essential goods in overcrowded shelters. Others noted that while official structures struggled to keep up, personal networks and volunteer efforts helped bridge the gaps.

**Box 4** Solidarity and humanitarian action on the Ukrainian side of the border

Despite the fairly open movement at this border, it is important to note that ***border crossings looked significantly different for people from minority groups***, such as the Roma community,<sup>44</sup> transgender people,<sup>45</sup> or Third Country Nationals.<sup>46</sup> Watchdog organisations<sup>47</sup> and UN agencies<sup>48</sup> documented multiple barriers to accessing protection or humanitarian assistance for these groups, as well as incidents of systematic marginalisation towards non-ethnically Ukrainian refugees. For example, Ukrainian Romas were often denied access to collective sites (see Box 5), facing discrimination and segregation, and were not able to use healthcare and social services due to language and cultural barriers.

Third country nationals<sup>49</sup> were initially not covered by the temporary protection measures, and in most cases were returned to their countries of origin. Reports

indicate that they had to wait at the border for a significantly longer time than Ukrainians, in many cases were not offered the same assistance, and were also vulnerable to harassment from Polish nationalistic groups.<sup>50</sup> This *de facto* created two tiers of protection initially, however temporary protection was later extended to these groups.<sup>51</sup>

Additionally, at this border, serious safeguarding concerns were raised regarding young women and unaccompanied children who were offered transport and private accommodation by individuals without undergoing a background check.<sup>52</sup> It is not possible to quantify the number of people that have fallen victim of modern slavery or trafficking at this border, but some safeguarding procedures were put in place later, and organisations implemented awareness-raising activities to ensure refugees did not accept lifts from strangers.<sup>53</sup>

### **Roma Refugees Fleeing Ukraine**

**Dr Elzbieta Mirga-Wójtowicz, University of Warsaw**

The initial reception at border crossings revealed clear differences and discrimination in the treatment of Roma communities, including verbal and non-verbal acts of discrimination, social and cultural exclusion. For example, they were repeatedly pushed out of queues and denied access to transport on both the Ukrainian and Polish sides of the border. Roma families faced serious challenges in obtaining food and material assistance, including systematic refusals in shelters, and experienced intimidation and threats from local authorities, sleeping in train and bus stations as a result, in precarious and unsafe conditions. These discriminatory practices were not isolated incidents, but part of a wider pattern of systemic anti-gypsyism.

The persistence of anti-gypsyism within refugee systems highlights the ongoing need for structural reforms to address discrimination and create inclusive support mechanisms. Polish Roma organisations played a pivotal role in bridging gaps between Roma refugees and aid systems, through the employment of Roma assistants working for the integration and inclusion of Ukrainian Roma. Roma organisations emphasised the specific needs and vulnerabilities of Roma refugees, advocating for equitable access to humanitarian assistance, and combating instances of exclusion and prejudice.

#### **Box 5 Roma Refugees Fleeing Ukraine**

# 4

**TWO BORDERS,  
TWO RESPONSES**



There are *fundamental differences between the humanitarian responses at the two borders*. At the Polish-Belarusian border, aid workers have faced significant legal and logistical obstacles in providing life-saving aid due to, among other reasons, hostility from authorities, the particularly challenging composition of the area, and the near complete absence of international organisations. At the Ukrainian border, the enormity of the crisis was matched with unprecedented solidarity from the public and cross-sectoral cooperation between a range of actors, including national and local governments, CSOs, the private sector and INGOs/UN agencies.

## 4.1 Local Organisations

- The Polish civil society, mostly lacking prior humanitarian experience, quickly responded and adapted to both crises, applying skills from non-crisis work to assist refugees at both borders.
- At the Polish-Belarusian border, aid has been provided covertly due to legal restrictions, hostility, with organisations operating undercover to avoid risks of criminalisation. The secrecy aspect of providing aid is central at this border.
- At the Polish-Ukrainian border, there was huge public solidarity and cross-sectoral cooperation, with local and international organisations and the state mobilising quickly to assist refugees coming from Ukraine.

Civil society at large, including individuals, activists and informal groups, have been at the forefront of the humanitarian assistance in Poland. Regardless of the differences, both responses highlight the *centrality of the work of local organisations in responding quickly and with agility* to the needs of people on the move.

The entirety of the assistance provided at the Belarusian border has been led by local NGOs, grassroots organisations, non-formal groups, activists, volunteers and local residents.<sup>54</sup> Access to the border by INGOs, UN agencies and the media has been severely restricted by the central government,<sup>55</sup> as the introduction of a state of emergency at the border and the consequent buffer zone blocked the provision of humanitarian aid.<sup>56</sup> Days after the events in August 2021 (see Chapter 3), local organisations and informal groups from all over Poland organised life-saving assistance for people on the move at this border (see Annex 1 for more details). Very quickly, these groups, which *rely on a fluid, decentralised structure and close coordination*, designed and implemented a complex infrastructure of aid, managing a variety of challenges and risks (see Section 5).<sup>57</sup>

Because of the challenges around the criminalisation of solidarity, *secrecy and invisibility are entrenched in the work of aid workers at this border*, as explained by one of our respondents:

*'We are here are working like partisans. We have to hide our work. We're doing this in a way not to be visible to ordinary people because there is a risk of pushbacks. And also, especially this year, there are groups who are trying to make some violence situations for us.'* (K1113)

Contrarily, ***the response to the Ukraine crisis was mobilised and organised quickly in close collaboration with central and local authorities.*** In the words of one of our respondents: ‘Everyone was here. I remember the first month as hell. I’d be lying if I said we were ready (...) What helped, in my humble opinion? All hands were on deck.’ (KII31) ***Municipalities and local governments*** were at the helm of the response in the days immediately after the beginning of the full-scale invasion, coordinating the response with regional authorities and the civil society. Shortly after the beginning of the crisis, local organisations took on a central role in the response, becoming the leaders:

‘After a week of being there, we were recognised by the Voivodeship office, by the crisis management authority, municipalities, and after a week we were already recognised as leaders, and officially we took over responsibilities on the 20th of March.’ (KII9)

***Ukrainian migrant and refugee-led organisations very quickly became the key players for the Ukrainian response,*** as they leveraged their pre-existing networks with authorities and other NGOs.<sup>58</sup> However, our respondents reported that despite their central role in the response, they could not access decision-making platforms and institutions, due to challenges in establishing a dialogue or cooperation with government representatives, especially at the central level, which hampered the provision of aid, integration activities and the flow of reliable information.

It is estimated that over ***half of the entire population of Poland was involved in supporting refugees*** from Ukraine in the first few months.<sup>59</sup> Our respondents from local organisations<sup>60</sup> mentioned that nearly overnight, they received hundreds of volunteering requests. Many of the volunteers and organisations working at the Polish-Belarusian border also moved to the Ukrainian border to support the refugees there. However, this movement of workforce and of media attention, which was inevitable given the much bigger scale of the crisis in Ukraine, created a ***considerable gap in terms of funding and manpower available at the Polish-Belarusian border,*** as funds and volunteers were redirected there.

The ***type of assistance provided at the two borders has also been at the two polar ends of the spectrum.*** For the Ukrainian response, the Polish government organised temporary visas, access to employment, education, health care and other social welfare. ***Local organisations and volunteer groups focused on areas of support based on their previous expertise,*** such as provision of information, education, Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), support to women and other vulnerable groups, and transport. At the Polish-Belarusian border, only life-saving assistance, such as food, first-aid, clothes, is provided to avoid any risk of being accused of facilitation of migration. As explained by one of our respondents:

‘When we talk about Ukraine, people were literally getting inside the cars and driving inside Ukraine to get people out [to Poland]. And here [at the Polish-Belarusian border] we knew that taking someone into a car to transport out of the forest is the most controversial, even when the temperature is minus 15 degrees and taking them to the nearest shelter would be obvious.’ (KII19)

Most aid workers at both borders ***did not have previous experience of operating in humanitarian contexts.*** Nevertheless, despite their lack of ‘traditional’ humanitarian

expertise, they were bringing a variety of competences from their day-to-day jobs or previous volunteering: nearly all the respondents were highly **specialised professionals who put their skills into practice** in the humanitarian context, such as legal representation, interpretation, medical assistance and social work. As illustrated by one director of a Polish NGO:

*'Of course, I know about human rights, I read about humanitarian aid, but I had nothing, no idea of how it functions. What are the principles? What are they? We learned by doing, and then we had these international organisations who came and supported us.'* (K111)

This is also the case at the Polish-Belarusian border: some aid workers had previously worked with people on the move in non-crisis settings, as legal representatives, social workers, teachers, translators, or as volunteers in other European migration routes, such as in Greece or the Balkans, or were previously engaged with activist or solidarity groups, related to other issues, such as environment, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex (LGBTQI+), feminist or anti-hunting movements.<sup>61</sup>

## 4.2 International Organisations

- International organisations faced challenges in providing humanitarian aid at the Polish-Belarusian border due to legal restrictions, political sensitivities, and the need to maintain positive relations with the Polish government while adapting their response to the unique nature of the Ukrainian refugee crisis.
- International organisations and UN agencies were called to operate in Poland in response to the Ukrainian crisis, requiring a recalibration of their standard humanitarian approaches due to the large number of people seeking refuge into a country with advanced infrastructure, social services, and strong civil society engagement.

The involvement of international organisations at the two borders is particularly interesting to highlight the **different roles international organisations play depending on access, mandate and diplomatic efforts** with the national government.

In our research, the **challenges of international organisations in negotiating access to certain populations**, while trying to maintain their role and presence in a country, emerged as a key finding. The case of Poland interrogates the ability of humanitarian organisations to reach all individuals in crisis, due to the wider politics within which humanitarian organisations operate in. This dilemma is one that is found elsewhere – for example in Europe with the search and rescue missions in the Mediterranean, as well as in other crises around the world.<sup>62</sup> This particular case provides an example of the intricacies of being involved in a crisis that is mainly caused by the violent (in) action towards people on the move.<sup>63</sup>

The denial of humanitarian access – *a situation where, as a result of the intentional behaviour of certain persons, humanitarian assistance does not reach its intended beneficiaries*<sup>64</sup> – is both physical and political. As presented in Article 233 of the Polish Constitution, *the law specifying the scope of limitations on freedoms and rights of citizens and individuals during a state of martial law and a state of emergency cannot*

*limit the freedoms and rights*,<sup>65</sup> specifically humanitarian assistance and protection of life and dignity. In the case of the Polish-Belarusian border, then, the introduction of a state of emergency led to the paradox of responsible citizenship: on one hand, the citizen has a constitutional duty to help others in need, on the other hand, the denial of access to the border areas created conditions for criminalisation (see Section 5).<sup>66</sup>

This research illustrates these points clearly: international organisations and UN agencies were called to operate in Poland to respond only to the Ukrainian crisis. ***Most of the international organisations were not operating in the country before***, bar a small number that were implementing small programmes or activities.<sup>67</sup> However, they were ***not given permission by the government to provide direct assistance at the Belarusian border***, hence they could not legally operate there.

***Engagement at the Polish-Belarusian border was deemed to be extremely sensitive for international organisations***, as they tried to maintain a positive relationship with the Polish government to keep projects in the country open and maintain access to decision-making and influence policy. Thus, international actors did not engage in relief efforts in the forest. MSF has been the only international organisation directly operating here since November 2022,<sup>68</sup> as they obtained limited access to the border area to provide first-aid assistance. In our interviews,<sup>69</sup> it transpired that other international organisations were not willing or able to take the risk of operating at the Polish-Belarusian border for a variety of reasons, including: the imperative of operating according to the legal framework of the county; fear of losing access to Poland altogether and having to leave the Ukraine response; reputational risks for the organisation; risks of potential legal challenges against members of staff.

At the same time, international organisations struggled to adapt to the specificity of the Ukrainian crisis. Our respondents<sup>70</sup> from international organisations mentioned that this was a humanitarian crisis like no other: a huge number of refugees into a country with sophisticated infrastructure, social services and a very strong civil society and civic engagement. ***International organisations had to recalibrate the standard approach for humanitarian crises, as it was not fit for purpose***. For example, Poland did not have refugee camps as refugees were sheltered either in collective accommodations (repurposed from old buildings such as libraries, shopping centres, offices, village halls, conference centres, etc.) or in private accommodation. Nevertheless, INGOs and UN agencies were instrumental in processing registrations, providing information, organising cash assistance, MHPSS, and organising advocacy efforts and fundraising.

### 4.3 Cooperation

- Cooperation between different entities has been a very important part at the Ukrainian border. Non-traditional humanitarian actors, such as volunteers or grassroots organisations, have been cooperating with international organisations, creating new alliances.
- In the Ukrainian response, INGOs were initially disbursing funds based on trust and needing minimal requirements. While collaborations were generally positive, local organisations sometimes faced challenges due to INGOs' lack

of contextual knowledge and divergence in priorities. At the Polish-Belarusian border, cooperation was more complex, as INGOs viewed some groups as not fundable, requesting them to ‘professionalise’ to meet international standards.

- Coordination platforms were established at both borders, with the Ukrainian border having formal networks to reduce duplication and improve service provision, while the Belarusian border created informal collaboration platforms.

### 4.3.1 International and Local Cooperation

International organisations relied heavily on the work of local NGOs in the Ukraine response to deliver aid. Respondents<sup>71</sup> reported generally **good cooperation in the Ukrainian response**, however representatives of local organisations<sup>72</sup> sometimes lamented **a lack of contextual knowledge of INGOs that affected** the ways of working, highlighting divergence in priorities and misunderstandings around how to operate in the country. It was reported that only on a few occasions international organisations asked local partners what support they needed, rather than providing the standard portfolio of activities and services in humanitarian crises.<sup>73</sup>

As outlined elsewhere,<sup>74</sup> **the Polish response was a positive example of localisation in practice from a funding perspective**, due to the high amounts of direct funding channelled to local organisations. In the first few months of the crisis, few restrictions and light due diligence processes were applied to the disbursement of funding to local organisations involved in the Ukraine response.<sup>75</sup> Our respondents from INGOs<sup>76</sup> mentioned that at the beginning, these funds were disbursed based on trust, rather than following the usual procurement processes. This way of operating was justified because of the high scale of needs and the necessity to make quick decisions. As the crisis slowed down, INGOs started to tighten the requirements; as one of our respondents put it:

*‘The organisations were given a blank pass, so it was like a gold card, and they could easily get thousands but also millions of dollars from INGOs without necessarily going through thorough organisational capacity assessment which we never do in other crisis in the world. We are much more cautious, we are much more risk averse, we try to find out what do, if they really exist, and if they really have the capacity that they say.’ (K114)*

The picture at the Polish-Belarusian border is more complex. Among some respondents from international organisations,<sup>77</sup> there was a perception that organisations at this border were not adequately equipped, operating ‘out of passion’ rather than professionalism, and hence not fundable. There was a sense that the **lack of professional qualifications or the profile of these organisations was a serious barrier to cooperation**, as they did not want to incur in potential reputational and operational risks. However, the same respondents admitted that there was no formal risk assessment carried out on these organisations to evidence this perception. As a result, **INGOs were requesting them to ‘professionalise’ in certain areas of their work**, in order to provide a guarantee that they were operating following basic international standards. These requests put a strain on the work and capacity of organisations, as well as heightening risks of criminalisation by being visible in the public realm.<sup>78</sup>



### 4.3.2 Local Platforms for Cooperation

Both responses established *coordination platforms to link different actors*, but these platforms are extremely different in their legal composition and purposes. At the Polish-Belarusian border, there are three groups with distinct territorial responsibilities around which the response is organised: Grupa Granica (see Box 6), a non-formal umbrella organisation, Podlaskie Voluntary Humanitarian Aid (POPH) and Ocalenie Foundation.

Grupa Granica is an umbrella coalition, not formally registered, that includes individuals, non-formal groups and NGOs, operating at the Polish-Belarusian border (in the forest, reception centres and in integration activities) since August 2021. It combines multiple task groups, focused on legal or medical assistance, access to hospitals and refugee centres, data collection, research and advocacy. The reason for its informality is also connected to risks of criminalisation of these organisations as it keeps them anonymous and non-traceable.

#### Box 6 Grupa Granica

On the Ukrainian border, NGOs coordinated their work trying to avoid duplication of aid and creating referral pathways for service provision also with municipalities, businesses, INGOs and local authorities. One important instrument for coordination in the Ukrainian response in Poland was the 'NGO Forum Razem', supported by Polish Humanitarian Action (PAH) with the intent of coordinating all actors, local and international, by providing information and networks (see Box 7).

NGO Forum Razem (Together) was set up in March 2022 by PAH and Ashoka to facilitate the cross-sectoral communication and coordination between local organisations and international actors, separately from the Cluster System. It is a mechanism created under the Refugee Response Plan (RRP) which includes a network of up to 200 listed members. It emerged during the Ukrainian response, but more recently one of the working groups was dedicated to the Polish-Belarusian border. In January 2025, NGO Forum Together as a project was transferred from PAH to Mapuj Pomoc, due to funding availability, yet its scope of action remained the same.

#### Box 7 NGO Forum Razem

## 4.4 Funding

Funding disparities highlight different approaches to humanitarian responses, with the Polish-Ukrainian crisis receiving substantial international and public funding, while the Polish-Belarusian border crisis has struggled due to political sensitivities and fluctuating public opinion, resulting in limited financial assistance for local organisations.

Funding presents a very significant issue that illustrates the difference in support provided to organisations at the two borders.<sup>79</sup> The unprecedented mobilisation for Ukraine was reflected in funding received by the Polish government and the civil

society to support the arrival of refugees.<sup>80</sup> International organisations were disbursing a substantial amount of funding<sup>81</sup> to local organisations to support relief efforts for the Ukraine response: only between March and December 2022, \$536 millions of international aid was sent to Poland, covering food security, protection, cash, basic needs and so on.<sup>82</sup> The support of the public with material donations, like clothes, basic hygiene items, was also considerable at the beginning of the crisis.

On the other side of the country, *there is no official funding instrument dedicated to this border area* and respondents from INGOs<sup>83</sup> mentioned that it was very *difficult to fundraise specifically for the Polish-Belarusian border as the crisis was deemed 'too political'*. The situation at the Belarusian border is not directly covered by the RRP in Poland, although some organisations have declared support for refugees in the country regardless of their migration trajectory.<sup>84</sup> The crisis at this border received material and monetary support mostly from public donations, foundations and charities. However, this support drastically changed as the crisis protracted, with the public opinion increasingly becoming hostile towards people on the move and aid workers.<sup>85</sup> One international organisation<sup>86</sup> mentioned that they received hate mail from the public because of their financial involvement at this border, and as a consequence they had to keep their work away from the public realm.

Given these challenges, only a small number of international organisations supported local organisations at the Polish-Belarusian border, by providing material assistance (such as food, clothes, sleeping bags and first aid supplies) or direct funding to cover costs of operations that were not directly aimed at rescue missions, such as collection of data or MHPSS support in detention centres.

Aside from the figures related to funding which are undoubtedly different for the two responses because of the scale of need, the Polish case provides a stark example of the *challenges for international organisations to fundraise for crises that are considered to be too political or sensitive*. These issues often result in a lack of funding for those crises, which have been overcome in a few cases with some 'creative' solutions. *Funding for local organisations working on what are deemed to be sensitive crises are also subject to changes in political opinion and media attention*, creating fluctuations for their operations. As we will illustrate in Chapter 6, the international humanitarian landscape in Poland is changing rapidly and radically, proving the unsustainability of interventions.

## 4.5 Motivations and Exhaustion

- Motivations for participating in humanitarian efforts at both borders were driven by a sense of solidarity, injustice, and shared history, but the emotional burden and long-term engagement led to burnout and exhaustion among aid workers.
- Burnout was common at both borders, exacerbated by hostile political environments at the Belarusian border and by the scale of the Ukrainian crisis.

The research looked at the motivations of individuals to take part in the responses, as understanding reasons for participating in relief efforts reveals interesting aspects of the response itself. Aid workers<sup>87</sup> at both borders were motivated to act by *a sense of injustice and humanitarian imperative, feelings of wanting to help others in crisis*



*and wanting to make a difference in a very practical manner.* This is a common trait in bottom-up humanitarian responses,<sup>88</sup> where often individuals are mobilised by a sense of solidarity with people in need, and it also points to the **centrality of personal emotions** in this type of work.<sup>89</sup> At the Polish-Belarusian border, people were also moved by *a sense of injustice and anger* towards the violation of human rights. The response to the Ukrainian crisis was fuelled by the **widespread public support to Ukrainians** and political will to support refugees. The geographical vicinity, as well as the shared history with Ukraine, and a potential threat from Russia, also played a big part in the motivations.<sup>90</sup>

As a result of the involvement in this work, our respondents mentioned that *they created deep bonds based on solidarity, shared values and mutual support, which in turn sustained this work despite the considerable challenges.* In the words of a volunteer:

*‘There is a community of people which is much bigger than Grupa Granica. Sometimes it’s hard to explain [the feelings among us] to people who are outside of this humanitarian work’ (KII17)*

However, because of the emotional burden of the response, *this work often becomes all-consuming and exhausting.*<sup>91</sup> In the case of the Polish-Belarusian border, risks of criminalisation, made more acute by the open hostility of the government and media, fear of intimidation and violence, and a lack of financial resources, play a big part in the burnout of individuals.<sup>92</sup> In general, **burnout is common in the sector**,<sup>93</sup> made worse by the financial instability of operations and uncertain future of aid in Poland:

*‘People get tired. If we are again much more criminalised than before, this might also affect people’s engagement. If we have much less resources, like material resources, financial resources, than previously, this will be probably a question of to be or not to be’ (KII14).*

Respondents pointed to a paradox of helping, often emphasising that they “should stop” or “would like to quit,” but at the same time they cannot leave the situation: *I’ll keep doing it. I have no idea what else to do* (KII24), explains one aid worker, adding that withdrawing from humanitarian work will be a major, maybe even traumatic experience. Several respondents reported a significant deterioration in their physical or mental health over the months, also including symptoms of PTSD. Some also reported feeling hopeless about the political landscape or fearing for their safety due to public persecution or the risk of legal harassment. Those working at both borders pointed out a similar challenge related to the ‘aid trap’, where they felt concerned that following the withdrawal of operations due to a lack of funding, adequate aid would not reach those in need. Unfortunately, with the severe cuts in funds to local organisations, and the increased hostility towards people on the move, including Ukrainian refugees, this is a trend likely to increase.

# 5

## **CRIMINALISATION OF SOLIDARITY**

- While aid workers at the Polish-Ukrainian border cooperate with authorities and receive positive recognition, those at the Polish-Belarusian border face obstruction, hostility, and criminalisation, leading to stark differences in treatment and public perception.
- At the Polish-Belarusian border, aid workers face state harassment, legal measures, surveillance, and physical violence for providing aid. This has led to a chilling effect, making aid delivery more difficult and costly.
- Aid workers experience constant harassment, including threats, physical violence, and long interrogations. There are reports of extreme right-wing and nationalist groups harassing and intimidating people on the move and aid workers.

■ *'If they can do it to me, they can do it to everyone.'* (KII33)

***Organisations and volunteers working at the Polish-Belarusian border faced serious challenges and risks to deliver aid***, including harassment, physical violence and criminalisation. This section will only discuss the Polish-Belarusian border as there are no known cases of criminalisation of aid workers at the Polish-Ukrainian border to date. As an aid worker who worked simultaneously on the Ukrainian and Belarusian borders stated:

■ *'The biggest difference is that on the Belarusian border we are not wanted. We are treated as very hostile, and we must work very secretly. On the Ukrainian side we are welcomed, we are wanted, we are seen as heroes there. And everyone was very cooperative, especially at the beginning because it was all hands-on deck.'* (KII18)

Criminalisation of solidarity is discussed here as the process of state harassment and discrimination of solidarity movements or individuals, mainly through judicial policies,<sup>94</sup> Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), and smear attacks or scapegoating of actors involved in providing life-saving assistance to others (see Box 8). The crime of solidarity in Poland can be penalised with the use of: legal measures, surveillance, intimidation, doxing, but also intentionally leaving aid workers in a state of physical, financial and psychological exhaustion and legal limbo.<sup>95</sup> Reports<sup>96</sup> have shown that the systematic criminalisation of solidarity significantly intensified in Poland between 2016 and 2023 under the Law and Justice government, targeting various actors, from environmental movements to women's rights,<sup>97</sup> LGBTQI+ movements, and aid workers at the Belarusian border. This was coupled with a gradual shrinking space for civil society, restrictions in freedom of assembly, and limiting access to funds.<sup>98</sup>

The Polish case sits within a broader ***European context of criminalisation of solidarity, a trend on the rise***. In 2023, at least 117 individuals across EU countries faced criminal or administrative proceedings for acting in solidarity of people on the move.<sup>99</sup> Of these, 67 were prosecuted for acts of solidarity on land in countries including Poland, Latvia, Greece and Italy. However, this number is likely to be higher as the statistics were collected only from media reports and are not comprehensive. As we

will see in Chapter 6, with the implementation of the EU Migration and Asylum Pact, the criminalisation of solidarity across EU countries is bound to become an even more present phenomenon.

### Criminalisation of Migration

#### Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights

Criminalisation of migration is a process in which migration (particularly irregular migration) is treated as a criminal activity rather than as a social or administrative issue. As a consequence, it often involves a shift in the way people on the move are perceived, affecting the state of human rights, setting new standards towards potential breaches of human rights and of dehumanisation practices.

The systemic criminalisation of migration can be understood as a threefold process: first, migration is managed through the adoption of substantive criminal laws; second, traditional criminal law enforcement mechanisms, such as surveillance and detention, are deployed; third, mechanisms of prevention of migration are developed. Beyond these legal and procedural measures, criminalisation is also a political strategy aimed at associating migration with criminality and illegality, punishment and crime.

Grassroots and humanitarian actors are targeted and affected directly and indirectly by such restrictions too. The provision of humanitarian assistance to migrants has been criminalised in recent years: Polish authorities framed humanitarian actions as facilitating irregular migration, leading to criminal investigations. In collaboration with the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, the “Szpila” collective provides free of charge assistance to people affected by criminalisation (a 24-hour legal and psychological assistance hotline has been launched).

#### Box 8 Criminalisation of Migration

## 5.1 Criminalisation of Solidarity at the Green Border

As discussed in previous sections, with the introduction of the zone of exclusion at the Polish-Belarusian border, *relief efforts became extremely complex as aid workers could not enter this border area*. Due to the humanitarian emergency, aid workers often crossed this zone to provide life-saving aid, defying the ban on humanitarian grounds. This situation resulted in the *development of undercover tactics to provide aid*,<sup>100</sup> but also added to the extreme conditions of aid delivery. In the words of a volunteer:

*‘Walking through a dark forest, with your flashlights off, stumbling over your own feet, with drones flying over you, and according to the services, you’re doing illegal things because you want to deliver hot soup to someone.’ (KII9)*

Technically, the trespassing of the buffer zone is not punishable with criminal charges, but rather with administrative misdemeanour charges as the enforcement of the zone is an administrative rule.<sup>101</sup> To date, all the charges for trespassing have been dropped, acquitted or turned into administrative fines. Nevertheless, this has resulted

in costly, time-consuming and difficult lawsuits, which in turn have led to discouraging the engagement of aid workers in this work. More serious charges of facilitation of migration have been pressed against five individuals, who are facing up to five years in prison (see Box 9),<sup>102</sup> and their trials are still ongoing (as of April 2025).<sup>103</sup>

Due to the high scrutiny from authorities, ***aid workers at this border have enforced very strict conduct, ensuring everyone is trained, and applying rigid rules to minimise risks of criminalisation***: for example, they do not provide transport for people on the move under any circumstance to avoid being accused of people smuggling, and no further contact is allowed after basic aid is provided (aside when individuals have been given the power of attorney for specific legal cases). Working within the legal framework is a key aspect in all the operations of these organisations to avoid the risk of being persecuted or, worse, closed. There are other security measures that extend beyond the work in the forest, including traceability of all donations and tight finance measures.

***Aid workers at the Polish-Belarusian border face constant harassment, threats and intimidation.*** Our respondents<sup>104</sup> have been detained and interrogated for up to ten hours without an explanation or access to lawyers.<sup>105</sup> There are numerous cases of direct harassment, including physical violence perpetrated by border guards or the so-called Territorial Defence Forces (Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej), a special arm of the military.<sup>106</sup> One of our respondents told us about the violence and threats he experienced from masked units of the territorial army in 2021, having been stopped in their car and intimidated with guns while driving back from a friend's house alone.<sup>107</sup> There was no evidence that could show smuggling activities, and no charges were filed.

Other respondents also mentioned various forms of pressure, surveillance or intimidation used by the law enforcement since 2021, such as car or house searches:

***'About a month ago [there was] a car being checked by the police and where a person was not able to say what the person was going to; they asked him where he was living. And a few hours later there was a very strong, very numerous groups of police officers forcibly entering the building of one of the organisations in one of the villages.'*** (KII33)

The climate of hostility extends beyond the authorities. ***Extreme right-wing and nationalist groups have also been present in the forest***, looking for people on the move to take to border police stations, or, in worse cases, to violently attack them. There have also been cases of intimidation against aid workers, stationing at their operational bases. One organisation highlighted the significant financial costs and extensive security measures required to proactively address the risk of cyber-attacks or legal actions potentially initiated by public institutions.

From our interviews, it emerged that ***this violence has been normalised*** by aid workers and was discussed as an inevitable part of the work. Despite the 'normalisation' of this violence, ***aid workers fear being harassed and mistreated***, a feeling made more acute by the legitimisation of the use of guns by the police in 2024. At the time of writing, there was a team of prosecutors investigating cases of power abuse by border guards against the border volunteers, however the details of this investigation are not publicly available. Proceedings are also underway into the possible abuse of power by

Border Guard officers in Usnarz Gorny at the very beginning of the crisis against the group of Afghani.<sup>108</sup>

Overall, the difference in treatment of volunteers, organisations and individuals at the two borders of Poland is stark: while aid workers have been facing obstruction and hostility at the Belarusian border, at the Ukrainian border, authorities, including police and border guards, were working side by side with aid workers, requesting their advice and support to assist people coming from the Ukrainian border, and hailing them as heroes. This, consequently, created **a disparity on the public perception of aid workers supporting people on the move at the two borders**. In the words of a legal assistant at the Polish Belarusian border:

*'I was all the time crawling in the bushes to hide and not to be found by the border guards and I could see on the other hand that people who are doing the same thing but on the other border are called heroes.'* (KII22)

### Excerpts from Public Statements by Aid Workers in the Regional Court in Hajnówka

Five aid workers at the Belarusian border received criminal charges for facilitation of stay against the law and 'for the personal gain' of helping an Iraqi family with children, providing them with water, food and medical aid. Their first trial was in January 2025 and below we report some of the excerpts from their public statements at the trial.

*I don't understand why I was charged for helping people in the forest. I believe that I acted as any person in my position should have acted. According to the law, I could also have been charged for failing to help. So, the next time I see an accident or a person in need, should I check my passport and ID first to make sure I'm helping the right person, the one who has legal status?*

*I would like to remind you that in school we are taught about what a tradition we have of hospitality and helping. I was raised in this spirit - to share and care for others, not to be indifferent.*

*I have been working in social organisations for years. I have helped the Roma community, refugees from Ukraine, and now I work with young people. Should I be punished for this, too, because the people I help benefit? As for the situation from Ukraine, I was a volunteer there, and I helped exactly the same way I helped in Podlasie.*

*I feel embarrassed that the state focuses its power and our taxes on such a process instead of dealing with real help, e.g. Investments in health care I believe that this issue has a political background, it is in favour of the current government. But I'm here to remind you that it is our duty to help. You can't be afraid of another person in need, and you can't be punished for it. I do not regret what I have done, and I am proud of myself and the people who sit here. I have helped and will continue to help.*

6

**FUTURE**



- The Polish humanitarian sector faces an uncertain future with reduced funding, the exit of international organisations, and local NGOs restructuring due to political and financial challenges.
- The new centrist government in Poland, elected in 2023, has shifted migration policies towards border securitisation and the suspension of asylum for people crossing the Polish-Belarusian border. The Pact on Migration and Asylum is likely to increase criminalisation of solidarity, externalisation of asylum procedures, negatively impacting the work of local organisations.

***For most actors in the Polish humanitarian response, the future is uncertain.*** At the time of writing, most of the international organisations have closed their programmes and reduced financial and material support for local organisations. At the same time, local NGOs are also restructuring their teams and activities due to funding uncertainties.

## 6.1 The Policies of the Future

Respondents' visions of the future are dominated by the stark deterioration of the situation at the Polish-Belarusian border and by future obstacles posed to refugees from other migration trajectories, including the Ukrainian border. Local organisations declare how their role, agency and cooperation with the state might be gradually shrinking with time, followed by the radical turn on migration in Europe:

*'I'm scared when I see the general direction, not just in Poland. You cannot really look at it in an isolated way because what happens here, happens at many external borders of the EU. I think we need a change in the minds of people in Europe. I think we need safe routes for people fleeing wars. And I think people should be treated with dignity. The solutions that are being pushed, proposed, like the pact or the externalisation, they're not real solutions to the problem. They're just new horrible ways to deal with it.'* (KII19)

*'The Ukraine response gave us some positive examples of how positive policies that put in place to support the refugees from Ukraine basically can be extended to third country nationals. Because this example of the Ukrainian response helped to decongest the introduction of the protection.'* (KII7)

Respondents declare that the change of government in 2023 not only did not improve the situation of refugees from both borders, but actually inflamed anti-migration rhetoric, and as a consequence assistance at both borders quickly began to lose political and public support (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej (CBOS) poll).<sup>109</sup> There is also a sharp increase in anti-Ukrainian sentiment: the percentage of people in Poland who declare being against accepting Ukrainian refugees has increased from 3% in March 2022 to 40% in October 2024.<sup>110</sup>

The election period in October 2023 was dominated by an anti-migration rhetoric and followed by a national referendum on border security and migration numbers.<sup>111</sup> After eight years of a right-wing government led by the Law and Justice party, a new



government took power, created by the opposition centrist party, Civic Coalition.<sup>112</sup> In the new government, the migration portfolio is primarily held by the Undersecretary in the Ministry of Interior and Administration, responsible, among other things, for the supervision of National Migration Strategy and national implementation of EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. It is widely agreed that these policies are driven mostly by an emphasis on securitisation of borders and by an increase of anti-refugee sentiment in Poland and across Europe.<sup>113</sup> The Pact - considered 'too liberal' by Poland's new centrist government<sup>114</sup> - reduces the routes to receive asylum, invites territorial externalisation and a wide range of screening and deportation of refugees, while not explicitly addressing issues such as human rights monitoring. The implementation of the EU Pact at the national level, according to the civil society,<sup>115</sup> will negatively affect their work due to the externalisation and automatised screening that will limit the access of asylum seekers to the Polish territory – and therefore, organisations' access to people on the move. These changes in Poland will mean that people on the move coming through the Belarusian route will file a claim for asylum or protection in Belarus, where humanitarian access and civic engagement is almost impossible.<sup>116</sup>

Local organisations also highlight that the provisions of the draft *Directive on Facilitation*, and the current practices of EU countries, including Poland, will increase the criminalisation of solidarity,<sup>117</sup> impunity of border services,<sup>118</sup> and interdependence of humanitarian agencies from the state actors.<sup>119</sup> In this context, UNHCR commentary on the Draft suggests that this instrument could be easily weaponised against humanitarian workers too: *'the lack of a clear legal obligation to ensure that such criminalisation will not occur provides significant grounds for concern as it puts friends, family members and others providing assistance with purely humanitarian motives, including NGOs, at risk of prosecution.'*<sup>120</sup>

At the national level, the Migration Strategy in Poland also indicates a tendency to limit the role and access of civil society organisations to decision-making processes in the areas of migration and security, and it does not address the crucial role NGOs have in the refugee response and integration. At a civic hearing in November 2024, local and international organisations, including UNHCR, pointed out the implications that the 2025-2030 Migration Strategy's solutions will have on Poland's migration landscape:<sup>121</sup> the temporary and territorial suspension access to asylum procedures; the dangerous trend of negative narrative and policy change; the values of European solidarity and human rights undermined; the proliferation of double standards and utilitarian, labour-oriented view on migration. At the hearing, representatives from NGOs also underlined the lack of public consultation with organisations and migrants themselves within the Migration Strategy development: *As NGOs, we have unique knowledge that is often not visible from the cabinet level in Warsaw, and we expect to be treated as parties, as partners in finding adequate solutions* – mentioned one representative of a Polish organisation during the public hearing.<sup>122</sup>

## 6.2 The Future Solidarity and Humanitarian Assistance

One of the main challenges currently affecting organisations at both borders is the drastic reduction in fundings for activities, together with the withdrawal of international organisations from Poland as the emergency period of the Ukrainian crisis is ending. In the winter of 2024, INGOs such as Oxfam, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)

and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) left the country, while MSF, PAH and Save the Children continue to operate but anticipate a significant reduction of funding in 2025. The RRP for 2025-2026 has been halved from the previous year.

Nevertheless, the needs at both borders remain high and with the exit of INGOs and reduced funding to local NGOs, there is a very real risk that there will be a gap in assistance. Local organisations like WAM, are particularly vulnerable to the loss of funds, and are in very precarious situations. Other projects, like the NGO Forum Razem had to abruptly seek other partners, while some smaller local organisations have no other way of continuing other than using volunteers.

As one organisation on the Belarusian border explains, the change in power in government initially emerged as an explanation for the reduction of international funding, as it was assumed that standards for refugee reception would improve. However, as explained above, the situation is far from better:

*'We were basically told in the beginning of this year that with the change of the government it will get better. So, we don't need to work there anymore. Not true. It did not get better. It actually got worse.'* (FGD5)

The reduction in funding is also strongly affecting organisations active in the Ukrainian crisis, which are significantly reducing employment and scaling down the scope of work. When asked about the future of their activities, respondents<sup>123</sup> prioritise local communities, working on integration and withdrawing from direct humanitarian work. Many mention the need to rest and reformulate the work model.<sup>124</sup> The exit strategy of most INGOs and the private sector, together with the reduction of personnel of local organisations, is so far not accompanied by a successful takeover of responsibility for the humanitarian response by the Polish central authorities.<sup>125</sup>

At the personal level respondents often declare personal burnout or severe fatigue, at the general level they openly speak of the gravity of future displacement and increased humanitarian needs:

*'It's sad, very short-sighted. Because it's so clear that there will be more and more migrants. Not only because of the geopolitical situation, but also the climate crisis and yes, people will move, will continue moving and it's so stupid to pretend that if we build more walls this problem will disappear.'* (KII22)

Our research shows strong concerns about the future of the humanitarian response in Poland, frustration and a sense of wasted potential, as well as disenchantment with the political and humanitarian narrative. Most of the respondents from both borders, asked about their future in the humanitarian response, were unable to have a roadmap for the future. The vast majority, however, pointed to a link between European rhetoric about border security and fading sentiment of solidarity with Ukraine, a loss of donor interest, and a loss of resources for local responses to ongoing crises.

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



*'I was all the time crawling in the bushes to hide and not to be found by the border guards and I could see on the other border that people who are doing the same thing but on the other border are called heroes.'* (KII22)

This research has exposed that the humanitarian responses at the two borders of Poland stand in almost polar opposition to each other: on one hand the Ukrainian border was characterised by the outpouring of financial and material resources; close coordination between civil society actors, local and state actors; significant presence of international INGOs and UN agencies; and a general cross-party welcoming sentiment towards people fleeing Ukraine in the aftermath of the full-scale invasion. On the other hand, the Polish-Belarusian border response has been scarcely funded, mostly through donations from the public; INGOs and UN agencies were not given a mandate by the government to operate at this border; local organisations have been criminalised and harassed; and finally open hostility and violence against people on the move, coupled with harsh anti-migrant rhetoric, have defined this borderscape.

Despite the differences, the two responses also share similarities: at both borders, aid workers quickly mobilised to assist, despite having little prior experience in humanitarian work. They leveraged expertise from other professional or activist backgrounds to respond to the crisis. As the crisis unfolded, they quickly adapted, relying on their existing expertise in areas like information, education, translation, legal aid and MHPSS.

The research indicates several gaps and challenges, hindering the humanitarian response on both borders of Poland. At the operational level, these are primarily difficulties in gaining humanitarian access to people on the move at the Belarusian border, as well as the criminalisation of aid work. The issue of mandate is of particular importance as it limits the scope of activities INGOs and UN agencies can carry out in a country. The Polish case highlights the difficulty international organisations face in providing support when crises are politically sensitive. The shrinking space for the civil society, reinforced by the legislative harassment, smear attacks and surveillance, has become a political landscape the border solidarity infrastructure has emerged in.

*'The biggest difference is that on the Belarusian border we are not wanted. We are treated as very hostile, and we must work very secretly. On the Ukrainian side we are welcomed, we are wanted, we are seen as heroes there. And everyone was very cooperative, especially at the beginning because it was all hands-on deck.'* (KII18)

Respondents at both borders report a loss of financial stability and staff capacity on the local level, mainly in reference to the steadily high level of needs in the ongoing refugee response, exit strategy of international humanitarian actors and lack of secured funding. In this landscape, local actors are facing the decision to discontinue their activities, whether due to loss of funding, burnout or impossibility to operate in a hostile environment.

# RECOMMENDATIONS:

## INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND UN AGENCIES:

### 1. Uphold humanitarian principles and save all lives.

- Provide life-saving aid to all people on the move, regardless of their migration trajectory. Humanitarian aid should be provided to all those in need, with the primary aim of preserving life and dignity, while alleviating suffering. This approach reflects not only the core humanitarian principles but also fosters a spirit of solidarity and respect for human rights of all people on the move.
- Increase advocacy efforts with governments and state actors to secure humanitarian access to all people on the move within the same country. Strengthen advocacy efforts in the country to ensure that the provision of humanitarian assistance is not deliberately obstructed by public actors and border services.
- At the European policy level, resolutely oppose and monitor attempts to hinder the provision of humanitarian aid or to target aid providers, volunteers and medical personnel in humanitarian contexts. Advocate for the protection of local and international aid workers and protect their right to deliver lifesaving assistance in line with international humanitarian and human rights law, international standards and legal frameworks.
- Protect the wellbeing and capability of local aid providers to deliver assistance and adapt institutional expectations to meet their resources and workload.

### 2. Recognise the highly valuable knowledge and professionalism of local organisations even when their skills are learned outside the humanitarian sector.

- Co-design programmatic activities within a crisis-affected country with local organisations, taking into account their expertise regarding the political landscape, legal framework and contextual knowledge.
- Create and maintain new alliances, particularly with informal groups and grassroots organisations, as they are often the first responders in crises and have knowledge of the context, including solutions on how to navigate political challenges.

### **3. Find innovative solutions to support local organisations involved in life-saving assistance in less visible or politically sensitive crises.**

- Take risks in localising assistance and design innovative solutions to provide necessary support to local partners, even if there is a need to remain invisible to protect mandate or the credibility of partners and donors.
- Prioritise the development of innovative solutions to fund local organisations working in a hostile environment. For example, channel funds for material assistance, support specific areas of work, such as organisational development and protection of data. Advocate with donors for higher percentages of unrestricted funding to cover other emergencies.
- Unify the approach to disbursement of funding to local organisations involved in life-saving assistance. It is key to ensure that the approach to the disbursement of funding is applied fairly and equally to all local organisations, and not be more restrictive towards organisations that have closer ties to activist or grassroots bases.

## **INTERNATIONAL DONORS**

### **4. Enhance the flexibility of humanitarian funding to address less visible emergencies within the same country or region, aligning with the principles of humanity and impartiality.**

- Allow for a portion of unrestricted funding from each budget to be allocated at the discretion of Country Offices to address emergencies not directly covered by existing appeals. This approach would empower Country Offices to act swiftly and effectively in response to unforeseen crises, ensuring that critical needs are met.

## **LOCAL ORGANISATIONS**

### **5. Recognise resources, advantages and limitations during or in preparation for a crisis and communicate them clearly in partnerships and arrangements with stakeholders.**

- Increase visibility of less visible crises with international organisations and advocate for involvement at different levels and in cooperation with other actors.
- Proactively come up with ideas of how INGOs (or other relevant actors) can add value, support and work with local actors in crisis where they cannot be visible, for example through support with advocacy, funding and organisational support.
- Be clear on expertise and knowledge gaps, point out resource deficits or access limitations, negotiate the terms of cooperation with a view to both the success of the partnership and the security of aid activities, both short and long-term. Keep in mind the well-being of the team and the risk of burnout, even when it means ceasing specific activities.

## STATE ACTORS:

### **6. Provide unified protection to refugees in line with the international standards and treaties.**

- Ensure access to local and international aid workers and the media to territories affected by crises. Unify standards in reception and avoid double standards, selective or discriminatory assistance.
- Coordinate the response between state services (local, regional, central and municipal) and other aid providers. Ensure and enhance crisis preparedness by deploying resources and administrative units that monitor and strengthen local capacity to future humanitarian responses.

### **7. Recognise the central role of civil society in humanitarian crises by including local organisations in decision-making processes on humanitarian responses.**

- Proactively seek the expertise and assistance of migrant, refugee, minority-led organisations as they are often the key players in crisis responses, given their closeness to minority populations and ability to act rapidly in crisis

### **8. Decriminalise life-saving humanitarian assistance and provide access to people in need.**

- Withdraw criminal proceedings against aid workers who are legally supporting people on the move. Stop the smear campaign and public targeting of aid workers aiding people on the move and not exploit regulations aimed at combating smuggling and human trafficking in cases where there is no evidence.
- Ensure that the national implementation of new legislative frameworks such as the Pact on Migration and Asylum or the Migration Strategy does not prevent or seriously impede the provision of life-saving assistance.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 For example, in 2020, 2,785 asylum applications were filed in Poland. European Parliament (2020) 'Asylum Applications in the EU'. European Parliament, 2020. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/infographic/asylum-migration/index\\_en.html#filter=2020](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/infographic/asylum-migration/index_en.html#filter=2020) (Accessed: 17 January 2025).
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- 3 In this report, we use the term 'people on the move' as it encompasses migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and people who continue their journeys to other countries.
- 4 UNHCR (2024) 'Country Operations: Poland'. UNHCR, 2024. Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/operations/poland> (Accessed: 6 January 2025).
- 5 Jaroszewisz, M. and Krępa, M. (2022) 'Stabilisation of emergency measures: Poland's refugee reception system one month after the Russian attack on Ukraine'. Centre of Migration Research. Available at: <https://www.migracje.uw.edu.pl/publikacje/stabilisation-of-emergency-measures-polands-refugee-reception-system-one-month-after-the-russian-attack-on-ukraine-2/> (Accessed: 17 January 2025).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Jarosz, S. (2024) 'Where are we now? NGOs and humanitarian crises in Poland'. Konsorcjum Migracyjne, February 2024. Available at: <https://konsorcjum.org.pl/raport-gdzie-teraz-jestesmy/>
- 9 While some call the situation at this border a humanitarian crisis due to the extreme vulnerabilities of people on the move and life-threatening conditions of their journeys, others argue it is a human rights crisis because of the breach of basic human rights. In this report, we will mostly call it a humanitarian crisis.
- 10 People on the move in Belarus have also been crossing the borders with Latvia and Lithuania, however there is less data available on the refugee responses in those countries.
- 11 Human Rights Watch (2024) 'Poland: Brutal Pushbacks at Belarus Border'. Human Rights Watch, 10 December. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/10/poland-brutal-pushbacks-belarus-border> (Accessed: 25 January 2025); Greener, C., Ożyńska, D. (2025) 'Brutal barriers. Pushbacks, violence and the violation of human rights on the Poland-Belarus border', Oxfam International, March 2025. Available at: [https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2025-03/Brutal%20Barriers%20report\\_0.pdf](https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2025-03/Brutal%20Barriers%20report_0.pdf)
- 12 Urząd do Spraw Cudzoziemców (2024) 'Nowelizacja ustawy o pomocy obywatelom Ukrainy w związku z konfliktem zbrojnym na terytorium tego państwa'. Gov.pl, 25 June. Available at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/udsc/nowelizacja-ustawy-o-pomocy-obywatelom-ukrainy-w-zwiazku-z-konfliktem-zbrojnym-na-terytorium-tego-panstwa2> (Accessed: 6 January 2025).
- 13 State or interstate measures that forcibly return people on the move across a border, violating international human rights and asylum law, such as non-refoulement principle.
- 14 Amnesty International (2021) 'Poland: 17 Afghans at the border violently pushed back to Belarus', Amnesty International, 20 October. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/10/poland-17-afghans-at-the-border-violently-pushed-back-to-belarus/> (Accessed: 30th January 2025).
- 15 The so-called buffer zone was introduced by the previous government in 2021 and reintroduced in June 2024 by the new government. Infor (2024) 'Strefa buforowa przy granicy z Białorusią od 13 czerwca 2024 r. Jaki obszar? Zakaz przebywania osób postronnych. Rozporządzenie już w Dzienniku Ustaw'. Infor, 12 June. Available at: <https://www.infor.pl/prawo/nawosci-prawne/6627590,strefa-buforowa-przy-granicy-z-bialorusia-od-13-czerwca-2024-r-zakaz-przebywania-osob-postronnych-minister-podpisal-rozporzadzenie.html> (Accessed: 6 January 2025).



- 16 Starzewski, Ł. (2022) 'Rozporządzenie pozwalające na pushbacki – sprzeczne z prawem. RPO przyłączył się do skargi cudzoziemca, który miał być zawrócony do Białorusi'. Rzecznik Praw Obywatelskich, 03 February. Available at: <https://bip.brpo.gov.pl/pl/content/rpo-wsa-cudzoziemcy-pushbacki-przepisy-sprzeczne-z-prawem> (Accessed: 17 January 2025); Oko (2024) 'Można strzelać. Sejm przyjął ustawę o użyciu broni. Co wprowadzono?'. Oko.press, 13 July. Available at: <https://oko.press/ustawa-o-uzyciu-broni-co-wprowadzono> (Accessed: 17 January 2025).
- 17 Amnesty International (2024) 'Poland: Plans to suspend the right to seek asylum "flagrantly unlawful"', Amnesty International, 16 October. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/10/poland-plans-to-suspend-the-right-to-seek-asylum-flagrantly-unlawful/> (Accessed: 6 December 2024); Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów (2024). 'Odzyskać kontrolę. Zapewnić bezpieczeństwo' – strategia migracyjna na lata 2025–2030' [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/odzyskac-kontrolę-zapewnic-bezpieczenstwo---strategia-migracyjna-na-lata-2025---2030> (Accessed: 25 November 2024); BBC (2025) 'Poland Suspends Migrants' Rights to Apply for Asylum', BBC, 27 March. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c8719dl587zo> (Accessed 4 April 2025)
- 18 In this report we will refer to 'aid workers' as a broad term to include registered Polish NGOs, volunteers, grassroots organisations, activist groups and individuals. There is no term that encompasses them all, hence using this generic definition.
- 19 These organisations are: We are Monitoring, Human Costanta, Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Open Space Works Ukraine, the University of Warsaw.
- 20 The territory of the border area, as well as other spaces related to migration and displacement beyond the border but within the territory of the country, such as refugee detention centres or Border Guard facilities.
- 21 We Are Monitoring, Grupa Granica (2024) 'We have only one war, which is immigration, which is you'. We Are Monitoring, 2024. Available at: [https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/RaportGranica\\_srodek\\_ENG\\_online.pdf](https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/RaportGranica_srodek_ENG_online.pdf) (Accessed: 17 January 2025).
- 22 We Are Monitoring, Grupa Granica (2024) 'We have only one war, which is immigration, which is you'. We Are Monitoring, 2024. Available at: [https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/RaportGranica\\_srodek\\_ENG\\_online.pdf](https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/RaportGranica_srodek_ENG_online.pdf) (Accessed: 17 January 2025).
- 23 The arrest, detention, or forced return of people on the move with the involvement of state authorities, followed by a lack of acknowledgment of their presence in the country. This often results from pushbacks and the absence of proper registration and identification before the return of people on the move, or, in cases of detention, the denial of their right to notify relatives or other designated persons of their detention.
- 24 Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (2024) 'Disappearances on the Polish-Belarusian border. Pushbacks as a factor in enforced disappearances in Poland'. Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 8 August. Available at: <https://hfhr.pl/publikacje/raport-zaginieni-na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej> (Accessed: 20 January 2025).
- 25 The Guardian (2021) 'Tourist visas and flights from Syria – the route to Europe via Belarus'. The Guardian, 12 November. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/nov/12/its-risky-but-ill-go-anyway-migrants-desperate-to-reach-europe-via-belarus> (Accessed: 20 December 2024).
- 26 Médecins Sans Frontières (2024) 'Death, despair and destitution: The human costs of the EU's migration policies'. MSF, 20 February 2024. Available at: <https://www.msf.org/death-despair-and-destitution-human-costs-eu-migration-policies> (Accessed: 30 January 2025).
- 27 Human Rights Watch (2022) 'Violence and Pushbacks at Poland-Belarus Border'. Human Rights Watch, 7 June. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/07/violence-and-pushbacks-poland-belarus-border> (Accessed: 20 December 2024); Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (2022) 'Visual Report: "Zone of Hidden Violence". 3D-Reconstruction documenting violations of human rights and pushbacks in the Polish-Belarusian border area'. Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 16 August. Available at: <https://archiwum.hfhr.pl/en/visual-report-zone-of-hidden-violence-3d-reconstruction-documenting-violations-of-human-rights-and-pushbacks-in-the-polish-belarusian-border-area/index.html> (Accessed: 15 December 2024);

- 28 Médecins Sans Frontières (2024) 'Death, despair and destitution: The human costs of the EU's migration policies'. MSF, 20 February 2024. Available at: <https://www.msf.org/death-despair-and-destitution-human-costs-eu-migration-policies> (Accessed: 30 January 2025).
- 29 We Are Monitoring (2025) Webpage. Available at: <https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/en/home/> (Accessed 15 January 2025); Bronitskaya, E., Chekhovich, A., Gogelytė, A., Griķe, A.E., Krapavickaitė, D., Palęcka, A., Raubiško, I. (2024) 'No Safe Passage. Migrants' deaths at the European Union-Belarusian border', Ocalenie Foundation. Available at: [https://gribupalidzetbegliem.lv/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ENG\\_No-Safe-Passage.-Migrants-deaths-at-the-European-Union-Belarusian-border.pdf](https://gribupalidzetbegliem.lv/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ENG_No-Safe-Passage.-Migrants-deaths-at-the-European-Union-Belarusian-border.pdf).
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- 70 FGD1, KII4
- 71 KII30, KII11, KII5, FGD5
- 72 KII5, KII9, KII30, FGD2, KII11, KII15, KII14
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- 75 KII4, KII7
- 76 KII4, KII6, KII7
- 77 FGD1, FGD6
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- 86 FGD6
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- 92 KII26, KII3, KII23 FGD4, FGD2, FGD3
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## Annex 1 –Aid Provided at the Two Borders

Aid provided at the Polish-Belarusian border
<b>Humanitarian assistance</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Search and rescue operations</li> <li>• Medical assistance (first aid)</li> <li>• Material assistance, including food and water; warm clothes and sleeping bags, medicines and hygiene products, phones, power banks and SIM cards</li> <li>• Provision of information</li> <li>• Interpretation</li> <li>• Legal representation and assistance</li> </ul>
<b>Monitoring and data collection</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitoring of the situation at the border, scale, demographics, and trends</li> <li>• Human rights monitoring</li> <li>• Data for advocacy and for supporting legal proceedings</li> </ul>
<b>Other support</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Casework</li> <li>• Assistance in detention and after detention</li> </ul>
<b>Assistance to aid workers</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Security, training and anti-repression training</li> <li>• Legal support to aid workers</li> <li>• Strategic litigation</li> </ul>
<b>Other activities</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fundraising and communication</li> <li>• Advocacy</li> </ul>

Table 2 Type of aid provided at the Polish-Belarusian border



<b>Aid provided at the Polish-Ukrainian border</b>	
<b>Humanitarian assistance</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Material assistance, including food and water; warm clothes and sleeping bags; medicine and hygiene products; phones, power banks and SIM cards</li> <li>• CASH assistance</li> <li>• MHPSS</li> <li>• Shelter and accommodation</li> <li>• Provision of information</li> <li>• Interpretation</li> <li>• Legal assistance</li> </ul>	
<b>Monitoring and data collection</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data collection</li> <li>• Research</li> <li>• Knowledge sharing</li> </ul>	
<b>Other support</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transport</li> <li>• Protection</li> <li>• Casework</li> <li>• Advocacy</li> </ul>	

**Table 3** Type of aid provided at the Polish-Ukrainian border

## Annex 2 – List of Stakeholders Interviewed

KII	Type of Organisation	Number of Participants	Response
1	INGO / UN Agency	1	Ukraine Response
2	INGO / UN Agency	3	Ukraine/Belarusian Border Response
3	INGO / UN Agency	3	Ukraine/Belarusian Border Response
4	INGO / UN Agency	4	Poland-wide
5	INGO / UN Agency	4	Poland-wide
6	INGO / UN Agency	5	Ukraine Response
7	INGO / UN Agency	6	Poland wide
8	Local Organisation	1	Ukraine Response
9	Local Organisation	2	Ukraine Response
10	Local Organisation	3	Poland-wide
11	Local Organisation	4	Ukraine Response
12	Local Organisation	5	Poland-wide
13	Local Organisation	6	Belarusian Border Response
14	Local Organisation	7	Belarusian Border Response
15	Local Organisation	8	Poland-wide
16	Local Organisation	9	Poland-wide
17	Local Organisation	10	Poland-wide
18	Local Organisation	11	Ukraine/Belarusian Border Response
19	Local Organisation	6	Belarusian Border Response
20	Government Representative		Poland-wide
21	Legal Association	1	Poland-wide
22	Legal Association	1	Poland-wide
23	Local Organisation	6	Belarusian Border Response
24	Local Organisation	12	Belarusian Border Response

<b>25</b>	Legal Association	2	Poland-wide
<b>26</b>	INGO / UN Agency	7	Poland-wide
<b>27</b>	Local Organisation	13	Ukraine Response
<b>28</b>	Local Organisation	14	Ukraine/Belarusian Border Response
<b>29</b>	Local Organisation	15	Ukraine/Belarusian Border Response
<b>30</b>	INGO / UN Agency	8	Ukraine/Belarusian Border Response
<b>31</b>	Municipality		Ukraine Response
<b>32</b>	Academia		N/A
<b>33</b>	Volunteer		Belarusian Border Response
<b>34</b>	Local Organisation Belarus	1	Belarusian Border Response

<b>FGD</b>	<b>Type of Organisation</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Response</b>
<b>1</b>	INGO / UN Agency 9	2	Ukraine Response
<b>2</b>	Local Organisation 16	3	Poland-wide
<b>3</b>	Local Organisation 5	2	Poland-wide
<b>4</b>	Grassroots Organisation 1	4	Belarusian Border Response
<b>5</b>	INGO / UN Agency 8	2	Ukraine/Belarusian Border Response
<b>6</b>	Local Organisation 6	2	Belarusian Border Response

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