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## Egala report

### Our history

In October 2021, an informal group – a local branch of Grupa Granica – was formed in Białystok. The aim of the group from the beginning was humanitarian aid for migrants coming in from the Belarussian border. This aid mostly consisted of immediate humanitarian aid, material assistance (warm food, dry clothing), medical aid, and when needed legal aid. These aid interventions mostly have taken place in boggy forest areas.

Due to the situation in Poland of this closed border zone (approximately within 3 km from the border for a length of 418 km – that includes 115 towns in the Podlaskie voivodeship and 68 in Lubelskie voivodeship), that was introduced in September 2021 and extended until June 30, 2022, and the sociopolitical narrative, these interventions mostly took place at night, with great care not to be noticed by border guards or other authorities.

This informal Białystok group brought together many different people from various backgrounds, who most likely would not have worked together otherwise. Our professions range from education, art, theater, yoga teaching, medicine to engineering, therapy, museology, etc.

This group also has been meeting regularly (once a week) for emotional support provided by a group of volunteer psychotherapists, with the support of a psychiatrist. The aim of the emotional support group



has been to discuss the helplessness and other emotions that arose during and after interventions to prevent PTSD and the accumulation of trauma. The therapists also offer individual consultations, also on a volunteer basis.

This group was the birth of the association Egala.

**Egala** in Esperanto means equal. This term reflects what is important to us, the founders of the association. We want to create a friendly space for all people, regardless of their origin, nationality or culture.

The Egala Association was established on December 10th 2021 in Białystok. Egala is a term that, apart from reflecting what is important for us, also refers to our roots in Podlaskie and Białystok. Ludwik Zamenhof, the father of Esperanto, was born here. The language was supposed to unite people of different cultures and nationalities. This is how we, as members of the Association, want to create a friendly space for all people, regardless of their origin, nationality or culture. Diversity is a value for us and we want to nurture it in our actions. We want our city, region and country to create integrated communities, including all foreigners: migrants and refugees.

#### Our aims:

- building a friendly, inclusive community for all people – regardless of their nationality, culture, religion, beliefs, sexual orientation or origin,
- supporting migrants and refugees in the process of adaptation and integration to life in Poland,
- developing the sensitivity of the host community to the situation of people with migration and refugee experience,
- developing the host society's knowledge of migration and refugees,
- helping victims of catastrophes, natural disasters, armed conflicts and wars at home and abroad,
- dissemination and protection of human rights, freedoms and civil liberties, as well as activities supporting the development of democracy,
- counteracting all forms of discrimination.



## Our current activities

### Forest – humanitarian aid

Activities in the forest continue on a as needed basis. We continue to provide first aid, medical aid, dry clothing, warm food, and legal assistance when needed. This is funded by individual donations and money received through HFPC from the funds raised by Grupa Granica.

### Warehouse – material support for migrants and refugees

We rent out and operate a warehouse with materials needed to aid migrants and refugees – in the forest, detention centers (closed and open camps). As has been necessary (and when possible), these material things have also been distributed to other activists working along the border providing humanitarian aid. This is funded by individual donations and money received through HFPC from the funds raised by Grupa Granica. We also receive material gifts, such as clothing, cosmetics, phones, shoes, sleeping bags, etc.

### Detention centers – material support, visiting, psychological support, contact with legal support

Currently, our support is focused on the closed detention center in Białystok run by the Border Patrol. The migrants contact us through email asking for support. Our volunteers visit them when possible, provide material support as needed and requested. The conditions are closest to prison-like. The people closed in this center cannot go about freely.

The volunteers also receive regular psychological support (in group emotional support group meetings and individual one-on-one meetings when needed).

Psychological support is provided with cooperation with Otwarci Center for Psychoanalytical Psychotherapy (<https://otwarci.org/>) and Polskie Forum Migracyjne (<https://forummigracyjne.org/>). Polskie Forum Migracyjne pays for and provides a therapist who gives out opinions on the psychological state of the people in closed detention centers and often recommends they be moved to an open center. Usually, these recommendations are ignored.



People in closed detention centers generally remain there for 6 months and are then released to an open center. Closed detention centers also include families with children, even very young ones.

### Support of refugees who decide to remain in Bialystok

Truthfully, there are not many migrants and refugees that decide to stay in Bialystok. However, there are some from Afghanistan and one from Senegal. Egala tries to assist in the apartment search and help with finding work or other activities.

### Office – administrative tasks and meeting space

Our small office serves as a space for administrative work, storing paperwork and a meeting space. We currently do not have staff as our entire organization is run on a volunteer basis. This will soon have to change as there is just so much work to do.

### Psychotherapeutic support – for activists, for migrants and refugees

In cooperation with the therapists from Otwarci Center for Psychoanalytical Psychotherapy (<https://otwarci.org/>), the activists (those providing interventions in the forest as well as those going to visit and assisting migrants and refugees in the closed detention center) receive regular group emotional support and also individual support (as needed). These therapists also meet with migrants and refugees and provide them with psychotherapeutic support. All this is provided on a volunteer basis.

The point of this support is to prevent the accumulation of trauma in the body and PTSD. Interventions in the forest are stressful due to the conditions, the state of the migrants (usually quite poor), fear of being caught by authorities (and being accused of people trafficking, arrested, etc.).

The group of volunteers that go to the closed detention center also participate in the regular emotional support group meetings. They too are exposed to traumatic stories about the migrants' traumas in their country of origin (escaping persecutions, war, search for better conditions for their children, etc.) and the trauma of the crossing from Belarus (abuse, beatings, etc.) to Poland (difficult weather and terrain conditions).

Participation in the emotional support group (meetings once a week since October 2021) as well as use of the individual sessions is noncompulsory but highly recommended.



## Research

We are also involved in research on migration. Egala is a partner with the research group Badacze i Badaczki Na Granicy (<https://www.facebook.com/BadaczeiBadaczkiNaGranicy/>), whose aim it is to analyze the situation on the border with Belarus. The group will soon have a website and publish content for general readers. This research initiative is funded by the Stefan Batory Foundation (<https://www.batory.org.pl/en/>), which is one of the largest foundations in Poland aimed at promoting an open, democratic society.

## Antidiscrimination education

We have also begun providing antidiscrimination education, in cooperation with the association 9dwunastych (<https://9dwunastych.org/en/>). The aim is counteracting and preventing discrimination, particularly aimed at new Ukrainian students entering schools. Currently done free of charge, on a volunteer basis.

## Funding & Cooperation

We cooperate with:

**Helsinska Fundacja Praw Człowieka** (<https://www.hfhr.pl/en/>) – provided funds to support our activities in the forest, our warehouse and our activities in the detention centers. We also pay for gas and train tickets (for traveling migrants – when they need to go to a different centers). These funds were collected from individuals as part of Grupa Granica fundraising.

**International Rescue Committee** – provided funds for institutional development. This paid for setting up our office and office rent until July as well as accounting until July.

**Stefan Batory Foundation** – funding for research to analyze the situation on the border.

**Otwarci Center for Psychoanalytical Psychotherapy** – psychotherapeutic support on a volunteer basis.



**9dwunastych association** – antidiscrimination education (currently) on a volunteer basis.

#### **Funding from individual donations**

**Cooperation with Grupa Granica** – we are part of this informal group, which was formed in response to the crisis at the border with Belarus and the formation of this closed border zone in September 2021. This border zone is closed to any humanitarian aid, NGOs, watch groups, media, etc. We participate in coordination meetings and share resources (lawyers, translators, funds). You can read more about the situation on the eastern border in English here: <https://www.grupagranica.pl/files/Grupa-Granica-Report-Humanitarian-crisis-at-the-Polish-Belarusian-border.pdf>

## Migrants in closed detention centers

**How many closed detention centers?** This is a difficult question to answer. I think officially there are 8 on the eastern side of Poland, along the border with Belarus. In response to the crisis situation, more have been opened temporarily. Some of these have closed.

Our organization focuses on the detention centers in Bialystok. You can see a video of the closed detention center in Bialystok here: <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/9666,Osrodki-dla-cudzoziemcow.html#:~:text=W%20strukturze%20Stra%C5%BCy%20Granicznej%20jest,zosta%C5%82y%20zaadaptowane%20trzy%20nowe%20miejsca.>

**How many migrants and refugees?** The closed detention center in Bialystok currently has around 100 people. We don't have the exact number as it is not provided publicly by authorities or the Border Guards. Recently, many people were released as their holding period of 6 months had ended. At the peak, there were about 130-150 people in the detention center in Bialystok.

According to Amnesty International about 2000 people are held in these detention centers in Poland in general. See the report here: <https://amnesty.org/pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Amnesty-report-POLAND-CRUELTY-NOT-COMPASSION-AT-EUROPE'S-OTHER-BORDERS.pdf>



The migrants and refugees held in the closed detention center in Bialystok include families, children, ethnic minorities, such as Yezidis, people fleeing Syria, Afghanistan. The majority it seems are from the region of Kurdistan in Iraq.

The activities of supporting and providing basic necessities to migrants and refugees held in the closed detention center are currently done completely on a volunteer basis. This needs to change soon as it's really many hours of work. We would like to hire someone (or maybe even two people) to run the coordination of these activities, so we can better serve the people closed in this detention center.

Our account information:

IBAN: PL38160014621804011930000001

SWIFT/BIC/ABA: PPABPLPK