

# EGALA



## **Egala's Situation Report**

Direct emergency assistance  
along the Polish-Belarusian border

Two years ago, on the 10th of December 2021, the Egala Association was established in Białystok in response to the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. Since then, we have consistently provided assistance to individuals who, due to wars, climate changes, poverty, or in search of a better life in the European Union, had to leave their homeland and found themselves trapped on the border. We were brought together by shared values, a refusal to tolerate human rights violations, and the conviction that everyone deserves help, support, and respect, regardless of the reasons for migration. Over these two years, we have witnessed an immense amount of human suffering, but also great determination, strength, incredible human empathy, and commitment to providing assistance.

The year 2023 has presented significant challenges. It has been marked by instances of violence and widespread human rights violations, notably the use of illegal deportations. Throughout the past twelve months, we've witnessed an increase in the scale of violence and the continued dehumanization of people on the move. Despite the hopeful anticipation following the October elections and the formation of a new government, concrete decisions addressing the situation at the border and in secured facilities for foreigners are yet to be made.

In 2023, much like in previous years, our primary focus has remained on providing humanitarian support. This has entailed offering necessities such as water, food, dry clothing, hygiene products, and first aid to individuals on the move. Simultaneously, we have been informing them about the legal system in Poland and the available options for seeking international protection. Additionally, we have been dedicated to keeping the public informed about the border situation and fostering awareness about migration and asylum. Beyond our humanitarian efforts at the border, we have actively supported individuals in detention centers for foreigners and hospitals in the Podlaskie voivodeship. Our support extends to providing tangible assistance as well as offering legal and psychological aid.





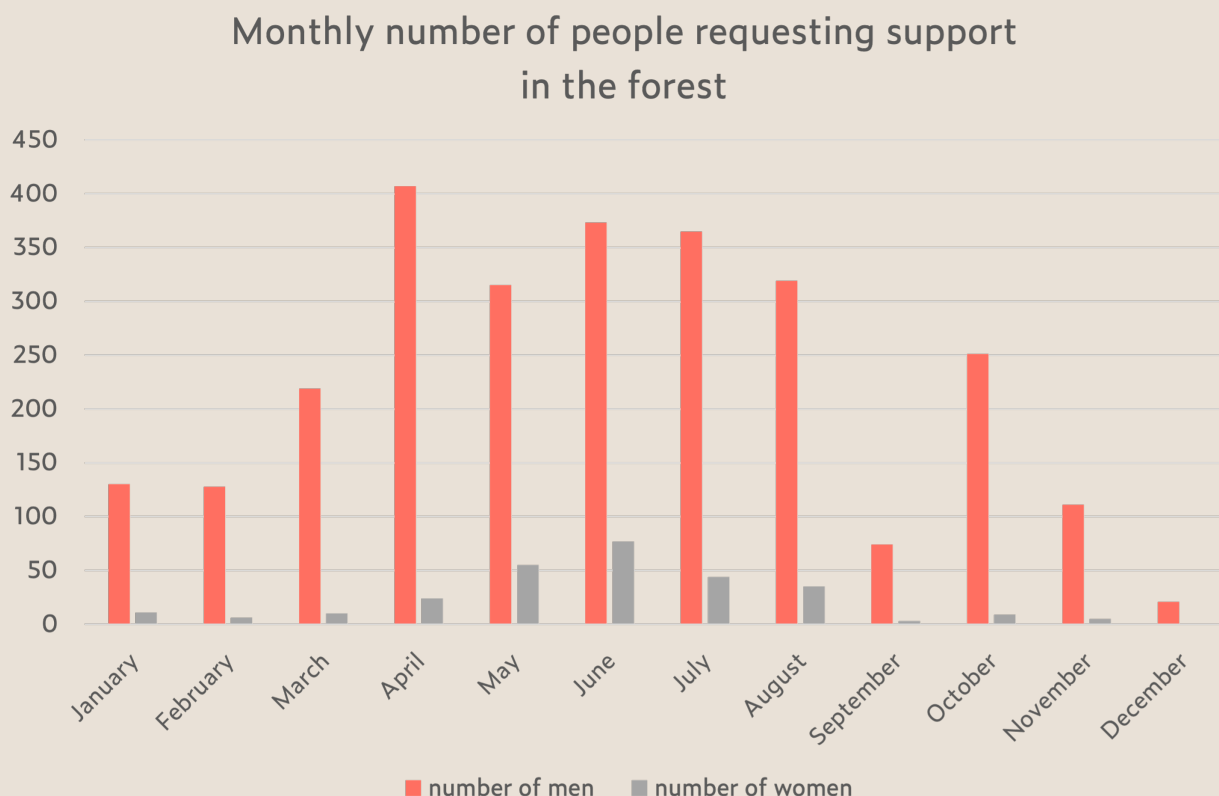
### Egala's comprehensive interventions at the border

The Egala Association plays a crucial role in providing support along the border through the dedicated emergency hotline set up for people on the move by the Grupa Granica initiative. Challenging border conditions, exacerbated by geographical features and temperature variations, heighten risks, particularly in winter. Crossing the border entails navigating fences, leading to frequent accidents and severe injuries.

In 2023, Egala carried out a total of 852 interventions at the border, facilitating access to essential services for 2992 individuals. Among these, support was provided to 279 women, while a significantly larger number of men benefited from our assistance. This gender imbalance in aid recipients is in line with the typical demographic patterns observed in this crisis context. The urgency of needs fluctuates with the seasons, and the presence of an additional electric surveillance wall is

unlikely to deter movement along this route.

Within Egala's border interventions, two main types of support were developed and effectively implemented to aid those affected by displacement. Field teams offered assistance by providing initial medical and psychosocial care, along with timely legal advice, ongoing updates on the situation, and counseling services. However, increased border guard and military presence hindered access to people on the move. This situation compelled individuals to frequently change locations, posing challenges for our teams to reach or wait for them, as such actions could reveal their whereabouts and potentially lead to push back incidents. As stated by the data collected by We Are Monitoring Association (WAM), 7583 persons requested support through their helpline and 1775 reported being pushed back to Belarus.



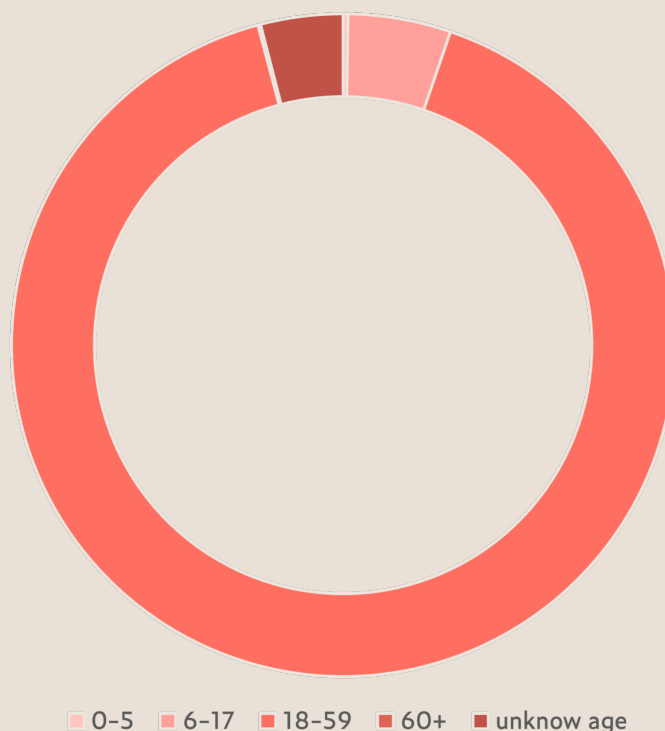
Egala estimated that among the people reached in the forest:

**2685** beneficiaries received psychosocial first aid,  
**2074** received medical first aid,  
**2645** received non-food items support,  
**2656** received food and water,  
**2610** people received information and counseling on legal and social situation in Poland.

In the majority of cases, individuals on the move availed themselves of multiple services provided by our workers. While not every person required medical assistance, nearly everyone encountered by our field officers received provisions such as food, water, and non-food items (NFI) support. Moreover, whenever communication was feasible, individuals were briefed on the legal regulations in Poland.

Direct cooperation with Doctors Without Borders (MSF) enables us to refer people on the move for specialized medical services provision. MSF, which restarted its field operations in November 2022, has one person on duty to join interventions and provide advanced medical assistance.

### Age profile of assisted individuals in the forest



Primarily, recipients fall within the 18-59 age group (2500 people), followed by the age brackets of 6-17 years old (150 people). The smallest groups consist of individuals aged above 60 years old (4 people) and those aged 0-5 years old (7 people). In certain instances, there were difficulties in determining the age of individuals on the move, with a total of 120 such cases.





### Casework

Some individuals, if not subjected to illegal pushbacks, are placed by Border Guards either in hospitals or detention centers. However, the situation in detention centers in Poland both in terms of overall conditions and legal framework, resemble those of a prison. People are often detained for extended periods, sometimes exceeding 24 months, with numerous extensions. People on the move end up in hospitals due to injuries sustained from crossing the razor wire fence. Those with injuries or medical conditions are not provided adequate medication management and external psychologists are not permitted on site. Detention center staff usually do not inform detainees about available legal consultation schedules. These circumstances directly contribute to deteriorating mental and physical health among detainees, resulting in hunger strikes, depression, and suicide attempts.

Our casework coordinator facilitates referrals for necessary specialist non-medical support outside of the hospital or detention center. Assistance is tailored to the person's needs and depends on current availability. Main referral needs typically include professional psychological support, translators, lawyers, and connections with organizations providing accommodation. Legal assistance is sourced from experienced organizations specializing in aid for foreigners, such as the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, the Association for Legal Intervention, and European Lawyers in Lesvos.

In 2023, Egala provided the following support in casework:

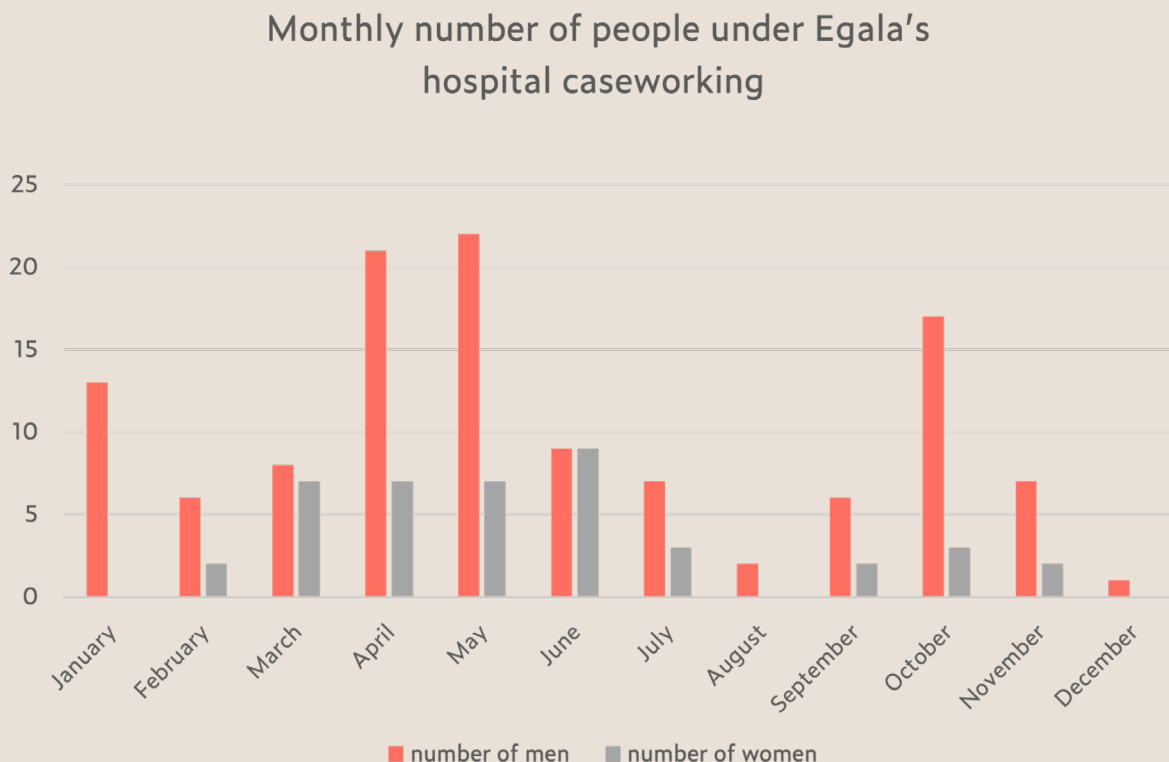
- 161 people (including 42 women) in the hospital in Hajnówka
- 222 men in the detention centre in Białystok

### Hospital

Assisting individuals on the move at the hospital in Hajnówka is one of the focal points of our operations. Recognizing the absence of specialized support in hospitals and the risk of pushbacks, external assistance becomes indispensable. The hospital does not supply them with necessities (such as clothes, toiletries, etc.). Patients are often uninformed about their legal status or the precautions they need to take to prevent pushbacks to Belarus. Additionally, some individuals have lost their phones or had them confiscated by authorities, resulting in a lack of communication with their families. Disturbingly, there are reports of people being forcibly returned to Belarus even from hospital settings, sometimes while still in precarious health.



The predominant issues in patients' health involve various forms of fractures. The border barrier proved ineffective in deterring border crossings, as the annual crossing figures remain consistent when comparing months before and after its erection. The barrier poses significant risks to individuals' health and safety. This is evidenced by an increase in severe and atypical orthopedic injuries resulting in hospitalization. Particularly since the implementation of the electronic layer, there has been a surge in fractures, as individuals strive to cross the barrier swiftly to evade detection by the electronic monitoring system and advance before authorities respond. Additional health concerns noted include hypothermia, dehydration, and general life-threatening exhaustion or waterborne illnesses. Moreover, there are specific instances such as that of a pregnant woman in an advanced stage of pregnancy. No matter the medical condition, each individual requires personalized assistance to help them stay resilient to potential mistreatment, misinterpretation, and detrimental coping mechanisms associated with stress and trauma.



Casework at the hospital primarily focuses on meeting the needs of individuals under medical care. Egala's staff strive to provide comprehensive non-medical assistance, supporting communication with hospital staff, aiding individuals in asylum procedures through collaboration with legal representatives and interpreters, managing medical and legal paperwork, and ensuring the timely submission of relevant documents to the authorities. The main goal of our hospital casework is to address the diverse needs of individuals under medical care, offering extensive non-medical support, including communication assistance, asylum procedure support, and efficient document management for prompt submission to the authorities. We advocate against unlawful proceedings and provide various other forms of aid, such as facilitating connections with psychologists, translators, lawyers, and organizations offering accommodation. Regular visits are conducted to build trust and provide ongoing basic psychosocial support.

Individuals who arrive from the Polish-Belarusian border to hospitals are often not informed about their rights. They face difficulties accessing a translator, legal and psychological assistance, as well as basic necessities such as clothing and toiletries. There are also reports of people being pushed back to Belarus from hospitals, sometimes in very poor health conditions.





### The caseworker's account:

A 29-year-old man from Ethiopia was admitted to a hospital in Podlaskie voivodeship, extremely cold and in pain. In his hospital locker, he had acorns that he had previously kept in his jacket pocket. When asked about them, he said: „I ate them because there was nothing else to eat in the forest, and I was very hungry”.

The next day, the man was discharged from the hospital. He was picked up by the border guard. He applied for international protection and was transferred to a detention centre.

### Detention centre

People captured by Border Guard, not pushed back to Belarus, are placed in detention centres. As a result of ambiguous protocols and inadequate care, our efforts at the primary detention centre in Białystok involve facilitating access to legal aid, social support, material assistance, monitoring, advocacy, and diverse aid initiatives. However, Egala encounters difficulties in fully monitoring the condition of the buildings and the treatment of the detainees due to restricted access imposed by the authorities.

Individuals are often detained for several months with multiple extensions. Those with injuries or other medical conditions are not offered support in managing their medication, and psychologists not employed by the institution are not allowed on the premises. Personnel at detention centres tend not to inform detainees about the schedules for legal consultations that are available to everyone. These conditions directly

contribute to the deterioration of mental and physical health among detainees, prompting hunger strikes and leading to depression and suicide attempts.

The duration of detention at the detention center is determined by a court decision, stipulating that an individual cannot remain in detention for more than 6 months from the time of their initial detention. If the detention occurs during the night, the detention period also expires during the night. Following release from detention, individuals are transferred to open centers. Caseworkers remain available 24/7, as detainees are released at irregular intervals. Upon release, individuals are required to promptly relocate to an open center in another city. They are often released without any financial resources or access to functioning mobile phones. Caseworkers facilitate travel arrangements to assist them in this transition.



## Polish authorities' hostility

Despite the change in the Polish government, violence by authorities and clear violations of human rights continue at the Polish-Belarusian border. Unfortunately, humanitarian aid remains criminalized, and there is a persistent failure to uphold basic human rights. Activists and humanitarian workers wishing to assist individuals in the move must remain in hiding, humanitarian aid is criminalized, and people are dehumanized. Humanitarian, legal, and medical aid is owed to every person in need of it. Each person is also entitled to respect for their dignity. The pushback policy conducted by the Polish state contradicts these universal values.

In December, a Syrian man experienced pushbacks four times. According to his account, during the first apprehension, no procedures were followed. He was beaten and forcibly taken to Belarus. Only during the fourth detention was he brought to a Border Guard facility, where he underwent a search and document check. Both he and others detained had their phones confiscated and destroyed. They were then coerced into signing documents in Polish. The Syrian man expressed a desire to seek international protection, resulting in physical assault. After the events at the facility, before being deported, he and other men were forced to undress in sub-zero temperatures in Podlasie. The Syrian recounts that they were not given clothes back and were pushed naked into Belarus.



**The man's account:** He beat me and four of my friends. He asked, „Where are you from?“ I said, „Syria“. „Are you a Muslim or a Christian?“ When I said I was a Christian, he beat me even more. I said I want to stay in Poland. I don't want to go beyond Poland's borders or return to Belarus. When I told [the guard] that I just want to stay in Poland, he beat me severely. He destroyed my phone. They forced us to undress. We were naked, without even underwear. Completely naked.





## Pushbacks and lethal journey

Since 2023 there has been a notable increase in reports of brutality by Polish authorities. These reports now encompass not only instances of phone confiscation, shoving, and verbal abuse, but also physical assaults, beatings with batons, and systematic use of tear gas immediately preceding the forcible pushing of people across the border.

Based on our field observations, a considerable number of pushback incidents remain undocumented, making it impossible to appeal them. Victims of pushbacks often lack tangible evidence of the occurrence, impeding efforts to monitor their movements. Vulnerable groups such as minors, pregnant women, and individuals with disabilities are also affected by these practices, putting them in danger and violating international legal standards. Court decisions are confirming that the method employed by the Polish Border Guard to return migrants to Belarus, used in most cases, is unlawful. Some judges have instructed the Border Guard to consider the situation in Belarus and the humanitarian crisis context when carrying out any actions or proceedings that could lead to the deportation of a foreign individual to the border area.

On the 418-kilometer stretch of the border, there can be over a dozen thousand kilometers of concertina wire which is found on riverbanks, in the water, intertwined with grass, and in fence form. The wire is designed to penetrate the body and cut to the bone. Egala's workers have often provided medical assistance to individuals injured by razor blade edges. The wires are also deadly dangerous for animals. In autumn a new strand of razor wire began to be installed in front of the border fence. These nearly two-meter-high barriers, along with additional military units dispatched to the Podlasie region, have made crossing the border in 2023 even more difficult and dangerous.

In 2023, 54 individuals have been officially recorded as deceased since the beginning of the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. The new government announces the fortification of the Polish-Belarusian border, which will result in the suffering and deaths of more people.





## Egala's organisational development



Egala's staff is well experienced and trained in emergency first medical and psychosocial aid, legal aspects related to interventions in the forest, human trafficking, safeguarding, anti-repression and operations in areas where hostile authorities may be present. The team consists of field officers, coordinators of individual activities, social media communication specialists and administrative staff. Accounting and personnel services are provided by a professional accounting office externally. The association operates three warehouses with emergency stocks necessary to provide assistance in the border zone. At the beginning of 2023, a significant event occurred regarding the organization's growth. We began an extensive search for a suitable location for our base. Finally, in March, we were able to relocate to a new field base strategically located in the most active part of the border, near the primeval part of the Białowieża forest.

Being the largest NGO in the field, the Egala Association takes on the responsibility of upholding assistance standards. Collaborating with local NGOs, we have crafted and implemented various policies to denounce unethical and hazardous behaviors, such as the Code of Conduct, Child Safeguarding, and Feedback and Complaint Mechanism, alongside financial, procurement, and staffing protocols within our organization. We offer accessible psychological support and provide training and resources to enhance staff capabilities, including conflict management. To ensure alignment of values and goals among our staff, we have conducted workshops on organizational strategy and the ethical principles of humanitarian aid, discussing the practical application of the Code of Conduct and ethical language in articulating our work and people on the move.

The communication capabilities of our field teams are crucial for facilitating swift and accurate communication. This enables individuals to make informed decisions regarding their next steps in the forest. Additionally, we have implemented language courses for our field staff to ensure that essential information about the legal situation and general context in Poland can be effectively communicated. Furthermore, Egala's workers are trained to provide medical first aid assistance to people on the move through medical courses.

During interventions, measures are taken to avoid attracting attention to individuals on the move. If the authorities spot the group, teams are trained to track individuals and prevent undocumented pushbacks. Egala mitigates the risks faced by individuals in the forest by having a separate driver who remains concealed within the vehicle. The driver strategically plans the route to approach individuals discreetly. Precautionary measures or de-escalation tactics are utilized to minimize the likelihood of pushbacks in case of encounters with authorities. Workers receive regular training to effectively implement these strategies and ensure their ongoing effectiveness. We prioritize both physical and psychological safety. New team members always accompany experienced workers during interventions. Additionally, we ensure that individuals receive essential information to navigate safely and care for themselves while traversing through the forest. To support our staff and prevent burnout, we conducted workshops for our employees and volunteers, implemented a rotational work system – two weeks on, two weeks off, provided group supervision at the base, and offered free psychological assistance.



## Partners:



**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency



**HELVETAS**

**DRC** DANISH  
REFUGEE  
COUNCIL

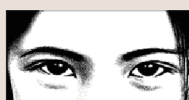


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Obywatele**  
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Iceland  
Liechtenstein  
Norway

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