Border Forensics

Circumference of Violence

infra Nature



THE DEATH ZONE

THE MAKING OF A LETHAL PUSHBACK REGIME ACROSS THE POLISH–BELARUSIAN BORDERLANDS

A report by the Circumference of Violence, Infrastructuring Nature, and Border Forensics

September 2026

Cover Image: A Polish border-guard vehicle stationed behind the treeline while its officers search for migrants who attempted to cross the Polish-Belarusian borderlands. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, 2025.

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SUMMARY



Figure 1. A group of migrants trapped in the buffer zone along the Belarus–Poland border, blocked from advancing by Polish authorities and unable to retreat into Belarus. Photograph by Maciej Moskwa, August 2021.

In the summer of 2021, amid rising geopolitical tensions, the government of Belarus facilitated the crossing of its borders with neighbouring European Union (EU) countries by illegalised migrants from the Global South. Considering the way EU countries have framed migrants as threats, the Belarus government aimed for these crossings to have a destabilising effect on the EU. In response, Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania denounced this practice as a form of "hybrid warfare" enacted through the "instrumentalisation" of migrants. In the aim of preventing migrants from arriving on their territories and seeking protection, the governments of these countries swiftly instituted exceptional legislation, erected exclusionary border infrastructure, and deployed large numbers of law enforcement agents to their borders. Their policies, which received the full backing of the EU, have constituted a pushback regime that has been consolidated over the last five years. As a result, migrants seeking to

cross the borders between Belarus and EU countries have been subjected to widespread violations of their rights and recurring acts of violence by law enforcement agents. Numerous migrant deaths and disappearances have been recorded.

This report led by the Circumference of Violence (CoV) and Infrastructuring Nature (IN) research projects with the investigative agency Border Forensics (BF), and in collaboration with a number of Polish researchers and civil society actors, focuses on the vast space of the Polish–Belarusian borderlands, which have seen the starkest developments.[1] It is here that, from 2021, migrants from countries of the Global South – such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Eritrea, and Somalia – whose mobility across the EU's borders has been illegalised by the EU's restrictive policies, were pushed forward by Belarusian authorities in greater numbers.[2] Although figures concerning the phenomena of illegalised migration are inherently unreliable, it appears that Poland saw the highest number of crossings and asylum applications.[3] In turn, Poland's deployment of law enforcement agents – including the military – and the construction of surveillance and border infrastructure has been more extensive than that of its Baltic counterparts. This has enabled the interceptions and summary pushbacks of migrants across the border. While pushbacks had been exercised in the past, they became widespread and systematic. Most importantly, the human cost of Poland's response has been far greater. Caught in repeated cycles of pushforward and pushback across the border during which they are forced to move or, conversely, immobilised – an alternating condition we refer to as *im/mobility* – migrants have remained trapped in the borderlands for extended periods of time.[4]

1 We use the term borderlands to describe a transitional space close to the political boundaries between countries. This space is dynamic and complex and shaped by interactions between actors and communities that evolve over time. G. Anzaldua, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2004); M. Agier, Borderlands: Towards an Anthropology of the Cosmopolitan Condition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016); E. Balibar, "Borderland Europe and the Challenge of Migration," openDemocracy, September 8, 2015.

2 The terms we use to describe human mobility across state borders have important implications. In this investigation, we follow the work of Scheel and Tazzioli and use the term "migrant" as "a person, who, in order to move to or stay in a desired place, has to struggle against bordering practices and processes of boundary making that are implicated by the national order of things." In turn, we use the adjective "illegalised" following authors such as De Genova and Bauder to highlight that illegality and criminality is a product of state law rather than an intrinsic feature of migrants. Finally, we use the term "Global South" despite the risk of homogenising it entails to point to the persisting but blurred geographies of global inequality that shapes the right to move across borders. S. Scheel, and M. Tazzioli. "Who Is a Migrant? Abandoning the Nation-State Point of View in the Study of Migration." *Migration Politics* 1 (1) (2022): 002; N. De Genova. "Spectacles of Migrant 'Illegality': The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion." Ethnic and Racial Studies 36 (7) (2013): 1180–98.; H. Bauder, "Why We Should Use the Term Illegalized Immigrant." RCIS Research Brief 1 (2013): 1–7.; S. Mau, F. Gülzau, L. Laube, and N. Zaun. "The Global Mobility Divide: How Visa Policies Have Evolved over Time", Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 41:8 (2015): 1192-1213., S. Mezzadra. "Challenging Borders: The Legacy of Postcolonial Critique in the Present Conjuncture." *Soft Power* 7, no. 14 (2020): 21–41.

3 In the European Commission's Proposal for provisional emergency measures for the benefit of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, the Commission notes the following: "Because of this instrumentalisation, in 2021 as of 21 November, 7,831 third country nationals have entered the territories of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland from Belarus in an unauthorised manner, compared to 257 in the entire 2020. In addition, there have been 2,676 asylum applications in Lithuania, 579 applications in Latvia and 6,730 applications in Poland." European Commission, Proposal for a Council Decision on Provisional Emergency Measures for the Benefit of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, COM(2021) 752 final, December 1, 2021, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52021PC0752.

4 Pushforward and pushback practices, as defined in this report, involve forceful and often violent movement of migrants across borders. Pushforwards direct migrants along their desired path across the border, while pushbacks forcibly return them across the border and obstruct access to legal protections. In the process the rights of migrants to seek protection, the principle of non-refoulement and prohibition of collective expulsion are frequently violated. The cyclical movements of pushforward and pushbacks alternate between containing and immobilising migrants in a specific zone and forcing them to move, a condition we refer to as "im/mobility". M. Hamersak and B. Mucko, "Pushback," e-ERIM: An Online Network of Keywords of the European Irregularized Migration Regime at the Periphery of the EU, May 26, 2023, accessed July 14, 2026.

Multiple forms of violence and violations of rights have become widespread, and 102 deaths have been recorded over the last five years by civil society actors in the area of the eastern border, a number that significantly exceeds those documented elsewhere along the Belarus frontier.[5] Furthermore, between 2021 and 2024, civil society organisations have received at least 214 fragmentary reports relating to potential border-related disappearances.[6] Beyond the implications of prolonged disappearance for families, this raises the possibility that the actual number of deaths may be even greater. Despite the tireless efforts of Polish civil society actors to mitigate the effects of the pushback regime by supporting migrants and denouncing violations, and despite the 2023 change from a right-wing to a centrist coalition government in Poland, Belarusian and Polish state policies, border infrastructure, and law enforcement practices implemented over the last five years have turned the vast forests straddling the Polish–Belarusian borderlands into what migrants have come to refer to as a "death zone."[7]

5 According to Sienos Grupė, between 2021 and 2026, eleven people have lost their life at the border between Belarus and Lithuania. At the Latvian–Belarusian border, fifteen people are recorded to have lost their life; see "FAQ about LV-BY," Gribu Palīdzēt Bēgļiem, accessed August 31, 2026, https://gribupalidzetbegliem.lv/en/faq-about-lv-by/. The list of deaths at the Polish–Belarusian border, covering deaths recorded on both the Polish and Belarusian sides, documented by the Border Death Monitoring Group, "List of Border Deaths," accessed August 31, 2026, https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/en/list-of-the-deceased/. It is compiled using the methodology developed by the Border Death Monitoring Group (BDMG) and currently contains 107 documented cases. In this analysis, however, we limit our geographical scope to deaths occurring in Poland within the Podlaskie and Lubuskie Voivodeships, as well as on the Belarusian side of the border, and thus focus on the 102 deaths directly related to the Polish–Belarusian border area, excluding cases that do not meet these criteria. A detailed description of the BDMG methodology is available at the same source cited above.

6 Between 2023 and 2024, the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights verified more than 400 such cases, the findings of which are presented in its 2024 report. See G. Baranowska, K. Czarnota, M. Czachor, M. Sosniak, and O. Wanicka, Disappearances on the Polish-Belarusian Border: Pushbacks as a Factor in Enforced Disappearances in Poland (Warsaw: Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 2024).

7 While the term "death zone" has become common among migrants crossing this border since 2021, the term was used before it became associated with migrant deaths. It was used in the context of wildlife research, as animals regularly became trapped within the border infrastructure which, until 2021, was particularly developed on the Belarusian side of the border.



Figure 2. Photograph of the graves of migrants who died at the border and were buried in Poland. Photograph by Maciej Moskwa, August 2024.

This report centres on the deaths and disappearances of migrants not because we consider them the only forms of harm worth documenting, but because we see them as the culmination of the violence and rights violations that migrants endure while being pushed back and forth across the border by Belarusian and Polish authorities. Despite efforts to document these deaths and disappearances and hold those responsible to account, impunity has prevailed. In Poland, prosecutorial investigations have considered the physiological cause of migrant deaths – such as hypothermia and drowning – and the absence of signs of direct physical violence as grounds to conclude that these lethal incidents were "natural deaths" related to the harsh environments migrants cross through. The role of Polish policies, border infrastructure, and law enforcement practices in causing these lethal incidents has been ignored. Under the dictatorial government of Belarus, accountability has been non existent. As a result, both Polish and Belarusian state actors have evaded responsibility for their actions and omissions – such as pushbacks or denials of assistance – which have contributed to migrant deaths. The lack of accountability for these deaths has allowed the state policies and practices that structurally lead to violence, violations of rights, and, most critically, the deaths and disappearances of migrants, to be perpetuated from 2021 to the present.

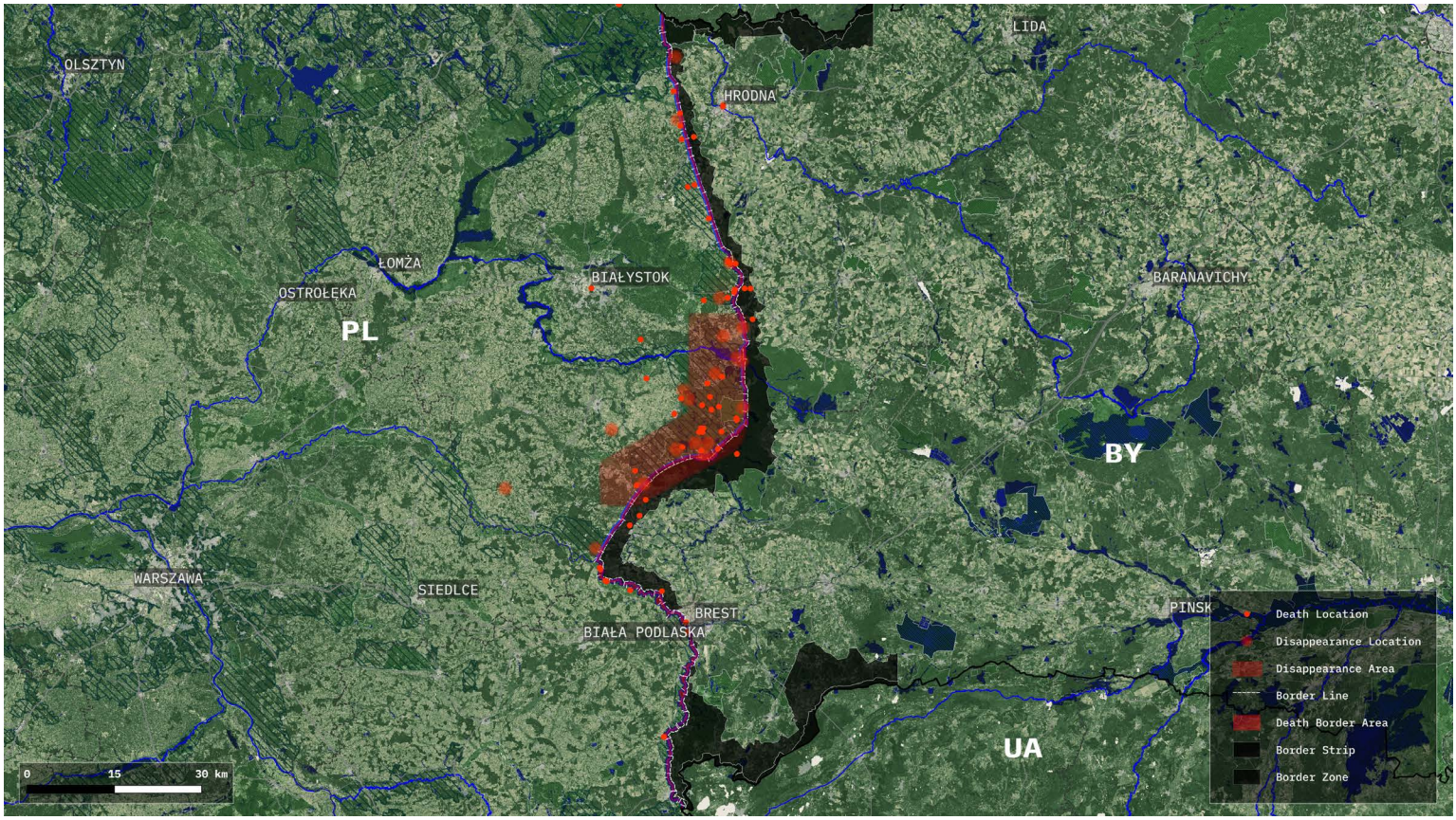


Figure 3. Map of the border region, compiled from multiple data sources and platforms tracking migrant deaths and disappearances. Map by Border Forensics, 2025.

In this context, this investigation mobilises a broad range of methods and fact-based analysis to answer the following key questions: *How has this lethal pushback regime emerged? How has it been consolidated over the last five years? How have border policies, practices, infrastructure, and the environment converged to structurally generate violence, deaths, and disappearances? Who should be held accountable for the different forms of harm experienced by migrants?*

To answer the questions above, we have led an investigation over two years. The research has been led by the researchers and fellows of the Circumference of Violence (CoV) and Infrastructuring Nature (IN) research projects and the investigative agency Border Forensics (BF). We have further collaborated with a number of Polish researchers and civil society actors,in particular We Are Monitoring (WAM), Podlasie Volunteer Humanitarian Emergency Service (POPH), Egala Association (Egala), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR), Border Deaths Monitoring Group (BDMG) and Piotr Czaban – investigative journalist and creator of the Czaban Robi Raban channel.



Figure 4. A photograph taken during fieldwork with members of the Egala Association's search and rescue team, Kamil Syller, local residents involved in search and rescue activities, and representatives of the Association for Legal Intervention (SIP). Together with the research team, they engaged in collective mapping to reconstruct the "crisisification" of the border. During fieldwork, the research team conducted four such collective mapping sessions with different organisations and individuals. Photograph by Charles Heller, 2025.

Our research has combined the analysis of a broad range of data types – that have been generated by civil society actors over the last five years or specifically for this investigation – with an equally wide range of methods – from ethnographic research to discourse analysis, from forensic reconstruction to geostatistical analysis. We offer a unique evidence-based account of the emergence and functioning of this lethal pushback regime, with a focus on the combined and cumulative forms of violence that structurally culminate in migrants' deaths and disappearances. By analysing the specific causal chains and recurring mechanisms leading to these human tragedies, and confronting these findings with geostatistical analysis, we demonstrate that the Polish and Belarusian state policies, infrastructure, and law enforcement practices have knowingly exposed migrants to environmental conditions – forests, rivers, and the cold in particular – that have proven lethal. In the process, we offer a unique account of the way three different forms of border violence that have often been analysed separately. First, direct acts of violence, such as beating, inflicted by law enforcement agents; second, lacerations and broken limbs inflicted through border infrastructure; and third, environmentally mediated violence. These different modalities of violence have converged at the Poland–Belarus border and are experienced cumulatively by migrants. Finally, the report accounts for the discursive,

legal, and political processes, both at the national and European levels, that have allowed this lethal pushback regime to be consolidated over the last five years, and this despite the 2023 change in government from the right-wing PiS government to the centrist coalition government led by Donald Tusk – who had included in his campaign the aim of ending violations of migrants rights and deaths. In fact, over time the pushback regime have become more entrenched at the national level – as exemplified by the 2025 law suspending asylum – and become a model for current European policy and legal trends, including in the EU's new Pact on Migration's Crisis Regulation. By drawing on the data and knowledge gathered by Polish civil society actors and researchers over the years, and supplementing them with new data and methods, our aim is for this report to offer a comprehensive account of the dynamics generating border violence across the Polish–Belarusian borderlands and to constitute a robust evidentiary base that may support demands for accountability and advocacy.

Report Outline

Our analysis, based on the methodology summarised below, unfolds across five chapters in which we seek to account for the emergence, functioning, harmful effects, and consolidation of the lethal pushback regime across the Polish–Belarusian borderlands over the last five years. Here, we introduce the contents of each chapter and summarise our key findings.

Chapter 1: The Crisification of the Poland-Belarus border

In the first chapter, we analyse the context and dynamics from which Poland's lethal pushback regime emerged in the summer of 2021, as we have alluded to above. Following the Belarusian regime's violent repression of protesters in 2020 and the criticism this sparked from the EU, the long-established cooperation on migration management between Belarus and the EU collapsed in 2021. The Belarusian authorities responded by establishing a new commercialised migration route, facilitating access to Belarusian visas and directing migrants towards the EU's borders. Considering the way EU countries have framed migrants as threats in the past and criminalised their mobility, the Belarus government aimed for these crossings to have a destabilising effect on the EU, and appears to have calculated that they would trigger violent responses from EU neighbouring countries which the Belarus government in turn denounced.



Figure 5. A group of migrants at the Belarus–Poland border in August 2021, close to the village of Usnarz Górny. Migrants are encircled by authorities from both sides, Polish authorities in front, Belarusian authorities at the treeline behind blocking them from advancing or retreating, caught in a state of enforced immobility. Photograph by Maciej Moskwa, 2021.

The Belarus-enabled arrival of large numbers of migrants from different countries of the Global South at Poland's eastern border indeed triggered a process we refer to as one of *crisification.*[8] This term allows our analysis to move beyond the dominant tendency to interpret these events as either a humanitarian crisis requiring protection or a security crisis requiring defence, and instead to examine the processes through which migrants came to be constructed as a threat demanding exceptional measures. We demonstrate that, through political discourse, people seeking protection were represented by both the Polish state and EU institutions as security threats and instruments of hostile state action. This framing enabled the introduction of extraordinary legal, military, and administrative measures, while progressively restricting access to asylum procedures and humanitarian assistance – what we term Poland's *counter-instrumentalisation governance*.[9]

8 V. Moreno-Lax, "Crisis as (Asylum) Governance: The Evolving Normalisation of Non-Access to Protection in the EU," European Papers: A Journal on Law and Integration 9, no. 1 (2024): 179-208, https://doi.org/10.15166/2499-8249/752.

9 We develop this term further in an academic article see K. Czarnota, C. Heller, A. Mangione, R. Mussa, and P. Teunissen, "Entangled Logics of Enmity: Race, Geopolitics, and the Lethal Pushback Regime at the Polish-Belarus Border," Citizenship Studies, forthcoming 2026.



Figure 6. Government press conference during the 2021 Belarus–Poland border crisis, at which state officials presented migrants as security threats within the broader narrative of "hybrid warfare." Screenshot reproduced from OKO.press.[10]

This chapter uses qualitative and quantitative discourse analysis to trace how events at the border, and migrants themselves, were framed discursively. We examine how migrants came to embedded within two distinct but intertwined logics of *enmity* – a term we use to describe feelings of hostility directed at individuals or collectives. Enmity can operate at the individual level, but it can also exist as a social and political process within and between states.[11] Enmity is shaped by specific logics and two such logics are especially salient in the discursive construction of migrants as threats: race and geopolitics. Though these have followed different historical trajectories, they became increasingly intertwined during the border's 2021 crisification, as negatively racialised migrants were framed as weapons in the "hybrid war" waged by Belarus and Russia. At the same time, humanitarian framings were increasingly sidelined. The threatening discursive construction of migrants crossing the Polish-Belarus border since 2021 is even more striking for the contrast that can be observed in relation to the far larger numbers of Ukrainian refugees arriving in Poland as of 2014 and mostly since 2022, who were instead predominantly framed as culturally close and as fleeing the aggression of a common enemy.[12]

10 D. Sitnicka, "'Krowa Kamińskiego' to stare nagranie z internetu. A w dodatku to klacz," OKO.press, September 28, 2021, https://oko.press/krowa-kaminskiego-to-stare-nagranie-z-internetu-a-w-dodatku-to-klacz.

11 A. Mbembe, Necropolitics, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

12 V. Charnysh, L. Peisakhin, N. Stoop, and P. v. d. Windt, "Understanding Refugee Assistance: Evidence on Syrian and Ukrainian Refugees in Poland," Comparative Political Studies (2026).

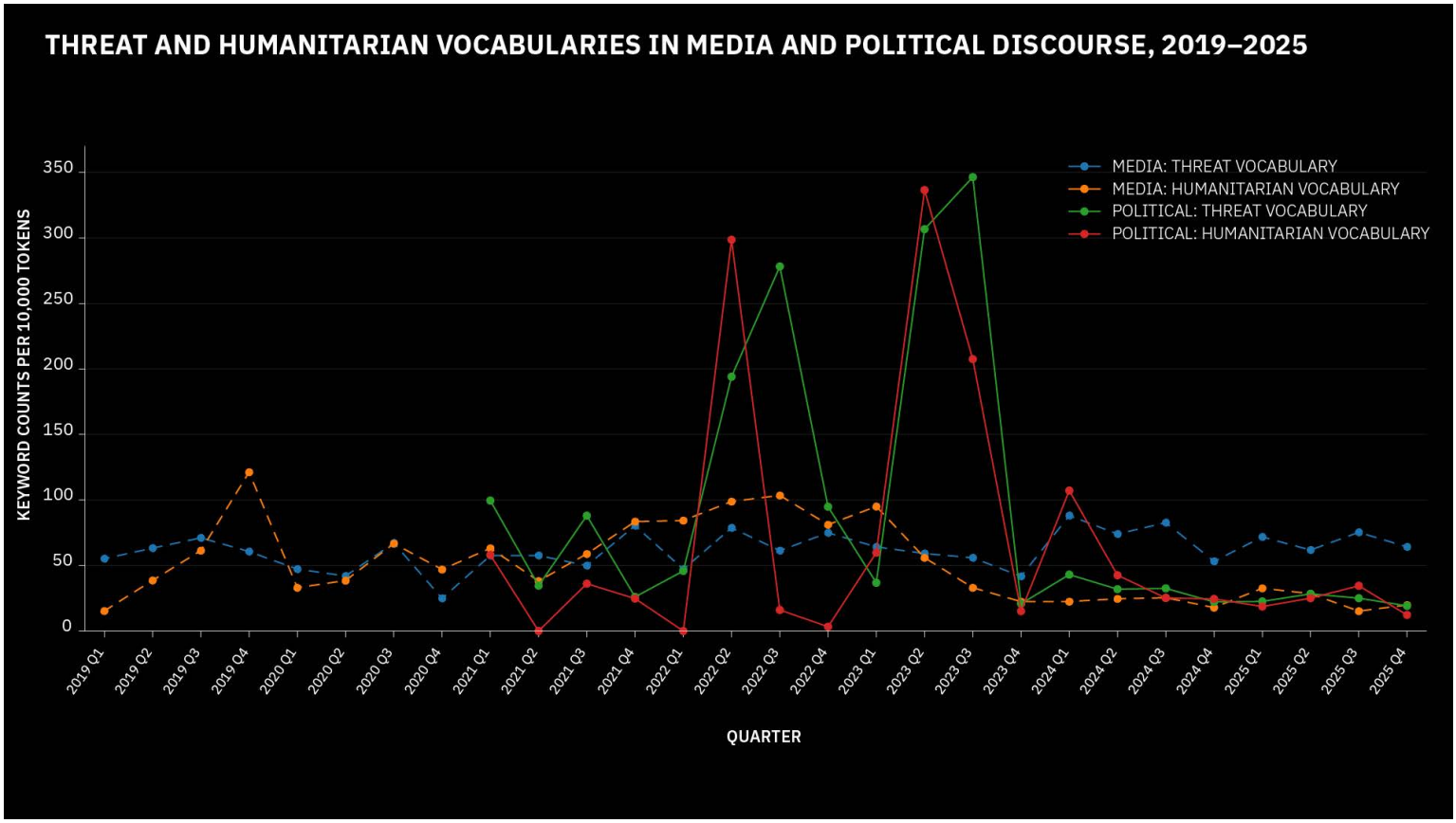


Figure 7. Threat and humanitarian vocabularies co-intensify. These are raw keyword counts per quarter: the blue line represents threat-related keyword totals; the orange line represents humanitarian keyword totals. This figure uses the components behind the threat-index workbook, not only the final net Threat Index. It shows that humanitarian language rises together with threat language in 2021; migrants' suffering remains visible, but becomes politically subordinated to a broader narrative of emergency, border defence, and hybrid attack. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

Having analysed the dynamics of threat construction concerning migrants, we turn to the forms of counter-instrumentalisation governance developed by Poland and the EU in response to this constructed threat. This has involved encoding logics of enmity into Polish law: migrants have been increasingly stripped of their rights, law enforcement agents granted exceptional powers, and civil society actors criminalised. These legislative changes have created the legal script for the recurrent practices of violence at the border, which we analyse in subsequent chapters.

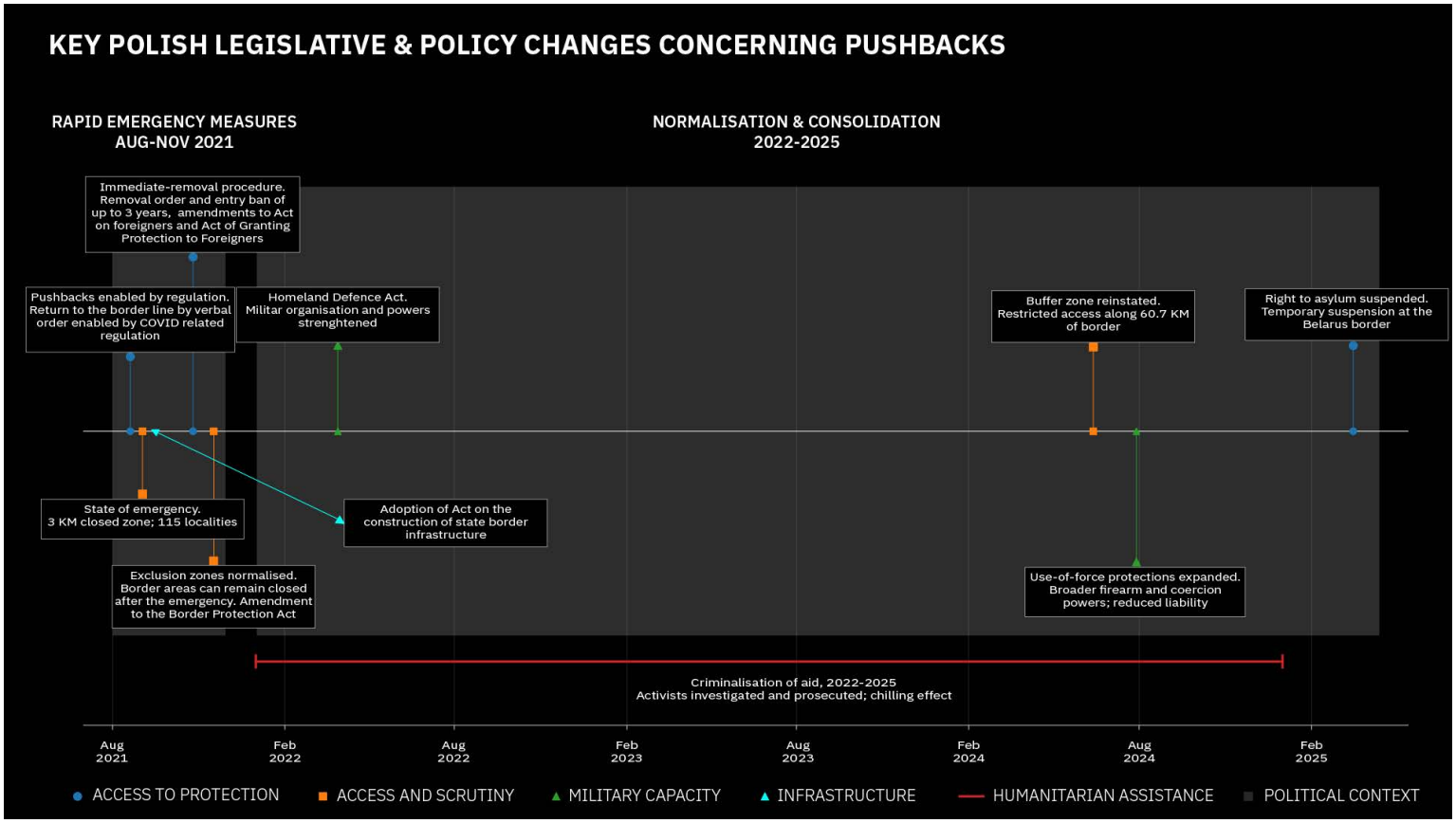


Figure 8. Policy timeline of key legislative changes, 2021–2025. Timeline by Border Forensics, 2026.

The logics of enmity crafted and adopted by state actors have not gone unchallenged. They have been met with logics of solidarity embodied by numerous activists, inhabitants of the border region, and non-governmental actors. Nonetheless, despite the courage and persistence of these individuals and the complex systems of collective support they have established over time, they have not succeeded in preventing the emergence and consolidation of the lethal pushback regime – a process we return to in the final chapter.



Figure 9. A civil society volunteer providing emergency care to a migrant in the borderland forest. Photograph by Malgorzata Klemens, 2023.

Chapter 2: The Architecture of Enmity

In the second chapter, we turn to the concrete manifestations of logics of enmity at the border. We analyse meticulously the establishment or repurposing of restricted zones, the deployment of law enforcement means and personnel, and the erection of border infrastructure, which together constitute the pillars of what we call an *architecture of enmity*.[13] We further highlight how this state-constructed architecture enlists the geophysical characteristics of the natural environment in the service of border control. Ultimately, we trace the production of a territory of violence extending across both sides of this extensive borderland – a space that migrants have come to refer to as the "death zone."

13 D. Gregory, The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004); V. Hansel and P. Teunissen, "Moving through the Architecture of Enmity: Infrapolitics and the (Re)Configuration of the Aegean Deportation Regime," in Von Moria bis Hanau: Brutalisierung und Widerstand (2022), 164-82.



Figure 10. Border infrastructure at the Poland–Belarus border. The 5.5-metre steel fence and electronic surveillance system sit alongside older, low-tech methods of control, such as a patrol road and a guard scanning the treeline with binoculars. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, November 2024.

This chapter's methodology draws on document analysis, field observations, semi-structured interviews, and open-source investigative techniques to analyse the different pillars of the border's architecture of enmity. Because this architecture is built on, and partly repurposes, a pre-existing "ground" constituted by the environment, human habitation, and political organisation, we start by describing the borderland's unique environment and history.



Figure 11. Several photographs of the Białowieża Forest. Photographs by Peter Teunissen, 2024; 2025.

The Poland–Belarus border cuts across a unique ecosystem: extensive forests cover a lowland terrain, shaped also by wetlands and rivers and home to diverse wildlife. In 1992, the Białowieża Forest was established as a transborder UNESCO World Heritage Site. Today it covers 141,885 hectares and is governed by a system of concentric environmental protection zones. Despite its ecological continuity, the Białowieża Forest and the broader region have been shaped by shifting imperial and national frontiers, with borders moving not just across the landscape but through people's lives.[14] During the Second World War, the forest's density concealed acts of Nazi violence, but it also provided refuge for Jewish, Polish, and Soviet partisans. This history of violence, resistance, and fugitivity is sedimented across the borderlands in a way that continues to shape the conflictual politics of the border in the present. Furthermore, after the Second World War, the Soviet Union militarised its border with Poland and constructed a complex system of control featuring extensive barbed wire fencing, watchtowers, bunkers, trenches, and a ploughed strip of land known as "Sistema", which, has remained in place.

14 The borders have changed considerably over the last century: from the aftermath of the partitions and the interwar boundaries, through the Nazi-Soviet division of 1939, to the post-1945 border settlement between Poland and the Soviet Union, to that border's transformation into an international frontier following Belarus's independence in 1991, and finally to Poland's accession to the Schengen Area.



Figure 12. Polish Border Protection Forces and Soviet border guards at border post no. 1398, 1980s. Photographer unknown, Archiwum Straży Granicznej, reproduced on Geoforum.[15]

Having probed the borderland's environment and history, we analyse in detail each of the three main pillars of the contemporary architecture of enmity, across both sides of the Polish–Belarusian border. We first map security and military exclusion zones which have been laid over existing restricted-access natural reserves, as well as security areas established during the Cold War. Exclusion zones are present on both sides of the border, and those on the Polish side have changed shape, location, and scale several times over the past five years. Within these zones, access has been controlled by law enforcement agents, with access at times and at specific locations forbidden entirely. This has created a security buffer zone which has served to govern the im/mobility of migrants during cycles of pushback and pushforward, while simultaneously limiting the capacity for civil society actors to intervene and hold state actors accountable – creating a *hidden zone of violence*.[16]

15 GeoForum, "Wojsko – Oznakowanie granic Polski w latach 1946-1990," accessed June 29, 2026, https://geoforum.pl/?menu=47155,47282,47284&page_nr=2&link=wojsko-oznakowanie-granic-polski-lata-1946-90.

16 Border Emergency Collective, Zone of Hidden Violence, visual report, 2022, Vimeo video, https://vimeo.com/738396988.



Figure 13. Photograph of a sign marking the exclusion zone, with the border barrier visible in the background alongside a house and agricultural land. Photograph by Charles Heller, 2025..

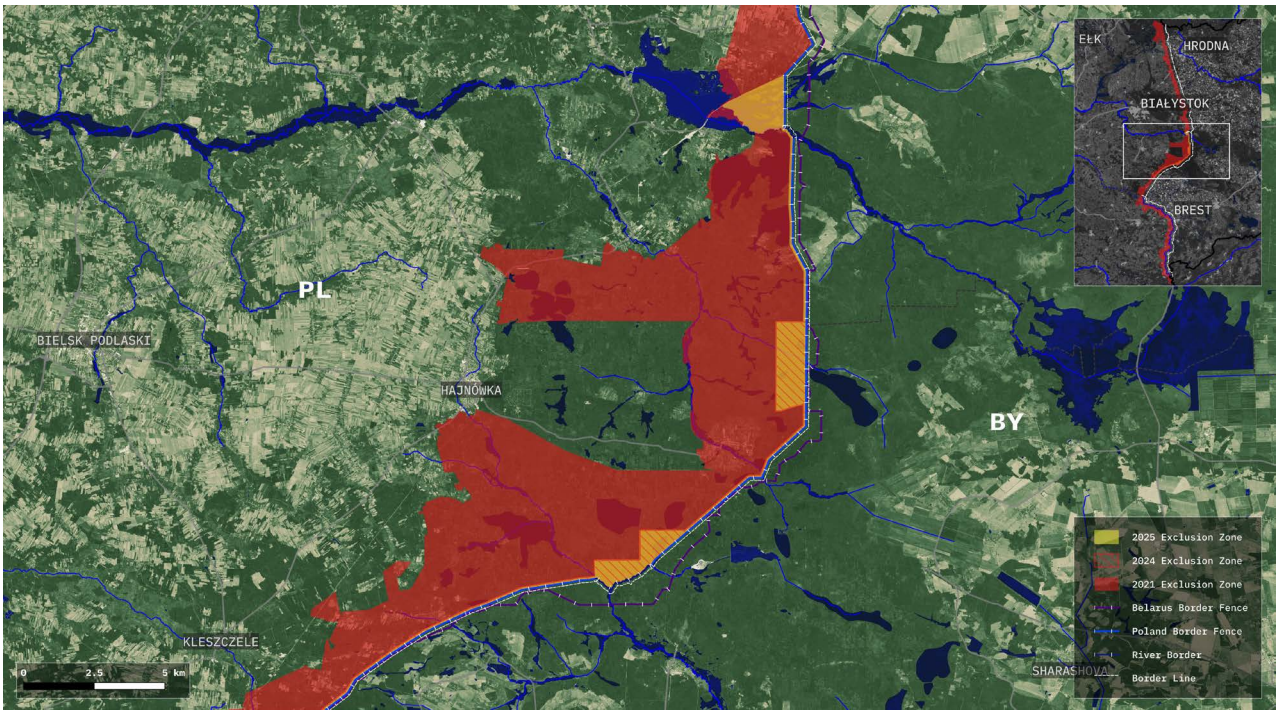


Figure 14. Map of Poland's exclusion zones along the Belarusian border, introduced, extended, and expanded in 2021, 2024, and 2025. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Second, we analyse the multiplicity of law enforcement agencies that have been deployed within and around both sides of the border. Each agency operates under distinct mandates, legal frameworks, and chains of command, yet together they produce a layered and opaque enforcement landscape. These agencies include military, paramilitary, and security actors. Their roles and relationships have evolved in response to shifting political conditions on both sides of the border, from the emergency deployments of 2021 to the consolidation of permanent operational frameworks by 2024–25. Together, these agencies have established an imposing military presence at the border, one that permeates the everyday lives of local communities.



Figure 15. Border guards and military personnel in the forest of Wygon. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, March 2025

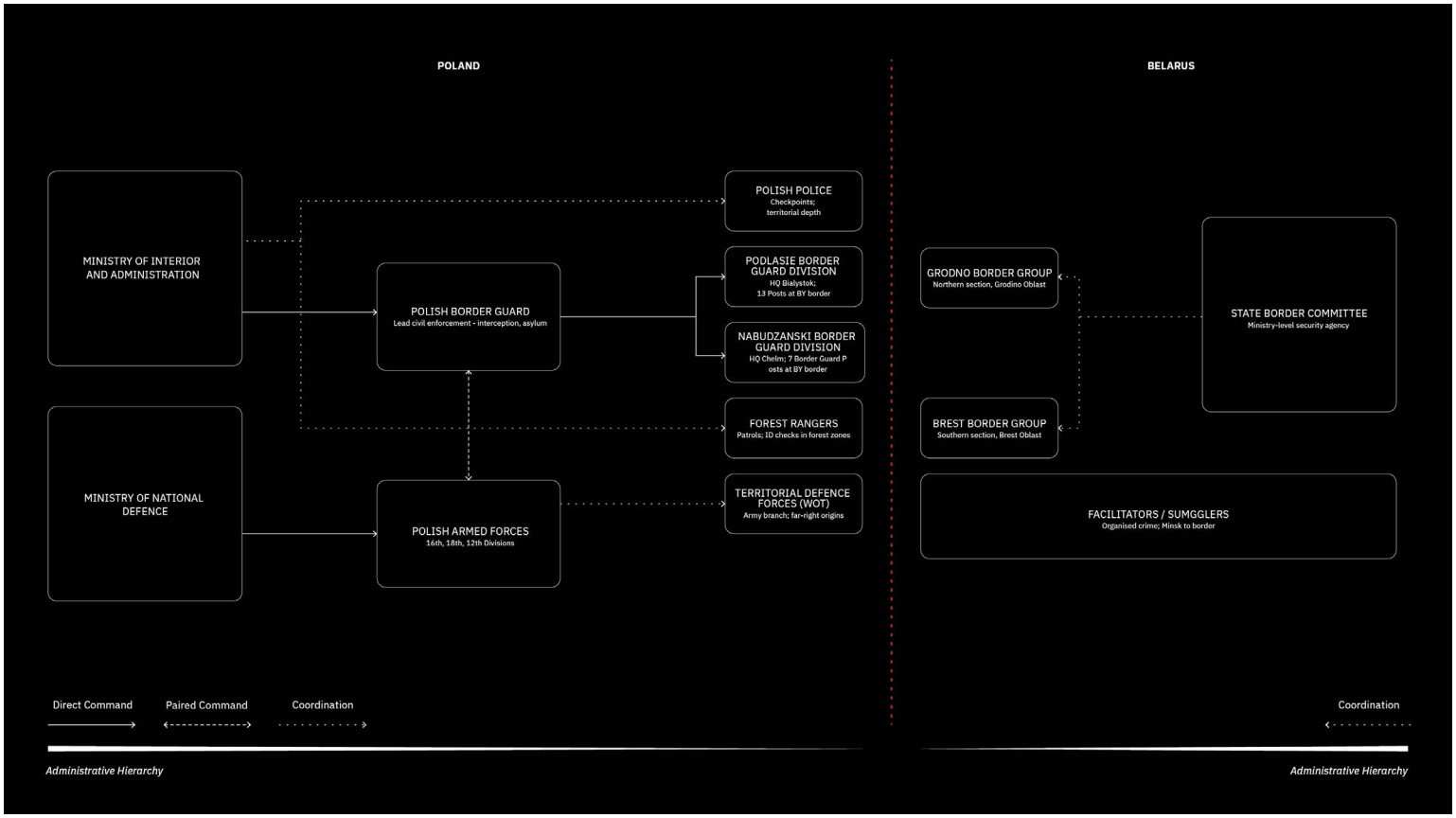


Figure 16. Diagram of the law enforcement and security actors operating at the Poland–Belarus border. Diagram by Border Forensics, 2026.

Third, we turn to border infrastructure and technologies that have either been erected or repurposed to govern migrants since 2021. These have increasingly striated the space of the forest with walls, sensors, towers, and surveillance. We particularly focus on the evolution of fences on both sides of the border through remote-sensing methodologies. We offer a unique perspective on the layered system of overlapping obstacles and surveillance technologies that forms the “Sistema” on the Belarusian side of the border, which has been expanded over recent years from its initial Cold War–era construction.



Figure 17. Satellite imagery analysis detected a doubling of the Sistema fencing layer along sections of the Belarusian side of the border in recent years. Satellite Imagery: Google Earth Image ©2019/2021 Maxar Technologies, and Google Earth Image.

The expansion of the border fence on the Polish side has not been incremental but exponential. During the Cold War, Poland was under Soviet influence but not formally part of the Soviet Union, while Belarus was a Soviet republic. Compared to the Soviet side of the border, the Polish side had relatively little border infrastructure in place to prevent access or entry from the border with the Soviet Union. While the asymmetry of the border infrastructure persisted even after the fall of the Soviet Union, the independence of Belarus and the inclusion of Poland into the EU, the 2021 crisification of the border triggered a rapid reversal as Poland hardened its side of the border through a series of infrastructural developments, including a 186-kilometre-long and 5.5-metre-high metal fence combined with means of digital surveillance, partly funded by the EU. [17] As an officer of the Polish Border Guard described to us, the different components of the border infrastructure are operationally integrated: the physical barrier, electronic surveillance, and aerial monitoring are woven together into a system of detection, crossing prevention, and interception by law enforcement agents.

17 Some components of the border infrastructure were funded by the EU, while others were financed through Poland's national programmes. Due to specific legislative provisions, not all elements were subject to public tender procedures, making it difficult to systematically determine which sections were financed by EU funds and which by national funds. Throughout the text, we refer to contracts or tender documents where these are available.

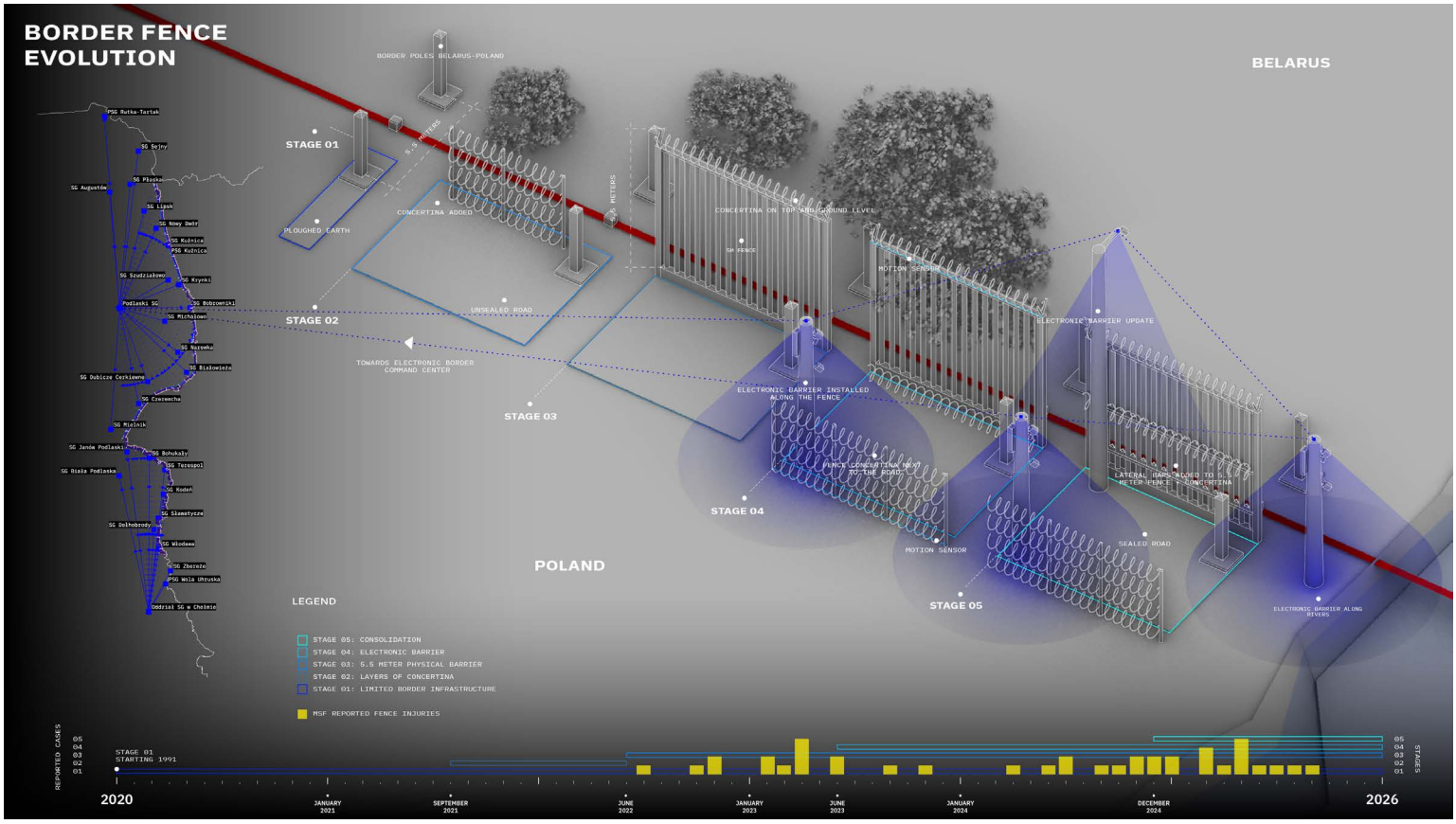


Figure 18. This illustration traces the phased construction of Poland's border barrier: from the initial razor-wire fence erected in 2021, to the 5.5-metre steel wall completed in June 2022, to the electronic surveillance components added in 2023, and subsequent layers of reinforcement. Below, the phased construction of the border infrastructure is mapped against fence-related injuries reported by humanitarian and medical organisations along the route. Illustration by Border Forensics, 2026.

Border infrastructure is not simply overlaid onto the natural landscape, but actively reorganises it, enlisting the geophysical characteristics of its environment into the architecture of enmity.[18] In 2025, our research team visited the Bug River section of the Polish–Belarusian border with the Border Guard. The Bug River forms approximately 178 kilometres of the international border between Poland and Belarus and constitutes the southern section of the bilateral frontier. Unlike the northern section, where a steel border barrier has been constructed, along the river there are only concrete poles, cameras, and lights mounted high above. When we asked the commander about the absence of a metal barrier, the officer replied: "We don't need it, the river does the work of the fence."

18 P. Teunissen, "Infrastructures, Riverscapes, and the Governance of Mobility: The Evros/Meric River and the Infrastructuring of Nature," Antipode 57, no. 2 (2025): 691-713.



Figure 19. Electronic barrier along the riverine sections, with the Bug river on the left, visited by the research team together with representatives of the Janów Podlaski Border Guard Post in October 2025. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, October 2025.

Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates how the architecture of enmity generates hierarchical positions and dispositions for the different actors within it. As a result of this architecture and the law enforcement practices it enables, many migrants remain trapped in the borderlands and exposed to violence for extended periods of time, while this space has been made inaccessible to the support and oversight of civil society actors.

Chapter 3: Mechanisms of Violence

In the third chapter, we analyse the different and recurrent forms of violence that emerge from migrants' encounters with law enforcement agents, border infrastructure, and the environment. These human and non-human entities are enmeshed in a dense field of interactions which leads to the recurring outcome of harm inflicted onto migrants – what we describe as *mechanisms of violence*.[19] As migrants attempt to cross the Polish–Belarusian borderlands, the forms of harm they experience are combined and accumulate in their bodies and experiences.

This chapter's analysis draws on the qualitative insights generated through our fieldwork, and on data gathered by activist and humanitarian organisations during their interventions over several years. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, we coded 151 testimonies of migrants gathered remotely by We Are Monitoring (WAM) between July

19 We understand mechanisms as identifiable web of relations in which the combination of similar processes, practices, and events generate similar outcomes – in our case violence/violation. Our understanding of mechanisms builds on a vast literature in the social sciences, for overviews see S. G. B. Johnson and W. Ahn, "Causal Mechanisms," in The Oxford Handbook of Causal Reasoning, ed. Michael R. Waldmann (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 363-85; P. Hedstrom and P. Ylikoski, "Causal Mechanisms in the Social Sciences," Annual Review of Sociology 36 (2010): 49-67.

2022 and December 2025. We further used aggregated medical data of 226 patients and field observations collected by Doctors Without Borders (MSF) between 2023 and 2025. Lastly, we received twenty-seven testimonies from an anonymous humanitarian organisation active in Belarus, which gave us an insight into the violence inflicted by Belarusian authorities.[20] Combining the analysis of these sources with official statistics allows us to develop a quantitative understanding of the patterns of violence inflicted on migrants as they attempt to cross the Polish–Belarusian borderlands.

20 The organisation has requested to remain anonymous, citing concerns over surveillance, legal reprisals, and restrictions targeting humanitarian organizations in Belarus.

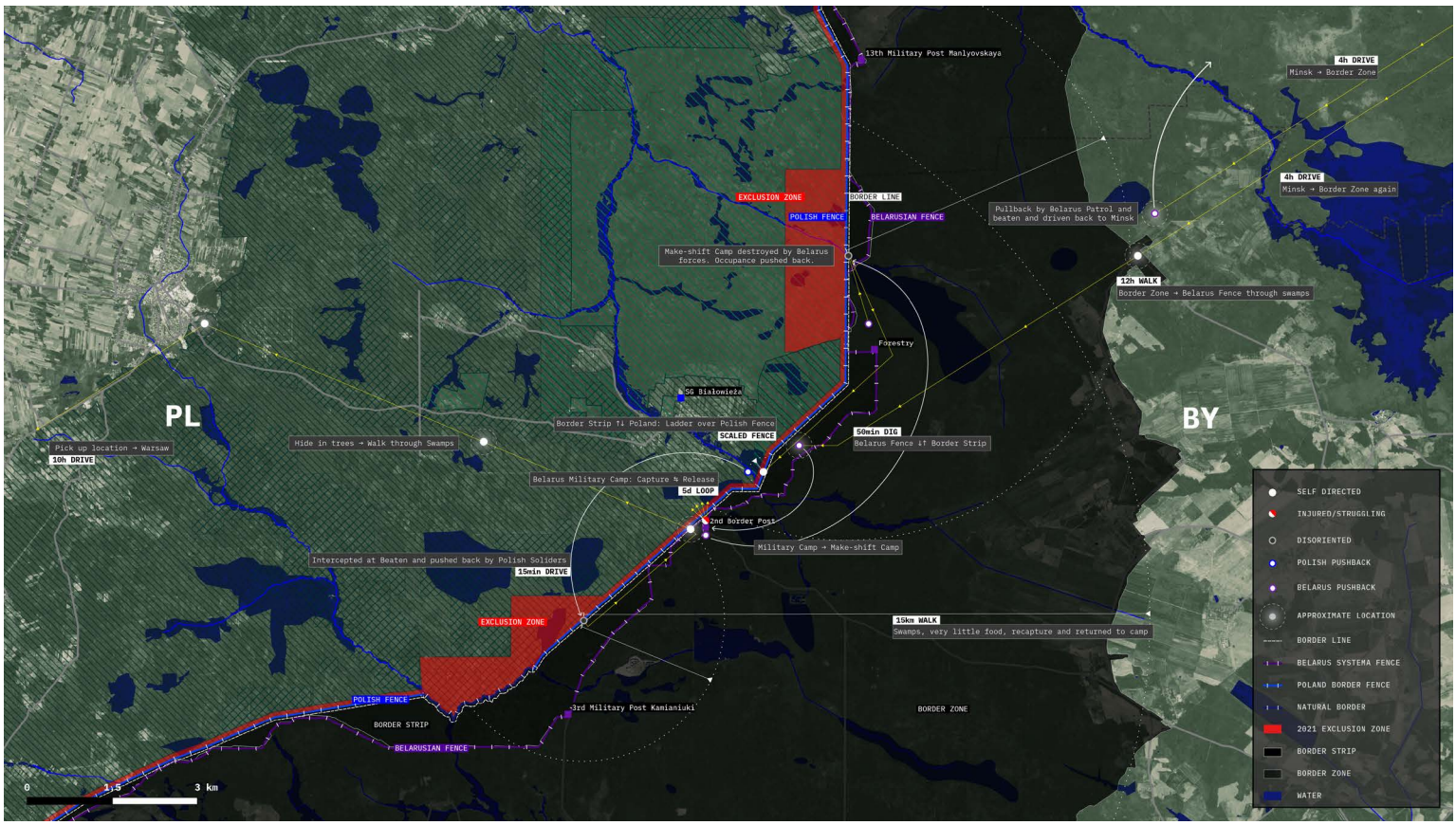


Figure 20. Map of Bashir's journey through the Polish–Belarusian borderlands, documented by We Are Monitoring. The map illustrates how Bashir was subjected to successive cycles of forced entry into Poland followed by pushbacks by Polish authorities to Belarus. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

We begin the chapter by discussing one particular migrant testimony, that of Bashir, which offers a striking example of the different forms of harm migrants are subjected to and the way they are experienced cumulatively. Bashir described how in Belarus two soldiers approached him and his fellow travellers "They had batons, these black sticks. They started to beat us, hit, hit." Then, after spending several days in the Belarus borderland, he crossed into Poland, but was swiftly intercepted by law enforcement

agents, beaten, pepper-sprayed, and pushed back. Abandoned in the rain on the Belarusian side of the border and unable to see, he recalled, "I sat on my knees and that's it. I was tired." The picture that emerges from this and other testimonies we analysed systematically is harrowing, and reveals practices of violence and violations of rights by both Belarussian and Polish law enforcement agents that are not isolated but systematic and widespread.

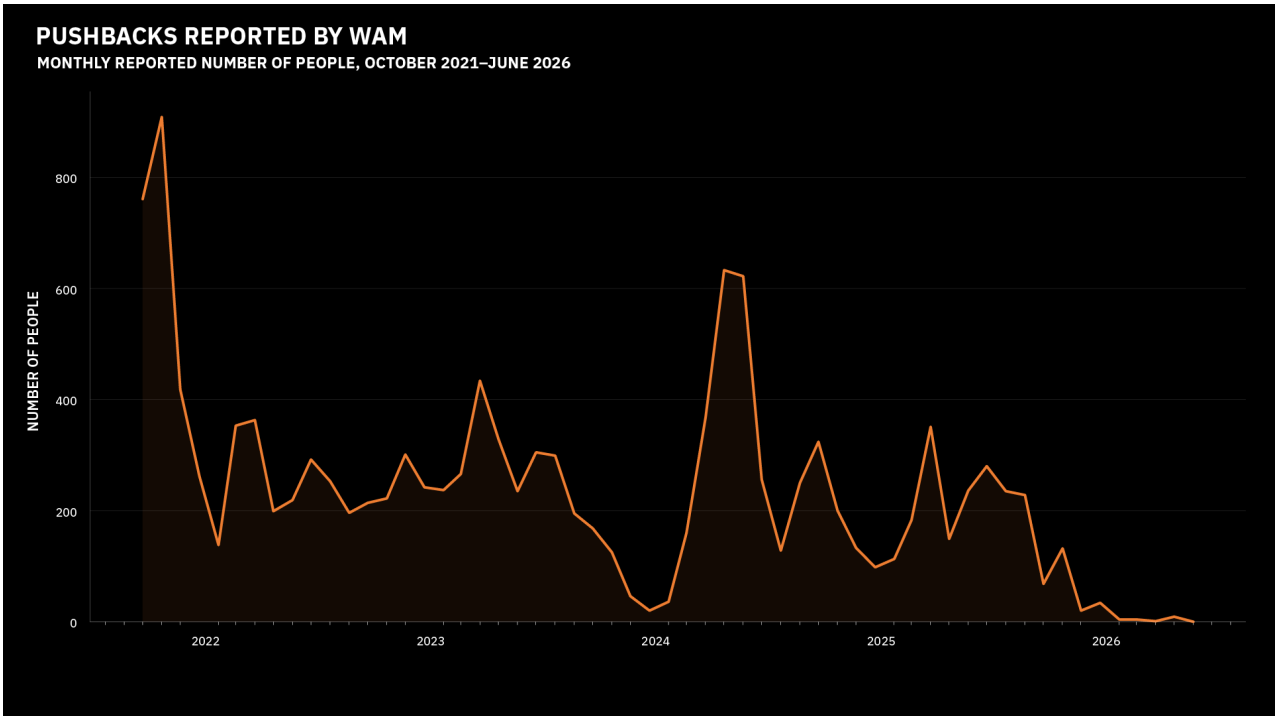


Figure 21. Monthly number of people reported to We Are Monitoring (WAM) as having experienced pushbacks from Poland to Belarus, October 2021–June 2026. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

Migrants attempting to cross the border frequently remain trapped in repeated cycles of pushforward by Belarusian agents and pushback by Polish agents. During these cycles of forced im/mobility, migrants are subjected to multiple and repeated forms of violence, which include beatings, destruction of such belongings as phones and identity documents, and different forms of verbal and physical humiliation.



Figure 22. Photographs of destroyed migrants' phones left in the forest after a pushback in 2024, taken during field research with the Egala Association. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, 2025.

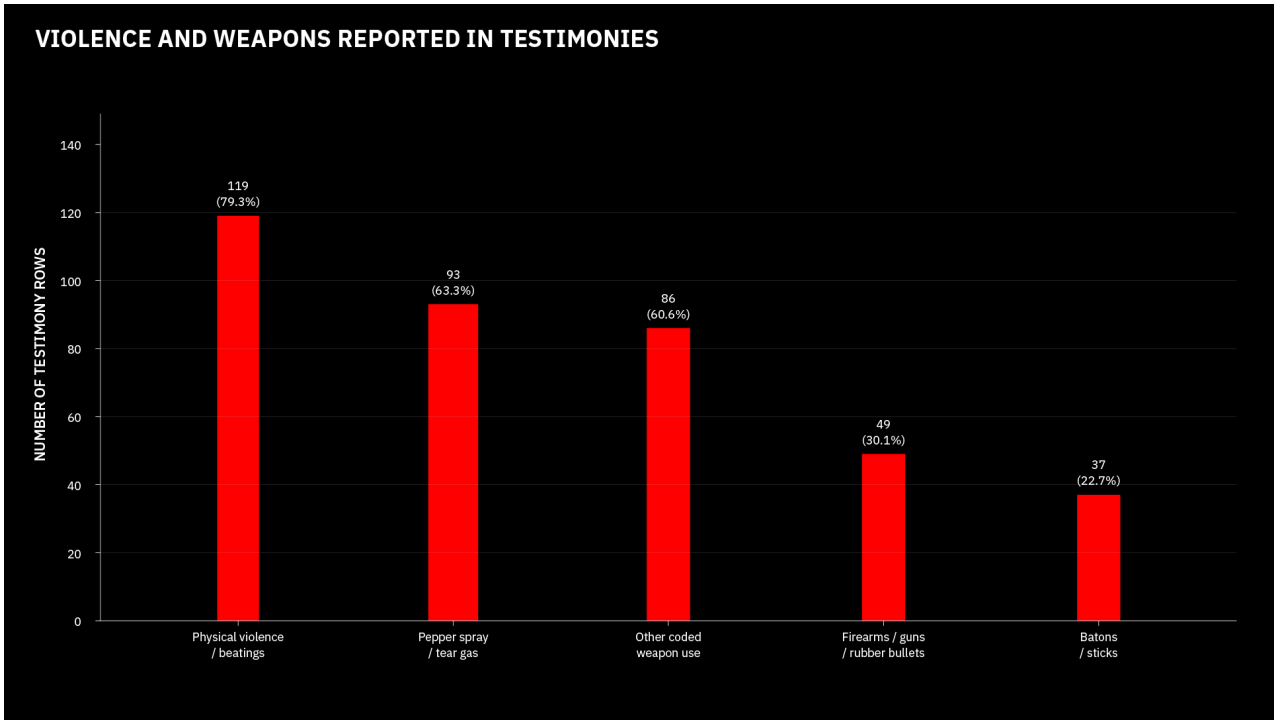


Figure 23. Reported beatings or other physical violence in We Are Monitoring (WAM) testimonies. WAM collects testimonies from individuals who have experienced at least one pushback, through semi-structured online interviews conducted with interpreters. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026. [21]

21 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

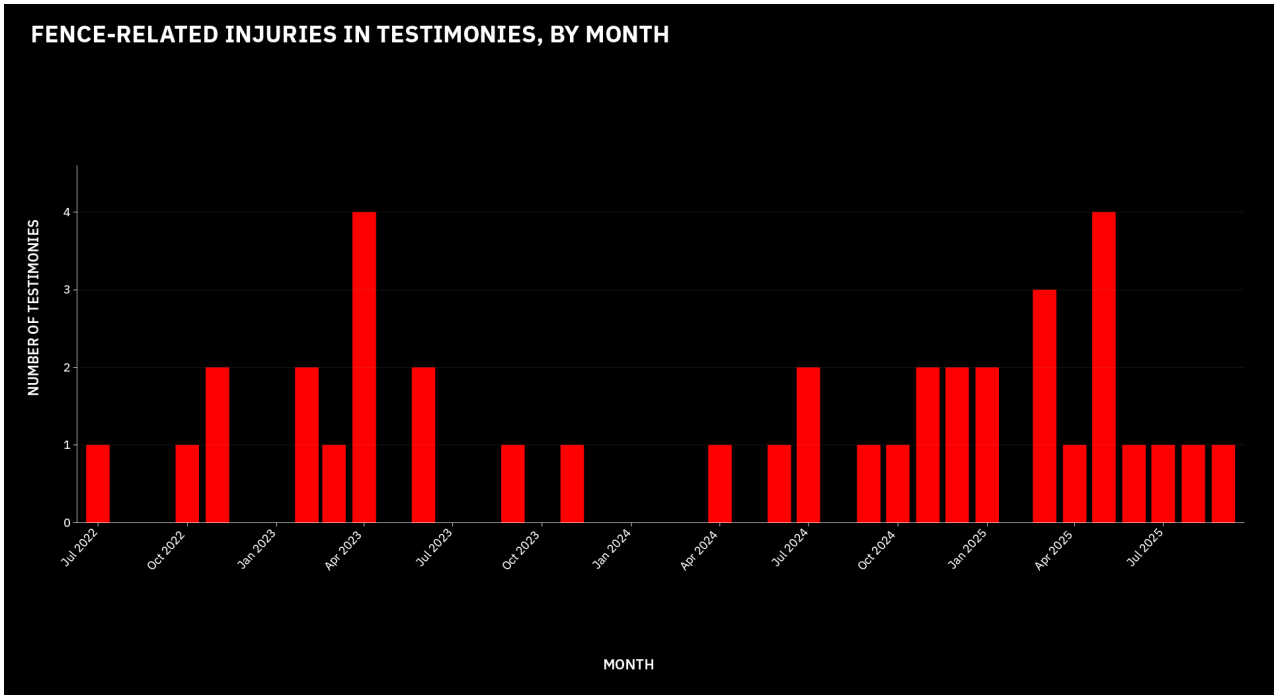


Figure 24. Number of testimonies mentioning fence-related injuries, based on We Are Monitoring (WAM) testimonies. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.[22]

22 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

The violence migrants are subjected to goes beyond the violent and cruel treatment inflicted by law enforcement agents; it also extends to harm inflicted by the border infrastructure and the environment, all of which operate in both direct and indirect ways. The fear of being subjected to direct violence by law enforcement agents leads migrants to attempt crossing the border in more remote areas of the forest where they face greater risks – an indirect harmful effect of direct violence. Likewise, border fences frequently cause deep lacerations and orthopaedic injuries, such as broken limbs and spine injuries, for those who attempt to climb over them. In turn the infrastructure also slows down crossings, particularly for those who are less physically strong, resulting in longer times spent in the borderlands, which increases migrants' exposure to harsh environmental conditions and to further violence inflicted by law enforcement agents.

Our geostatistical analysis of the data sets we have gathered reveals that the effects of law enforcement practices and border infrastructure on the *spatiality* and *temporality* of migrants' movement across the borderlands play a fundamental role in modulating the migrants' exposure to *environmentally mediated harm*. Cold, humidity, rivers, dense forest, darkness, and uneven terrain do not become harmful – potentially lethal – in isolation from the pushback regime, but as an effect of border enforcement practices and infrastructure that prolong the time migrants spend in the borderlands and redirect them through more hazardous landscapes.

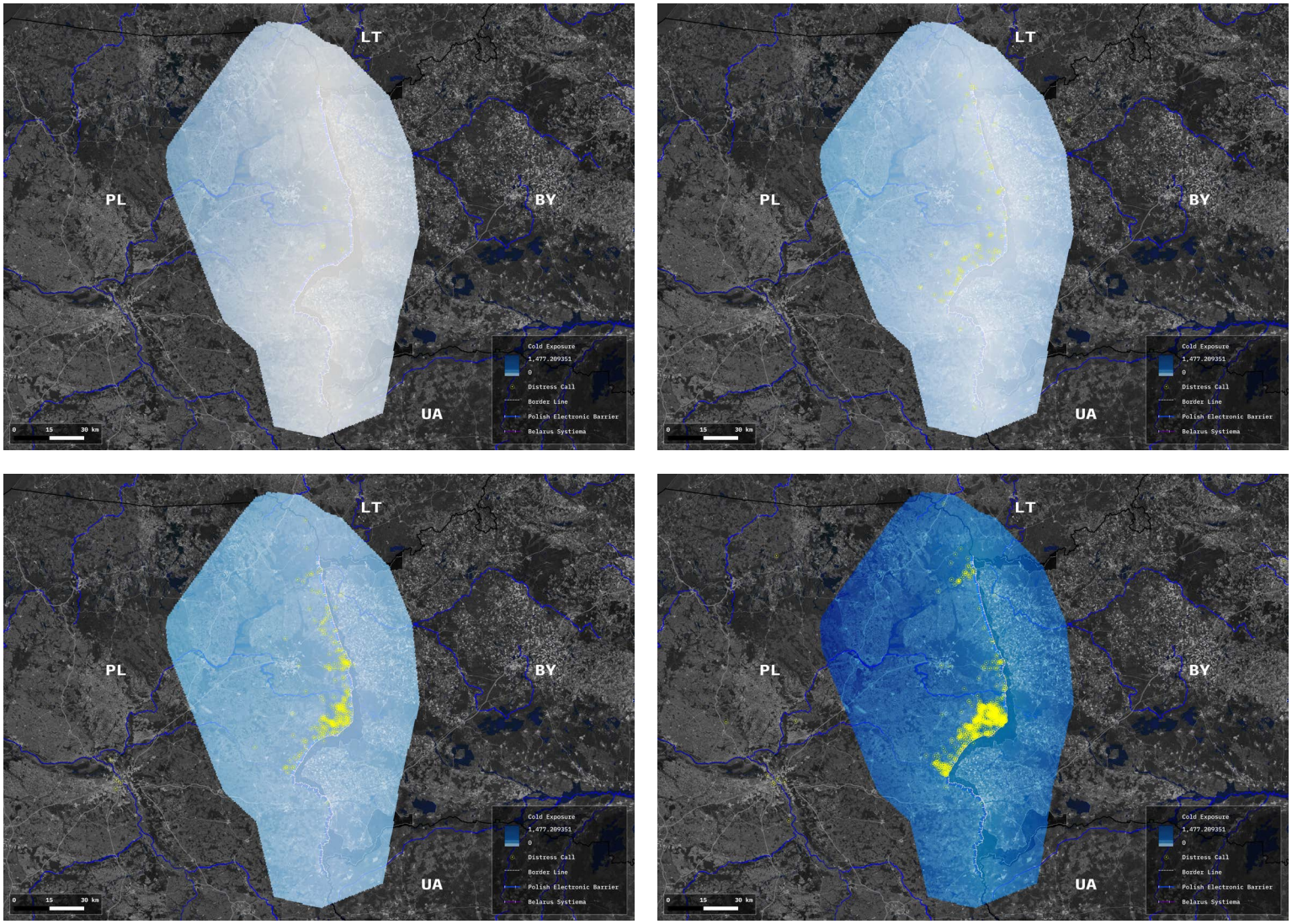


Figure 25. Modelled cumulative cold exposure and distress-call clusters along the Poland–Belarus border. This map overlays a scenario-based surface of cumulative cold exposure across the borderland with the spatial distribution of documented distress-call clusters. The blue surface represents the modelled intensity of cold exposure under the selected delay scenario, while yellow circles indicate distress-call locations/clusters. These layers show that exposure is produced not only by environmental conditions, but by the interaction between terrain, bordering infrastructures, and the forced duration of migrants' immobility or rerouting. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Ultimately, what emerges from our analysis in this chapter is that, in the trajectories of migrants crossing the borderlands, every beating, every cut from the fence, every pushback, every re-routing, every hour spent in the forest is experienced cumulatively, adding to exposure, exhaustion, and risk.

Chapter 4: Border Deaths and Disappearances

In the fourth chapter, we analyse the culmination of these combined forms of violence in numerous cases of death and disappearance. While most of the recorded deaths have indeed been related to environmental conditions – forests, rivers, cold – we demonstrate that, contrary to the arguments of state officials and prosecutors, there is nothing "natural" about these deaths, and that the natural environment of the Poland-Belarus border has been knowingly made lethal by state policies, infrastructure, and practices.

Towards this analysis, the chapter first mobilises critical forensic methods and combines multiple sources of evidence to reconstruct meticulously the chains of events for ten cases of migrant deaths that occurred between 2021 and 2025. These reconstructions are available in an annex to this report and on the investigations' mapping platform.



Figure 26. Photograph taken during fieldwork in March 2025 at the site where the body of Ahmed Al-Shawafi was discovered during a search initiated by local actors in 2022. Within a few metres of where his body was found, the team found backpacks with food and belongings. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, 2025.

We hone in on the death of Ahmed Al-Shawafi, a 26-year-old man from Yemen, whose body was found on 21 February 2022 in the wetlands

along the Leśna Prawa River, inside a nature reserve on the Polish side of the border. Between 10 and 15 February 2022, the group of approximately 35–40 people Ahmed was travelling with was repeatedly forced back and forth between the two sides of the Poland–Belarus border. On 15 February, seeking to avoid border control and being intercepted again, Ahmed and his group crossed the Przewłoka River on Polish territory. As they advanced slowly through the forested terrain, their movement constrained by waterlogged clothing and physical exhaustion, they came to cross the Leśna Prawa River. After crossing the second river, his travel companions described how Ahmed began to shiver intensely, cried out, stumbled, and collapsed on the ground. Despite his fellow travellers attempts to assist him, he lost consciousness and stopped breathing. The group attempted to turn on a phone and call for help, but there was no GSM signal in the area, so they left him to seek assistance. When they encountered Polish Border Guard officers, they provided them with Ahmed's location and requested an urgent response. Instead of providing this emergency assistance, the officers pushed back the group of migrants to Belarus in an undocumented manner. It was only days later that, thanks to the efforts of civil society actors, Ahmed was found, but dead.

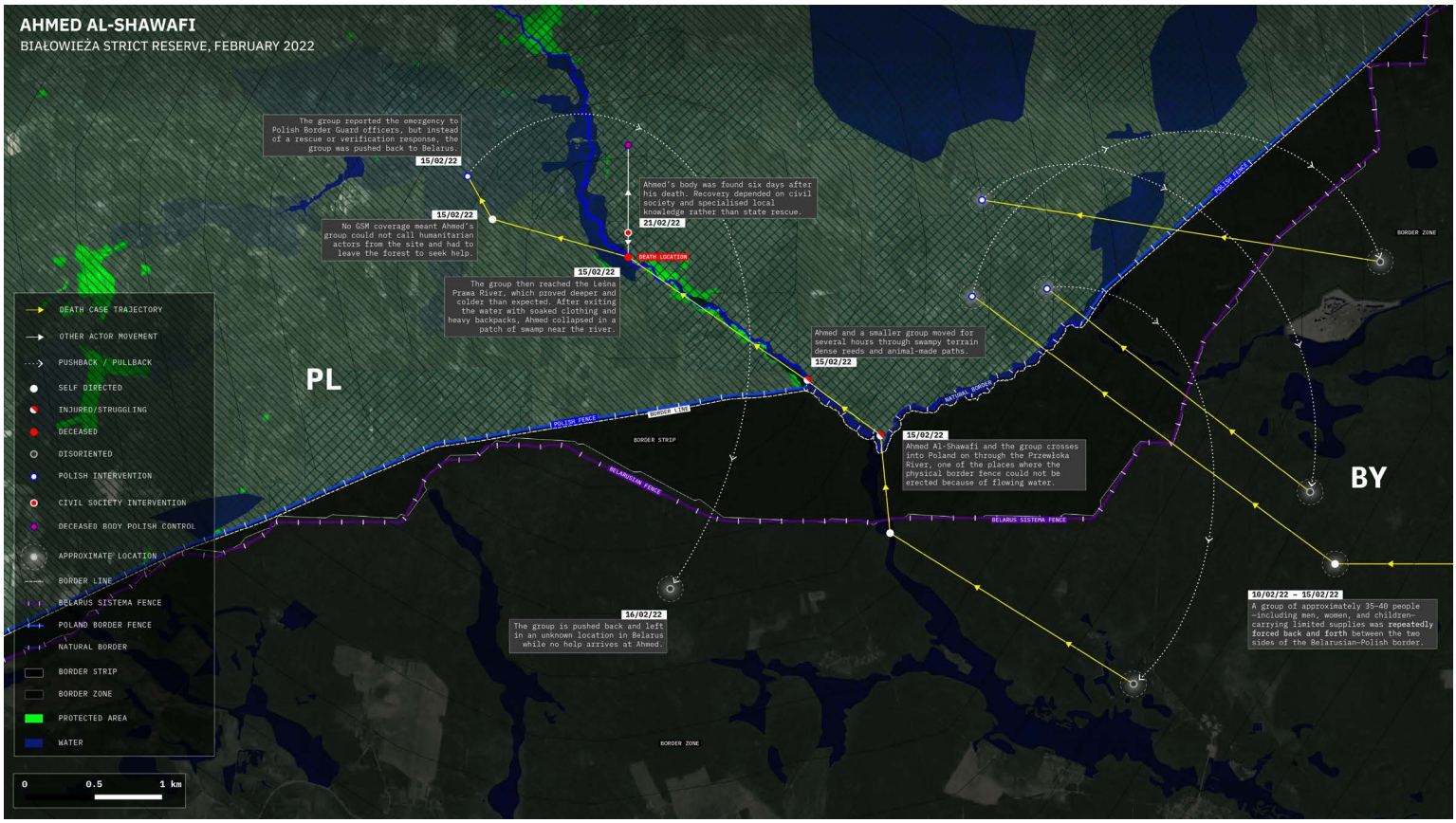


Figure 27. Map with the chain of events leading to the death of Ahmed Al-Shawafi. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

The circumstances of Ahmed Al-Shawafi's death provide a tragic example of the way different forms of violence converge and reinforce each other under these circumstances. His case is unfortunately not unique, and while each of the ten cases we reconstruct presents specific circumstances, we observe recurring mechanisms across them. Indeed, they involve different combinations of several forms of harm: first, violence inflicted by Belarusian and Polish law enforcement agents as migrants were forced back and forth across the border; second, the spatial effects of the border fortifications, which funnelled their movement towards more difficult terrain; third, forced exposure to environmental factors – in particular, the cold – that triggered hypothermia; fourth, the organised abandonment of migrants by state actors who disregarded their need for urgent assistance or prevented civil society actors from accessing them; and fifth, the subsequent disappearance or erasure of bodies, identities, and evidence. Through our reconstruction of these cases, the frequent physiological cause of death – hypothermia – can be seen in a new light: as the last, fatal moment in a series of state actions and omissions that together created conditions incompatible with survival.

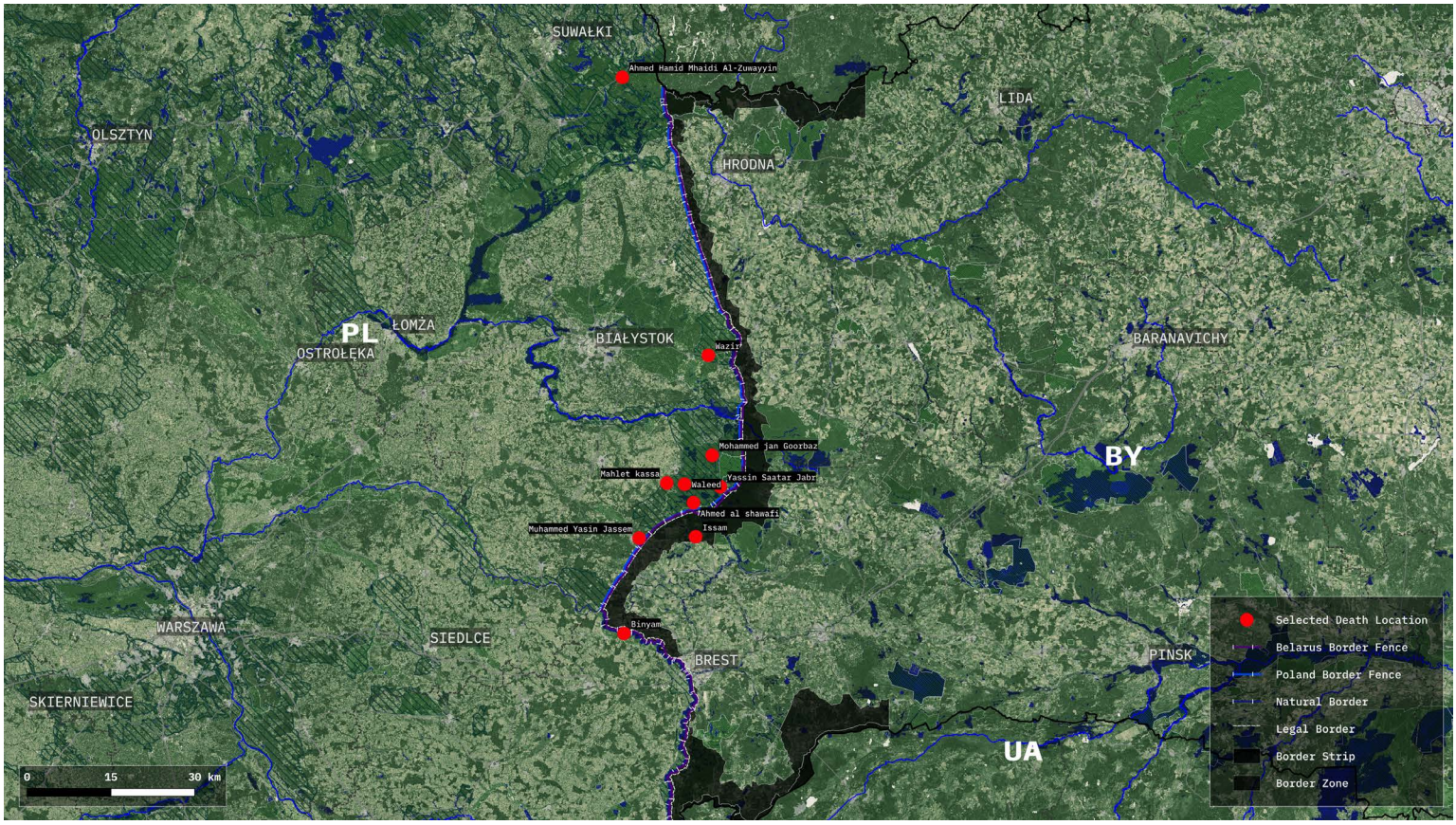


Figure 28. Map showing the locations of ten reconstructed death cases. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

The understanding of the lethal mechanisms that emerge from our ten case reconstructions serves as the basis for explaining the patterns we observe in our geostatistical analysis. Here, we rely on 102 verified and geocoded death records, combined with the spatial data layers presented in the previous chapters. Our analysis reveals that documented deaths are not randomly distributed across the borderland. They concentrate in and around forests, wetlands, rivers, protected nature areas, and exclusion zones – spaces where movement is slowed, visibility is reduced, and communication becomes fragile, further complicating the recovery and identification of human remains.

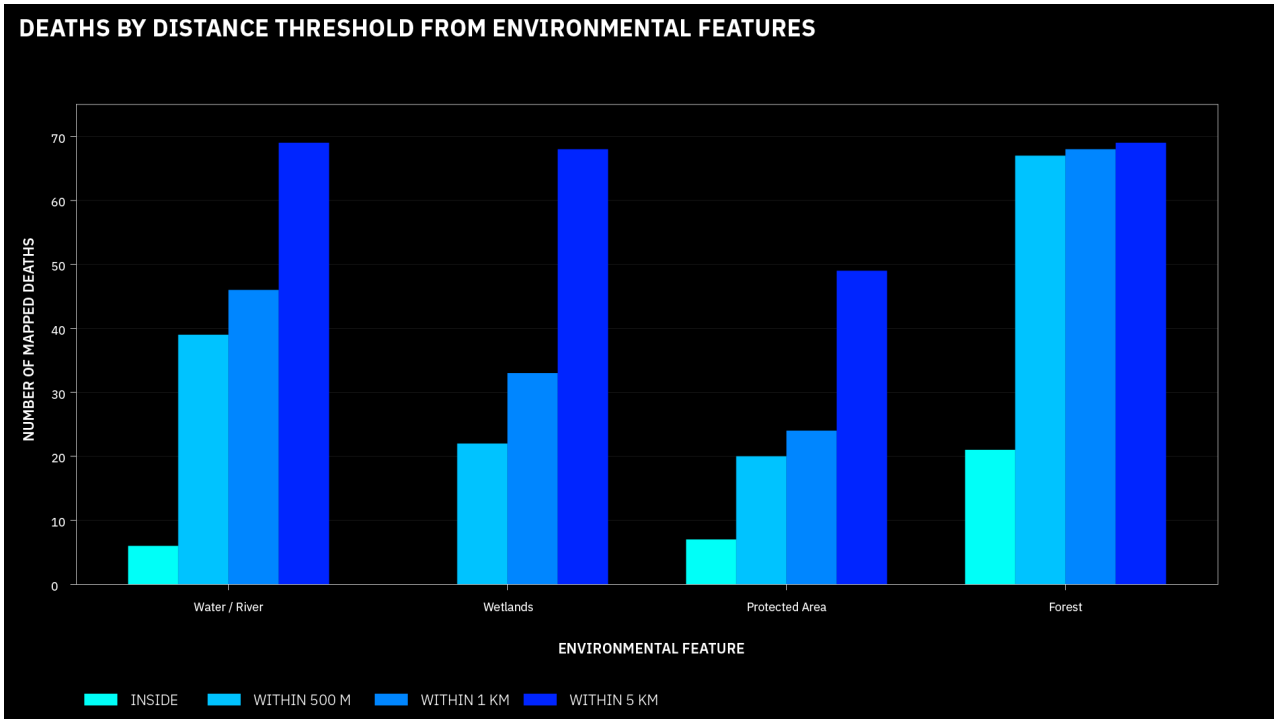


Figure 29. Bar chart showing the number of deaths occurring within a given distance of water, wetlands, or protected/restricted areas. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

We then compare the geography of documented deaths with that of migrant distress-calls to civil society actors. We show that deaths occur within the broader landscape of documented distress, but often at points where distress has become less communicable and less reachable. We further model the impact of the cold on migrants crossing the borderlands, thereby adding a temporal and physiological dimension to our findings. We demonstrate that cold becomes lethal not simply because temperatures are low, but because bordering practices impose time on the body and heighten the impact of the cold through waiting, hiding, repeated pushbacks, wet clothing, exhaustion, immobilisation, and the

absence or obstruction of rescue. Read together, the spatial and cold-stress analyses show how bordering practices transform environmental exposure into a predictable mechanism of death. Finally, by comparing our data set of death cases with our political timeline, we reveal that mechanisms of death were reorganised across successive phases of the border regime, indicating the role of political decisions in producing these patterns of mortality.

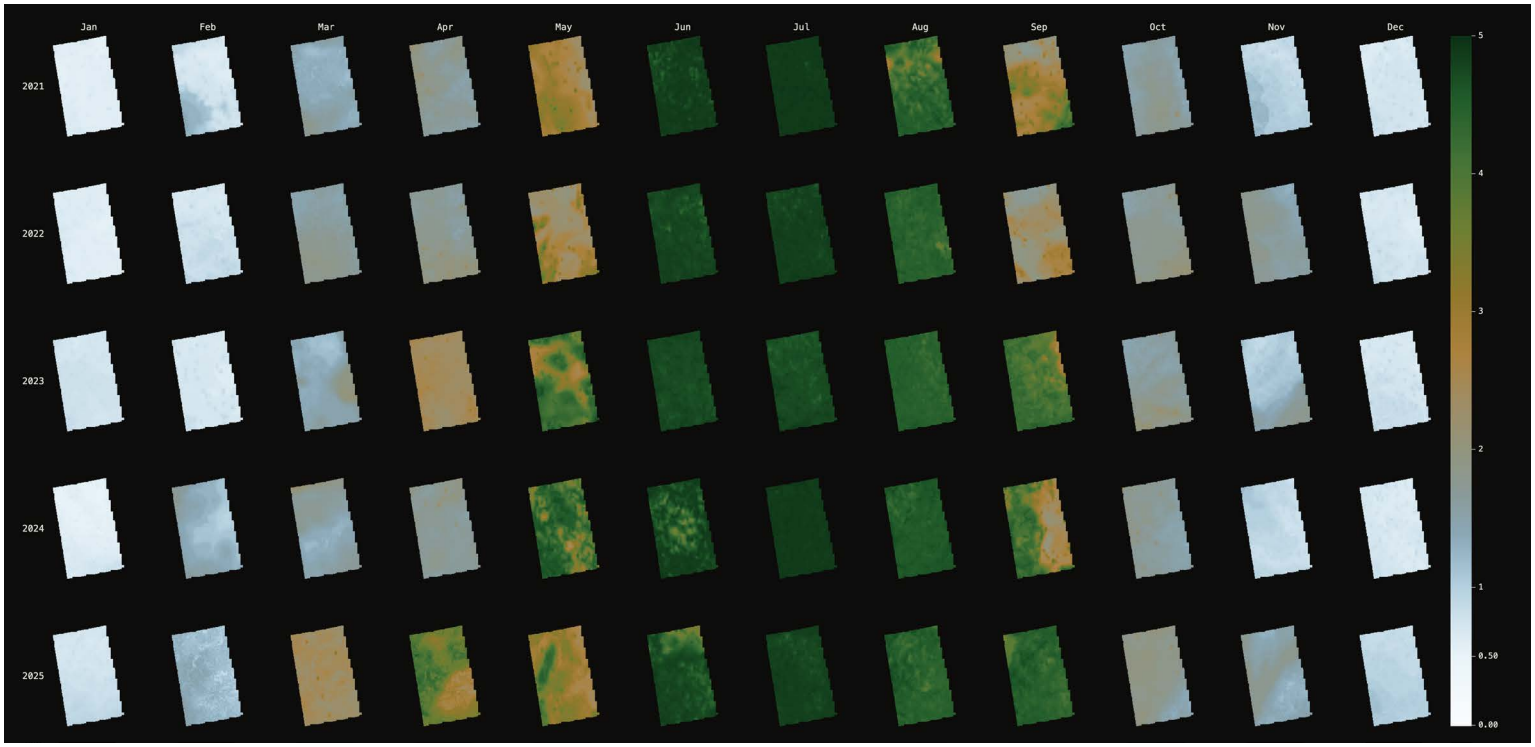


Figure 30. Map showing cold-stress scenarios, documented deaths, and distance to the Belarus border. It compares death locations with cumulative cold-exposure in relation to bordering practices. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

Finally, the chapter turns to the relation between deaths and disappearances. While five of the lethal incidents we have reconstructed were initially cases of disappearance which were later confirmed as deaths, we show through the analysis of a particular process of search for a missing person that disappearances have their own distinct dynamics, and constitute a form of harm in their own right for families. Indeed as a result of the lack of search mechanisms and recurring obstructions by the Polish state, families supported by civil society actors have been left to navigate administrative systems across borders, contact hospitals, police, morgues, detention facilities and humanitarian organisations, and live with the unresolved absence of a loved one. In this sense, disappearance extends the violence of the border beyond the space and time of the



Figure 31. Photograph of a sign marking an NN grave – an unidentified body – at the Bohoniki Tatar Muslim cemetery (known as a "mizar"), illustrating how disappearances at the border often leave no trace of who the person was. Photograph by Maciej Moskwa, 2024.

In turn, we analyse a broader corpus of 214 fragmentary records relating to potential border-related disappearances reported to the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR) between 2021 and 2024. By comparing the geography of potential disappearances to that which has emerged from our analysis of confirmed deaths, we assess the extent to which there may be more deaths than have been recorded. The spatial analysis of this database highlights that deaths and disappearances should not be understood as separate phenomena but as different outcomes produced through the same conditions and operational sequences at work in the pushback regime.

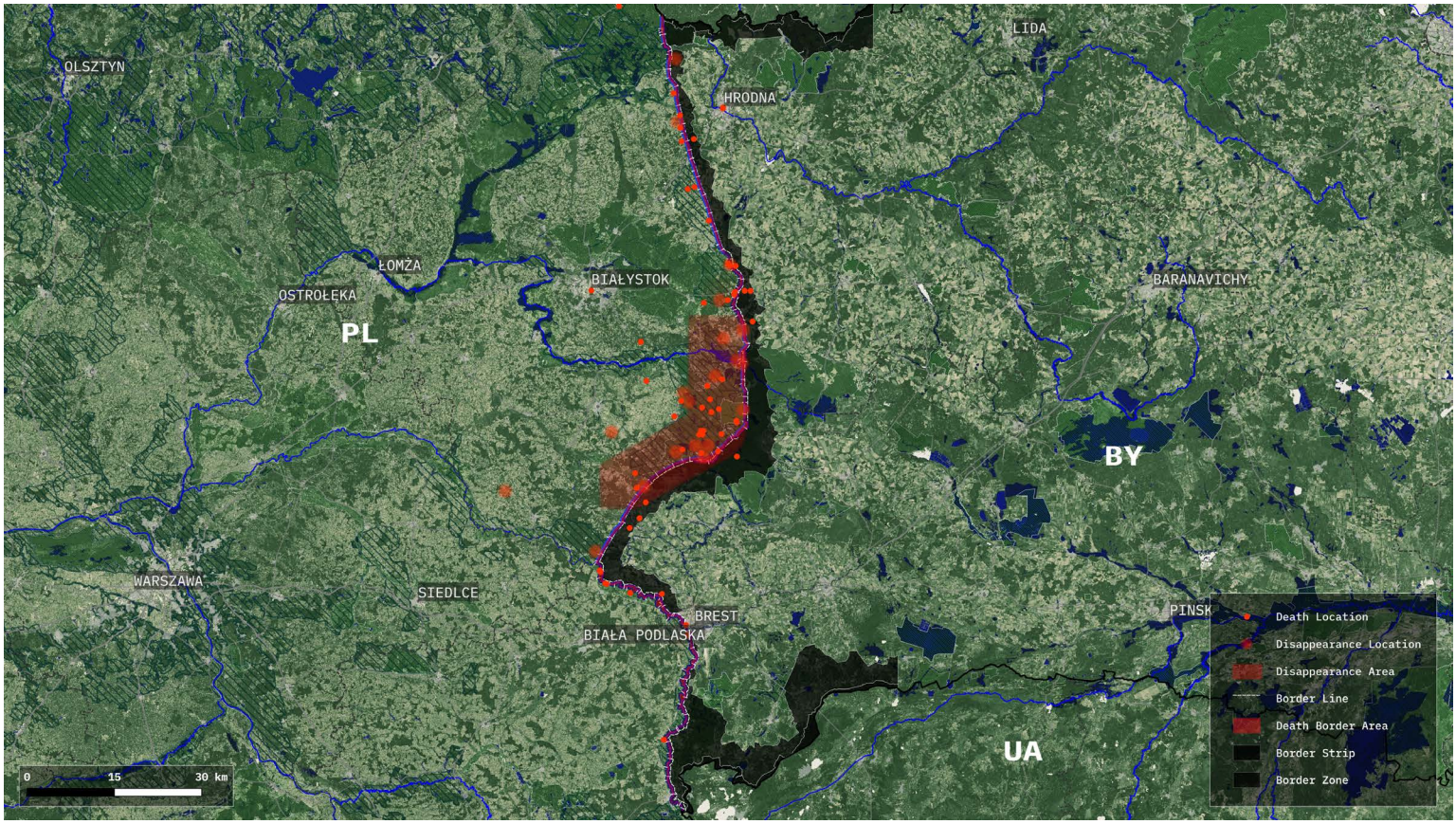


Figure 32. Map showing documented cases of death and disappearance at the border. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Overall, this chapter demonstrates that deaths and disappearances at the Poland–Belarus border are politically, spatially, and operationally produced. Environmental conditions matter, but they do not act alone. Forests, rivers, wetlands, cold, and snow become lethal through their incorporation into the pushback regime's mechanisms of violence which we analysed in Chapter Three. Our analysis of deaths and disappearances reveals a form of violence in which causality is displaced across time, terrain, institutions, actions and omissions. This has direct implications for attempts to seek accountability, which we address in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: The Consolidation of the Lethal Pushback Regime

In the fifth chapter, we ask how this pushback regime has been perpetuated over time despite its documented lethal outcomes and repeated attempts to seek accountability for violence and violations. Towards answering this question, we analyse the discursive, legal, and political processes at work in Poland and in the EU that have allowed this regime to be consolidated, and, in several respects, *normalised*.[23] Indeed, not only have different forms of violence and violations become the regular outcome of border management, but they have become increasingly accepted as socially, legally, and politically normal. This has occurred despite the change of government in Poland in 2023, from the right-wing

23 We understand *normalisation* as the combination of two processes related to the different meanings of this term. On one hand, it involves a particular event or practice that was rare and exceptional becoming so recurrent and frequent that it becomes the average – the *normal* in statistical terms. On the other hand, normalisation involves the same event or practice that appeared to transgress the limits of the social and legal *norms* of a given society becoming increasingly accepted, and even attributed positive meaning. See T. Hendriks. "On the surprising queerness of norms: Anthropology with Canguilhem, Foucault, and Butler". *Anthropological Theory*, 23(3), (2023): 235-254; M. Amir & H. Kotef. "In-secure identities: On the securitization of abnormality". *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 36(2) (2018): 236-254.

populist PiS government, which played a central role in the crisification of the border, to the broad pro-European centrist coalition led by Donald Tusk, who pledged during his electoral campaign to put an end to the violations of migrants' rights and deaths at the border.[24] Through different data and methods, this chapter traces a series of non-linear feedback loops between discursive, legal, and political processes and the practices of actors at the border, and the way these have co-evolved over time.

We first trace shifts in the discursive construction of migrants over time through a discourse analysis. While in Chapter One, where we discussed the process of crisification, we demonstrated how migrants have been constructed as a threat, here we reveal that the construction of threat did not recede after this initial phase but has been repeatedly reactivated around key political, legal, and border events. At the same time, our analysis reveals a progressive normalisation of violence. While negative framings of migrants remained high, the violence produced by the border regime became increasingly detached from public recognition as violence. By comparing the evolution of threat discourse with documented deaths and references to violence, death, suffering, and bodily harm, we identify a growing bifurcation between the material violence documented at the border and its visibility in public discourse.

24 Of many statements in this direction by Donald Tusk during his 2023 campaign, the following offers an example: "We need to address migration in a way that is consistent with our values and international law. Violence and forced disappearances of migrants are not only morally wrong, but also contrary to our responsibilities as members of the international community." Donald Tusk, Chairman of the Civic Platform, August 12, 2023, interview with TVN24. The changing discourse on migration of Donald Tusk before and after his institution as Prime Minister has been analysed in an internal analysis of communication strategies drafted by Tomasz Lisiecki under the coordination of Katarzyna Czarnota as part of the Oxfam-funded project "Disappearances at the Polish–Belarusian Border: Diagnosis of the Situation and Recommendations for Change," implemented by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights in 2023–2024.

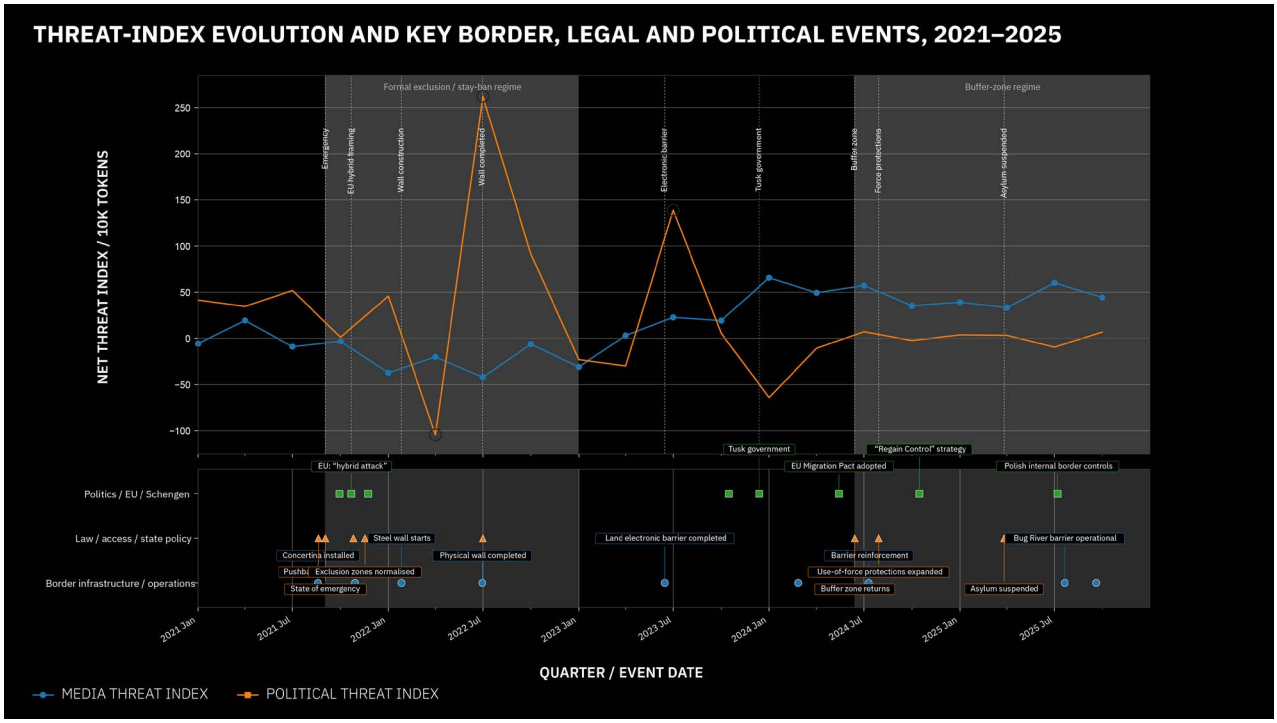


Figure 33. Media and political threat-index evolution with event-timeline data points, 2021–2025. The figure plots the media and political net threat indices together with the dated events. The lower panel distinguishes border and operational events, law/election/state-policy milestones, and civil society or regional interventions. The pattern should not be read as a mechanical causal relation between each event and each index value; rather, it shows how different moments contributed to the consolidation of the border regime: initial crisification in 2021, infrastructural sedimentation in 2022, electoral and security reactivation in 2023, and routinised media threat framing around border incidents and legal hardening in 2024–2025. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026..

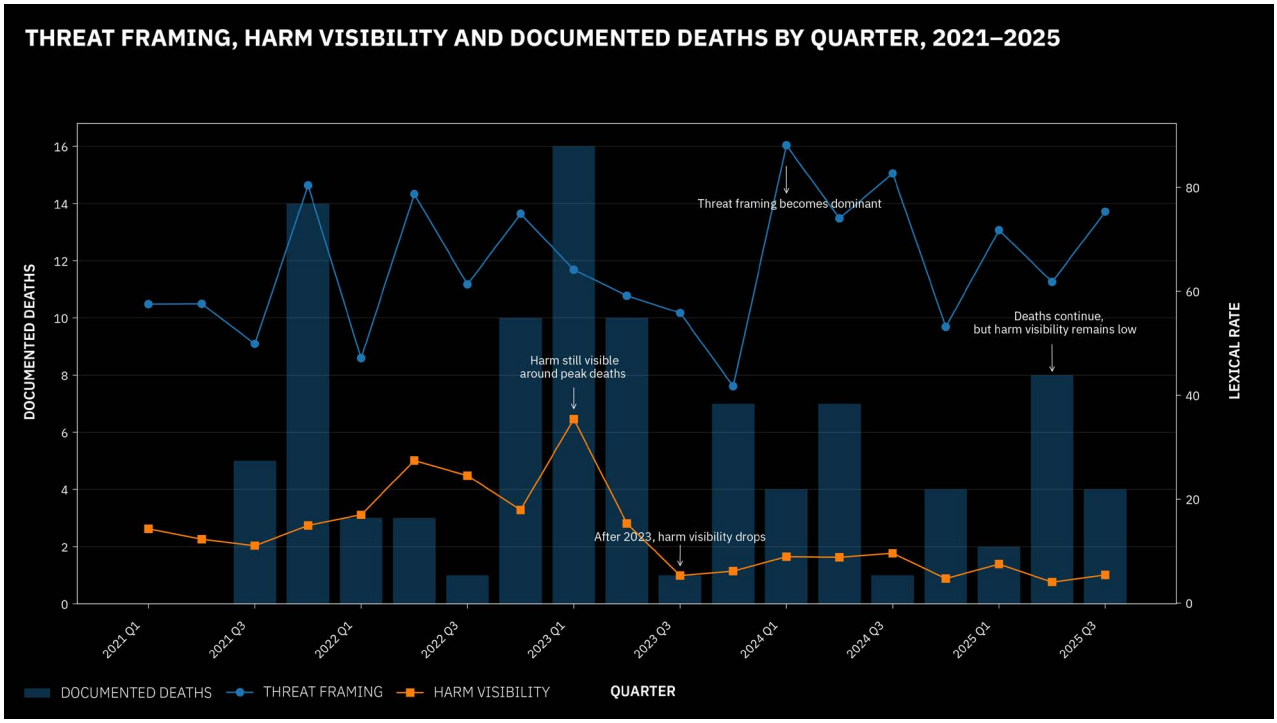


Figure 34. Threat vocabulary, harm vocabulary and documented deaths by quarter, 2021–2025. The figure compares quarterly documented deaths at the Poland–Belarus border with two lexical rates in the media corpus: threat vocabulary and harm vocabulary. Threat vocabulary refers to words associated with security, attack, pressure, crisis, aggression and instrumentalisation. Harm vocabulary refers to words associated with death, bodies, victims, hypothermia, drowning, disappearance and suffering. Both are normalised per 10,000 tokens. The figure does not show that violence entirely disappears from public discourse; rather, it shows a shift in balance: from late 2023 onwards, harm vocabulary becomes less visible while threat vocabulary remains high, even as deaths continue to be documented. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

25 Border Forensics, 2026.

Second, through legal analysis, we assess the outcomes of one of the essential avenues for Polish civil society for challenging the practices of pushbacks and violence: seeking accountability before both Polish and European courts. We show that, at both national and regional levels, the outcome has been mixed – some state practices have been sanctioned by courts, while others have not – creating the impression of a degree of accountability and respect for the rule of law. However, since even judgments that have upheld migrants' rights have not been implemented, while other cases have been pending for years, accountability has mostly been an illusion. Furthermore, we highlight the limits of legal language in relation to the forms of violence documented in this report. Indeed, in many of the harmful incidents we have analysed in the previous chapters, the interrelation between multiple human and non-human entities leading to them generates a fragmentation and dispersal of responsibility. As a result, when legal proceedings have been initiated, the responsibility of law enforcement agents has been evaded. Together, this has produced a condition of impunity behind a simulacrum of procedural accountability. Law and legal processes have failed to limit state practices that have violated migrants' lives, dignity, and rights.

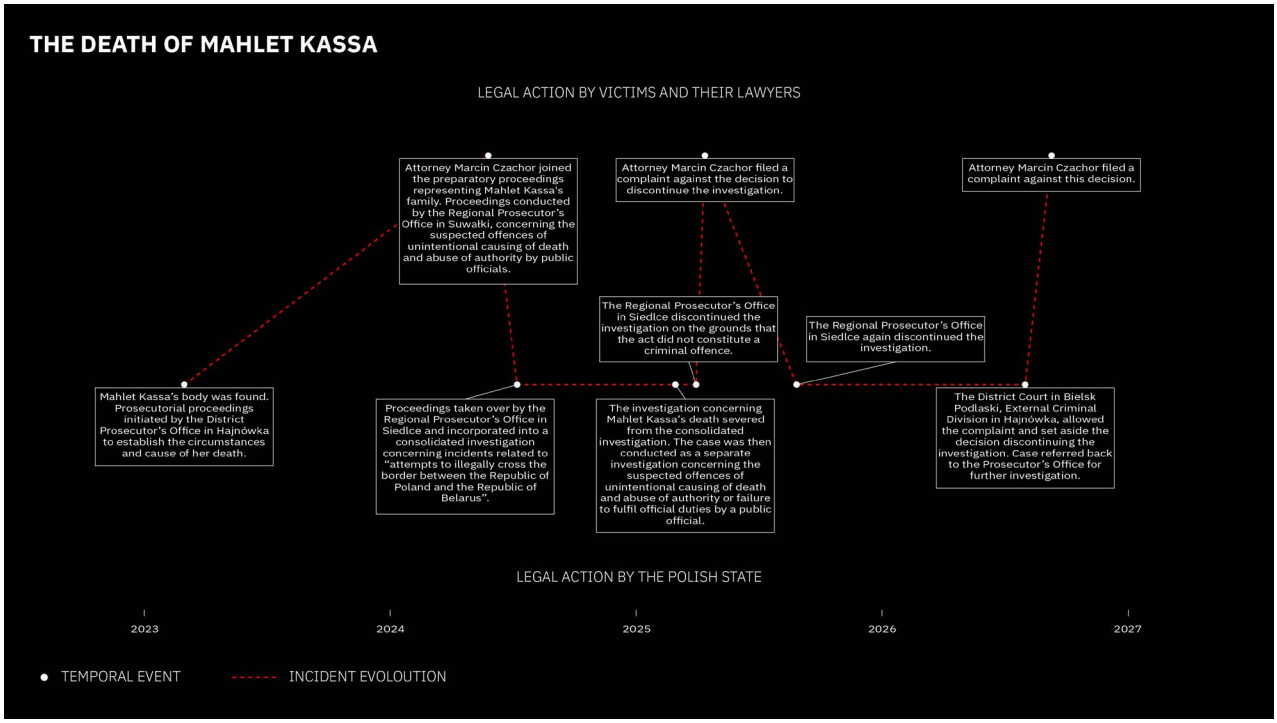


Figure 5.1. Timeline of the case of Mahlet Kassa. Timeline by Border Forensics, 2026.[25]

Third, through policy analysis, we demonstrate that, far from acknowledging the harmful outcomes of the pushback regime and reversing course, Poland has over time consolidated anti-migrant legislation and policies deployed in the name of countering Belarus's instrumentalisation of migrants. We trace this evolution in Poland, which, far from being reversed under the centrist coalition led by Donald Turks since 2023, has culminated during his government within the suspension of asylum in 2025. We further demonstrate that neighbouring EU states and institutions have largely supported Poland's hardline policy, and that the latter has partly served as the model for EU policy, particularly the Crisis Regulation included in the EU's Pact on Migration. What emerges from our analysis is that, to manage the contradictions and tensions generated by Poland's contravention of national, EU, and international laws, the Polish government has actively sought to remodel national and EU legislation on Poland's violent counter-instrumentalisation policy. While Poland's attempts to remodel national and EU law still leave important contractions between its pushback regime and fundamental international legal norms, this process of legislative change has played an essential role in consolidating and normalising violations of migrants' fundamental rights in the name of border security.

The analysis offered in this chapter points to actors and institutions, such as Polish and European prosecutors and judges, media actors, and politicians, who, despite being located far from the border, have become *implicated* in the violence and rights violations that migrants are routinely subjected to as they attempt to cross the Polish–Belarusian borderlands.[26] Indeed, the discursive, legal, and political processes we have analysed in Chapter One and Chapter Five have not only created the *conditions of possibility* for the perpetration of violence, but for the reproduction and consolidation of violent practices over time.

26 M. Rothberg. *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2019).

Conclusion

We conclude by summarising our findings and formulating key recommendations to end border violence across the Polish-Belarussian borderlands and respond effectively to the instrumentalisation of migration by non-European states. Our investigation demonstrates that Poland and the EU have fallen into a trap of their own making, which the Belarusian government scrupulously activated. The trap was set by politicians and media actors in Poland and the EU prior construction of migrants from the Global South as racial and security threats, the institution of legislations that seek to limit and criminalise their movements across the EU's borders, and the externalisation of border control to non-European states including Belarus. This has led to migrants being perceived as a threat and to Poland and the EU being dependant on Belarus to police it. As many other EU neighbouring states have done in the past, such as Turkey in 2020 and Morocco in 2021, in a time of tension with the EU, the Belarusian regime activated this trap to forward it's political interests and facilitated the movement of migrants towards the EU's borders. In response, neighbouring countries supported by the EU gave an extreme performance of a predictable script: instituting exceptional legislations that strip migrants of their rights, erecting border infrastructure, and enacting violent border control practices to prevent migrants' arrival on EU territory. The lethal pushback regime that has emerged and consolidated across the Polish–Belarusian borderlands in particular since 2021 has acted as a laboratory for, and a paradigmatic example of, the undermining of human rights norms, and specifically the rights of refugees enshrined in the Geneva Convention. If the instrumentalisation of migrants' lives by the Belarusian government is appalling, it could only be effective because of the prior conditions created by Poland and the EU –the construction of migrants as threats, the absence of legal pathways for most migrants of the Global South, and the externalisation of border control to non-European states. Poland and the EU's militarised response to the effects of Belarus' tactics has only heightened the structural conditions that enable such instrumentalisation. In turn, it is Poland and the EU's response to the constructed "threat" of migration that has constituted a real threat to migrants' lives and to the very foundation of democratic societies.

As of 2026, the Polish government has promoted a narrative of the successful closure of its border with Belarus.[27] Although 2026 falls outside the primary scope of our investigation, and it is too early for us to offer a detailed assessment of trends that are still unfolding, crossings of the Polish border have demonstrably decreased. However, this does not mean that the Belarus route has been permanently closed.[28] Civil society

27 Ministry of the Interior and Administration, "Minister Marcin Kierwinski: Zero Illegal Border Crossings from Belarus," Gov.pl, April 27, 2026, https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia-en/minister-marcin-kierwinski-zero-illegal-border-crossings-from-belarus.

28 We Are Monitoring, "Interactive Dashboards," last accessed 24 June 2026, https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/en/statistics/interactive-dashboards/.

actors and border guards have reported to us an increase in movement across the border with Lithuania, from where migrants continue to move into Poland. This suggests a re-routing of migrants' movements, indicating that individuals are seeking alternative entry points into the EU. Beyond empirically assessing Poland's claim to "success" in relation to migration dynamics, we believe the essential question the spectacle border security occludes is: *what has been the cost of five years of policies, infrastructure, and law enforcement practices aiming to impose border closure?*

Our report demonstrates that the pushback regime imposed by Poland has come at an exorbitant human cost, as the lives and rights of migrants have been systematically violated, and these practices have culminated in 102 recorded deaths and numerous disappearances. State policies, law enforcement practices and infrastructures have combined with the environment to create what migrants have called a "death zone". We further reveal a series of feedback loops linking practices at the border with discourses, policies, legislations, and jurisprudence at the national and EU scales, in a way that has been mutually reinforcing and evaded accountability. The result has been the consolidation and normalisation of the lethal pushback regime, and the institutionalisation of rightlessness. Beyond the cost to migrants and their families, Poland and the EU's policies pose grave risks for their societies and polities. The militarised violence and stripping of fundamental rights targeting migrants may easily spread to other segments of society. While migrants seeking protection do not raise any serious security threat for Poland or the EU, the undermining of fundamental norms of human dignity, rule of law, and human rights does.

On the basis of our analysis, we formulate key recommendations to end border violence across the Polish-Belarussian borderlands and respond effectively to the instrumentalisation of migration by non-European states.[29]

29 Several of the following demands are developed further in C. Heller et B. Kasparek, "Towards a European pact with migrants, Part Two", *Open Democracy*, 2020.

In particular, we call on Polish and EU politicians, but also courts of law, media outlets, construction and surveillance technology companies, citizens and non-citizens, according to their different responsibilities, to:

- → End the construction of migrants as threats, cease relating migration to ongoing geopolitical tensions, and adopt bold policies aimed at ending all forms of racism.
- → End all political and economic relations that destabilise the Global South, leading to large-scale involuntary migration, and adopt policies oriented towards global justice.
- → End and reverse legislations and jurisprudence that undermine the rights of migrants and refugees, acknowledge the enduring reality of migration, and offer legal pathways for migrants to safely access EU territory and seek protection.
- → End the extraordinary deployment of law enforcement agents and the militarisation of the borders of the EU, dismantle and cease funding and constructing border infrastructure and surveillance systems that harm migrants- and invest instead in social and redistributive policies for everyone living in Europe.
- → End the impunity for the violations of migrants' rights.
- → End the outsourcing of border control beyond the EU and cease supporting authoritarian regimes.

In turn we call on Belarus to:

- → End the instrumentalisation of migrants and the violations of their lives and rights by law enforcement agents.

These demands are ambitious, and the direction they point to is clearly at odds with the current political tendencies in Poland, in the EU, in Belarus and beyond. However, the dangers of fear as a political affect have long been demonstrated, and in particular the way it's spread can undermine the human capacity for thought and political action.[30] The counter-instrumentalisation governance of Poland and the EU has demonstrated its dire implications for migrants and for democracy, and it's inability to address

30 H. Arendt. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (New York: Meridian Books 1971).

the conditions that make the instrumentalisation of migrants by non-European states possible. What is demanded today of all actors involved is the demonstration of the *courage* to embark on this challenging path. It alone could lead to durably preventing migrants from being used as "weapons" by malevolent states and being subjected to violence and the violation of their rights. With the implementation of these measures, migrants seeking a better life and protection by crossing Europe's border could be seen as what they have never ceased to be: human beings with rights and dignity demanding recognition. While solidarity with Ukrainian refugees in Poland and the EU should not be idealised and appears to be wanning, Poland and the EU's initial response to their plight as they crossed Poland's southern border indicates that such a courageous response is possible.[31]

31 V. Hernes and K. Lukasiewicz, "Restrictive, Liberal, Selective or Universal? A Cross-National Analysis of European Countries' Policy Response to Forced Migrants from Ukraine," Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 52, no. 2 (2026): 343-366, DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2025.2565907.

As a first and essential step in this direction Poland and the EU should start by heeding the demands for accountability repeatedly voiced by the victims of border violence and their families, demands to which Poland and the EU have responded with a deafening silence for too long. Beyond states and European institutions, the actors and institutions – such as Polish and European prosecutors and judges, media actors, politicians – which we have identified as having contributed to creating the conditions of possibility for the violence and violations of rights migrants should also be held accountable – legally, politically, and morally – for the consequences of their actions.

In this spirit, we conclude this Summary with the demand for justice of the uncle of the late Mahlet Kassa, who died in the forest in February 2023 after Polish border guards failed to assist her.

“Even though Mahlet Kassa is no longer alive, we still cannot accept the lack of accountability. For us, this case is not closed. We are emotionally exhausted. Mahlet died because she was denied assistance. For me, that is unimaginable. We continue to demand at least a measure of justice. I think about her every day. We are worn down by helplessness. It cannot be right that she lost her life, that we know why it happened, and yet no one does anything about it.”

Seyoume Shashego, uncle of the late Mahlet Kassa



Figure 35. Portrait of Mahlet Kassa. Unknown Photographer, date unknown. [32]

32 Photo courtesy of Hope&Humanity Poland/ Facebook, as published in Gazeta Wyborcza (Białystok), accessed August 31, 2026, https://bialystok.wyborcza.pl/bialystok/51,35241,29522102.html.

METHODOLOGY

While we describe the specific data and methods used in each chapter, here we briefly present the emergence of this investigation and introduce the methodological challenges we encountered, along with how our attempts to respond to them have shaped the investigation's orientation.

Assembling a collaborative investigation

This report represents the culmination of several years of research, which has been led in different configurations. Katarzyna Czarnota, one of the lead researchers and coordinator of our fieldwork in Poland, has been involved in humanitarian support, human rights reporting, and research at the Poland–Belarus border since the beginning of the crisification of the border in 2021, before joining the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR). In 2023, HFHR initiated a collaboration with the investigative agency Border Forensics, aimed at documenting indirect forms of state violence at the Poland–Belarus border and generating evidence to support documentation, advocacy, accountability, and strategic litigation efforts.

In 2024, this initial collaboration led to the formation of a broader collaborative investigation, led by the Circumference of Violence (CoV) research project in partnership with the Infrastructuring Nature (IN) project and Border Forensics (BF).[33] The core team of researchers who have authored this report came from across these main partners: Katarzyna Czarnota, Charles Heller, Alessandro Mangione, Stanislas Michel Werner, and Peter Teunissen. Reem Mussa also contributed to several phases of fieldwork and analysis. Spatial analysis, remote sensing and cartography were led by Nico Alexandroff, Jack Isles, Rossana Padeletti, Samuel Chambers and Ee-Faye Chong. We have further sought to bring together a wide range of civil society actors and researchers, with the aim of fostering collaborative models of knowledge production across different forms of expertise. While the extensive network of people who have contributed to this report in different ways is detailed in the Investigation Team and Acknowledgements sections of the report, here we mention the main actors we collaborated with.

33 The Circumference of Violence (CoV) project is led by Prof. Dr. Charles Heller and based at the University of Bern. The research project, spanning from 2024 to 2028, adopts a comparative approach focusing a distinct situations of political tension and violence related to migration across the EU's external borders, of which the Polish-Belarus border is one. The aim is to not only to understand the practices of different actors at the border but also geophysical conditions as well as political and legal processes have shaped variations in modalities of border violence and their intensity. See https://circumferenceofviolence.eu

The Infrastructuring Nature (IN) project, is a collaborative project research project with Prof. Penny Koutrolikou, (National Technical University Athens), Dr. Joris Schapendonk (Radboud University Nijmegen), Dr. Peter Teunissen (University of Bern), and Georgina Choleva funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation. This project aims to understand the relationship between 'nature', border regimes, and the movement of displaced populations. This project investigates how 'nature' is incorporated into regimes of border control and how in turn, 'nature' influences these regimes. The project, which also focuses on several different borders, aims to map the way these environments have become violent spaces in 'migrants' trajectories. See https://infranature.org/

Border Forensics (BF) is a Geneva based agency mobilizing innovative methods of spatial and visual analysis to investigate practices of border violence. Border Forensics conducts research and carries out investigations with and in support of communities exposed to border violence – broadly understood as the different forms of harm resulting from the existence and management of borders, wherever such violence. Through its team mobilising cutting-edge and innovative spatial and visual methodologies, BF has been an essential partner in this investigation. See https://www.borderforensics.org/



Figure 0.1. Mapping the crisification of the border with local activists and residents. Photograph by Charles Heller, 2025.

The main civil society organisations that have contributed their knowledge to this platform for collaborative knowledge production, documentation, and accountability have been We Are Monitoring (WAM), Podlasie Volunteer Humanitarian Emergency Service (POPH), Egala Association (Egala), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR), Border Deaths Monitoring Group (BDMG) and Piotr Czaban – investigative journalist and creator of the Czaban Robi Raban channel. These actors have generously shared both the data and the knowledge they have generated over several years of activity.

Beyond Polish civil society actors, we have also collaborated with Polish researchers who contributed particular dimensions of research in which they had already developed considerable expertise. Maja Łysienia contributed to the legal analysis; Natalia Judźynska contributed historical analysis; Aleksandra Chrzanowska, Anna Kolberg, and Małgorzata Klemens contributed to the reconstruction and analysis of facts, as well as the mapping of events and documentation; the I-Claim Poland team, led by Aleksandra Grzymała-Kazłowska, Kseniya Homel, and Aleksandra Szkudlare, conducted the discourse analysis of this investigation; Eliza Kowalczyk, and Rafał Kowalczyk contributed to the deaths and disappearances analysis.

From fieldwork to methodology

While our aim of empirically investigating the dynamics of border crossing and border enforcement that generate different forms of state violence at the Poland–Belarus border was clear from the start, our methodological approach was not determined in advance. Instead, it emerged iteratively from successive phases of fieldwork that we conducted across multiple sites and over extended periods between 2021 and 2025, and from our exchanges with the various actors who interact at the border. In particular, we engaged with migrants and the families of missing and deceased migrants, civil society organisations and lawyers, law enforcement agents, biologists, and residents of the border region. Their knowledge, experiences, and interpretations played a central role in shaping both the evidentiary basis and the analytical framework of the investigation.

Migrants were recognised as experts by virtue of their lived experiences and were treated as active contributors to the production of knowledge. Knowledge was developed collectively, emerging from the experiences of migrants, families of missing persons, and families of those who died at the border, as well as from shared discussions and encounters. Many of these exchanges took place online, while others were organised through in-person meetings.

We collaborated closely with civil society actors, including by accompanying monitoring activities and participating in interventions to support migrants. We led a series of collective mapping encounters with activists, humanitarian actors, and other participants – such as biologists, wildlife experts and local inhabitants – who have become deeply engaged with the border region. Through the collaborative reconstruction of events, spatial transformations, and changing border practices, these sessions sought to assemble dispersed forms of knowledge and situate key dynamics of the border regime within a shared temporal and spatial framework. Additionally, we engaged with Polish civil society actors and Belarusian researchers in exile.

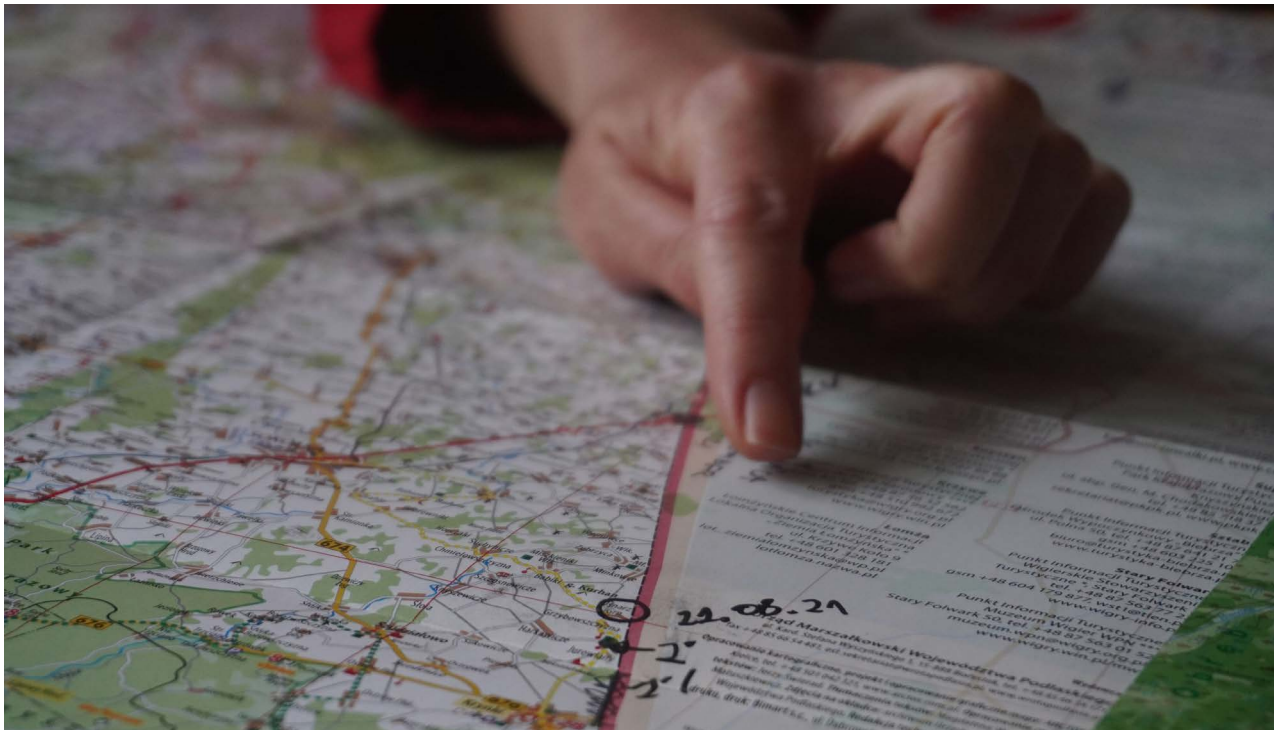


Figure 0.2. Photograph taken during fieldwork, showing a collective mapping session with activists tracing how the crisisification of the border unfolded, and how this in turn shaped law enforcement practices, migrant movement and injuries and risks. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, 2025..

An important dimension of our investigation involved fieldwork with the Polish Border Guard. During a three-day delegation with the Podlaski Border Guard Division and two visits with the Nadbużański Border Guard Division, we met with border guard commanders and border guard and military officers. We accompanied officers and military officials to the border zone, entered exclusion zones, and visited the operational rooms in Białystok and Chełm. During these visits, commanders gave official presentations about their work, sharing the challenges they faced and answering our questions, and we also had informal conversations with these state officials. Though these interactions were often carefully managed by public relations officials and human rights officers and were thus highly selective in terms of what was revealed and concealed, these visits provided valuable insights into the perspectives of state officials, revealing the practical realities and complexities of border enforcement and the meaning they convey to their practice.

Figure 0.3. One of our researchers speaking with military and Border Guard personnel at the Poland– Belarus border during a delegation visit. Photograph by Peter Teunissen

We did not conduct fieldwork in Belarus or engage directly with Belarusian border authorities, primarily due to security and access constraints. Nonetheless, by drawing on a range of data – including interviews with Belarusian citizens abroad, as well as OSINT methods – we were able to analyse the role of Belarusian authorities.



Our field visits and exchanges with multiple actors did not produce a single comprehensive perspective on the border. Rather, they exposed us to multiple, sometimes conflicting, forms of situated knowledge shaped by different experiences, positions, and relations to the border regime. Our aim has been to develop a methodological framework capable of assembling dispersed forms of knowledge and evidence into coherent accounts of the dynamics of the border and of border violence in particular.

Towards this effort, we drew on the transdisciplinary methodology developed over the last fifteen years within critical forensic research concerning border violence in different contexts.[34] This methodology has increasingly combined different methods in ways that cut across disciplinary boundaries, the qualitative–quantitative divide, and different spatial and temporal scales. In particular, we engaged in the cross-referencing of multiple sources of evidence to produce forensic reconstructions of particular lethal incidents; ethnographic border regime analysis, through which we aimed to account for the practices and logics of the different actors who interact across and constitute particular borders; remote sensing and geostatistical analysis of patterns of practices and violence; and political, legal, and discursive analysis to understand the processes and conditions that have enabled border violence.

This transdisciplinary approach to critical forensic research has allowed us to respond, in a unique way, to methodological and political problems that were inextricably linked in the course of this investigation.

34 E. Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2017).

Specifically, the challenges concerned our capacity to fulfil two distinct but interrelated aims: on the one hand, empirically accounting for border violence across the Polish–Belarussian borderland; and, on the other hand, supporting practices that might help counter this violence, in particular through demands for accountability. We address these challenges in turn, focusing first on particular lethal incidents, then on recurring mechanisms and patterns observable across wider datasets, and finally, on the discursive, legal, and political processes that have enabled violence.

Challenges in investigating violence and seeking accountability

Accounting for environmentally mediated deaths

One of the first challenges we faced concerned the reconstruction of cases of deaths and the complex entanglement of state policies, the actions and omissions of law enforcement agents, border infrastructure, and the environment that led to them. Indeed, in Chapter Five, which focuses on deaths and disappearances, we adopted the critical forensic approach developed by Forensic Architecture and Border Forensics to produce ten in depth reconstructions of lethal incidents. Towards this end, we drew on evidence generated over several years by civil society actors, investigative journalists, lawyers, open-source investigations (OSINT), families and friends of deceased and missing migrants, as well as migrants themselves. By systematically cross-referencing these diverse forms of evidence, we reconstructed the spatial and temporal sequences of events leading to deaths and deadly disappearances. This research entailed a number of challenges, starting with that of collecting evidence for deaths that have occurred across the difficult-to-access and vast forests and rivers of the Polish–Belarusian borderlands.

Furthermore, it quickly emerged that these deaths not only occurred *in* these forests and rivers, but partly *through* them. Indeed, as we indicated in the Summary, the lethal incidents we reconstructed had as their immediate cause of death the physiological consequences of migrants' exposure to the environment – the forest, rivers, and, above all, extreme cold – while the available evidence did not indicate that death had resulted directly from fatal physical violence inflicted by another person. Prosecutorial investigations in Poland have treated this as grounds to

conclude that these lethal incidents were simply a consequence of the harsh environments migrants cross through. As a result of this narrow investigative focus, the role of state policies, border infrastructures, and law enforcement practices in producing lethal conditions has been largely obscured, allowing responsibility for these deaths to remain fragmented and accountability to be avoided. Our counter-investigative practice reverses this analytical perspective. Rather than treating the immediate physiological mechanism of death as the endpoint of explanation, we begin with the fatal incident and trace backwards the interconnected chains of political decisions, legal frameworks, operational practices, infrastructures, and environmental conditions that systematically produced the conditions under which death became foreseeable. In doing so, we reconnect forms of responsibility that official investigations tend to isolate, demonstrating that environmentally mediated deaths and disappearances are neither accidental nor inevitable, but recurrent outcomes of the way the border regime operates.

Tracing the mediating role of environments and infrastructures (discussed in detail in Chapter Two) does not diminish state responsibility. On the contrary, it is precisely the means through which state responsibility can be more accurately reconstructed and accountability more effectively pursued. It is our hope that the analyses, evidence, and visualisations of particular lethal incidents presented in this report will support ongoing and future efforts by civil society actors to advocate for migrants' rights, seek accountability, and advance claims for justice that have too often been denied or ignored by the Polish state. We maintain this aim and hope even though we are well aware that both national and EU courts are increasingly failing in their mandate to uphold the rule of law and the human rights of migrants specifically, and this regardless of the quality of the evidence submitted and the rigour of its analysis.

Accounting for cumulative, systematic, and widespread violence

A second challenge we faced concerned the scale of violence, rights violations and lethal incidents recorded across the Polish–Belarusian borderlands. It quickly became apparent to us that these were not few, unique, and isolated cases, but numerous incidents emerging from similar circumstances. In other words, the violence inflicted on migrants across the Polish–Belarusian borderlands was systematic and widespread. While the reconstruction of a selection of particular incidents is essential, and these are important in their own right, had we limited our research to that alone, we would not have been able to sufficiently account for the

systematic and widespread character of border violence at this border. Thus, in Chapters Four and Five, we sought to analyse and compare many incidents together, so as to understand the system of interactions between state policies, border control practices, infrastructures, and the environment that has led to this recurring outcome of violence for migrants – what we refer to as *mechanisms of violence*. Towards this end, we analysed different datasets generated by civil society actors over the years. In relation to sub-lethal forms of harm, we relied in particular on the archive of incidents and testimonies collected by WAM over the last five years. We coded these testimonies collaboratively and then analysed them through both qualitative and geostatistical methods. Data gathered by MSF during its medical interventions also proved essential to this aim. In relation to lethal forms of harm, we analysed a dataset of death cases at the Polish–Belarusian border compiled by BDMG, focusing on 102 deaths that occurred within the Polish–Belarusian border zone. Geostatistical analysis of these datasets allowed us to identify recurrent geographical configurations in which state practices, infrastructures, and environmental conditions repeatedly converged to produce similar forms of violence, and to analyse how these configurations evolved across both time and space. What emerges from the analysis of these data sets, through qualitative and geostatistical methods, is not only a unique understanding of systematic and widespread practices of violence, but also of the way different forms of direct and indirect violence – inflicted by law enforcement agents, through the border infrastructure, and through the environment – are combined and accumulated in migrants' experiences over time.

Accounting for the discursive, legal, and political processes enabling violence

A third challenge emerged from the previous one: if we could demonstrate empirically that the violence targeting migrants is systematic and widespread, the question then became what broader processes shape the recurring violent actions and omissions of individual law enforcement agents, and how this violence has become normalised. To answer this question empirically, we shifted our focus from violence at the border to the discursive, legal, and institutional processes which have enabled that violence, relying on both existing datasets and new data generated for this purpose. In collaboration with Polish researchers from the I-CLAIM project, we analysed media corpora covering 2019–23, extended to 2024–25 for this research, and divided into quarterly sub-corpora. In Chapter One we analyse the racialisation of migrants through discursive framings, the evolution of legislations which have granted exceptional powers to law enforcement agents while stripping migrants of their rights, and militarised policies of counter-instrumentalisation governance at the Polish and the EU levels. Importantly we found that these discursive, legal, and political factors not only create the *conditions of possibility* for the perpetration of violence, but, as we emphasise in Chapter Five, have also led to the reproduction, normalisation, and consolidation of violent practices over time. We believe the focus on the discursive, legal, and political processes shaping border violence – which involves specific actors and institutions – is essential at present. First, this is an essential step to go beyond the descriptive analysis of violence, and to advance towards explaining it. Second, analysing the different actors and institutions which, despite being located far away from the border, are implicated in its violence, constitutes a response to the crisis of accountability in Poland and the EU. Indeed, in response to the limits of courts of law in answering demands for justice, we believe such demands should not be abandoned, but expanded. Mapping of the web of actors and institutions implicated in violence can help orient this expansion of demands for accountability, both within and beyond the law. Finally, we believe it is only through rigorous analysis of the different practices and processes that structurally produce and perpetuate violence that one can begin to decipher particular levers of change within a system – what the philosopher Michel Foucault called "tactical pointers."[35]

Ultimately, and in continuity with the critical forensic approach, we have sought to articulate the analysis of the "minimal causality" linking migrants' bodies to the human actors and non-human entities that inflicted harm on them during their attempts to cross the borderlands, with the

35 M.Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978* (New York: Palgrave McMillian, 2007).

"field causality" that extends far beyond that space-time. As we have argued above, this involves tracing the threads of entangled discursive, legal, and political processes operating in space-time extending far beyond the border, but that decisively shape these violent encounters.[36]

36 M. Fuller and E. Weizman, *Investigative Aesthetics: Conflicts and Commons in the Politics of Truth* (London: Verso, 2021).

We believe that the methodological approach we have crafted specifically for this investigation has allowed us to shed a unique light on the dynamics of violence across the Polish–Belarusian borderlands, and in particular to make visible structural dynamics that remain largely invisible when individual incidents are examined in isolation. Our analysis reveals a deeply worrying level of dehumanisation and violence targeting migrants. Our findings also suggest that the normalisation of violence affects not only migrants, but also the institutional cultures and professional norms of those responsible for border enforcement.

A final note is necessary to clarify our approach. From the report's summary and these methodological orientations, it should be apparent that our methodological approach is different from most human rights–focused reports, as is the tone in which our analysis is written. The crisis of human rights that we are seeing at Europe's borders demands that human rights research and practice be reinvented in order to regain effectiveness, which is a challenge but also an opportunity. We see our research as a contribution to this transformative process. While we investigate violence and violations by mobilising rigorous and fact-based methods typical of a human rights report, our approach to understanding violence, and the different degrees of implication in it, also requires us to draw on methods across the social sciences and humanities. As a result, the methods of analysis and the style of writing used to convey them vary throughout the report. Furthermore, because our focus is first and foremost on violence, which may or in turn constitute a violation of the law, conceptual qualification and theoretical thinking are as important for us as the legal qualification of the harmful practices at hand. Concepts, whether drawn from others or forged in the course of our research, are important to our investigation as they help us to be attentive to and understand particular practices and processes.

Finally, while a neutral and descriptive tone usually prevails in human rights reports, we believe this is problematic as it tends to erase the social position of the authors and their political orientations to convey an impression of objectivity. In response to this problem, we intentionally do not adopt a neutral tone in our writing, nor in the political perspectives we derive from our analysis. On the contrary, through what we call "engaged

objectivity", we seek both to reconstruct facts in the most rigorous, transparent, and verifiable way, and to assert our position, our commitment, and our perception, not only of the violations of the law, but also of the harm and injustice committed.[37] We further seek to adopt a reflexive stance towards the problems, limits, and ambivalences of our research process. Acknowledging our position is part of our methodological rigour and provides a transparent account of our perspective on the facts we reconstruct. Through this approach, we seek to contribute to the transformation of human rights practice towards greater reflexivity and criticality.

37 Eyal Weizman, Forensic Architecture_threshold detectability_2018, p. 74.

CHAPTER 1. THE CRISIFICATION OF THE POLAND–BELARUS BORDER

We left the car at the edge of the village, beside an abandoned wooden house. From a slight rise in the terrain, surrounded by trees, a field below came into view. On its surface, several tents belonging to Fundacja Ocalenie and other activists had been erected, forming a small camp. For days, people had been arriving here with food, medicine, clothing, and sleeping bags. A strip of tape had been placed along a small watercourse, demarcating a zone that could not be crossed. Beyond it stood Polish Border Guard officers, unmarked military vehicles, masked soldiers, and police units. Through the deployment of personnel, vehicles, and temporary barriers, an otherwise ordinary landscape was transformed into a controlled border space, structured by restrictions on movement and access. Behind the state officials, a group of around a dozen people could be seen sitting on the ground – Afghan men, women, and children who had already spent nearly three weeks sleeping outdoors between Belarusian and Polish forces. Belarusian state officers stood in line farther back in the forest on the Belarusian side of the border, wearing helmets and face coverings and carrying firearms. Between the migrants and the activists in the camp lay less than one hundred metres. But the presence of the border guards seemed to make this space unsurpassable.

At regular intervals, a translator of Ocalenie Foundation raised a megaphone and called across the field. Questions travelled in one direction and answers returned in the other. “We are all sick.” “It is very cold.” “If nothing happens, we will die here.” Then another message arrived: a woman was urinating blood. The information circulated quickly through Ocalenie’s camp. Calls were made, and an ambulance was requested, but assistance was repeatedly refused.

Eventually, a local ambulance arrived at the scene. Two paramedics stepped out and began walking towards the group, but they did not get far. Police officers formed a cordon across the road preventing the paramedics from reaching the group. The paramedics asked who was in command, who had authorised the decision to block access to a person whose life might be at risk and under what legal basis medical assistance was being

prevented. No answer was given. The Border Guard referred questions elsewhere, as did other law enforcement actors. No commander appeared, and no individual accepted responsibility for the decision. The paramedics reminded the officers that they were under a legal obligation to provide assistance and that they could refuse unlawful orders. The officers We left the car at the edge of the village, beside an abandoned wooden house. From a slight rise in the terrain, surrounded by trees, a field below came into view. On its surface, several tents belonging to Fundacja Ocalenie and other activists had been erected, forming a small camp. For days, people had been arriving here with food, medicine, clothing, and sleeping bags. A strip of tape had been placed along a small watercourse, demarcating a zone that could not be crossed. Beyond it stood Polish Border Guard officers, unmarked military vehicles, masked soldiers, and police units. Through the deployment of personnel, vehicles, and temporary barriers, an otherwise ordinary landscape was transformed into a controlled border space, structured by restrictions on movement and access. Behind the state officials, a group of around a dozen people could be seen sitting on the ground – Afghan men, women, and children who had already spent nearly three weeks sleeping outdoors between Belarusian and Polish forces. Belarusian state officers stood in line farther back in the forest on the Belarusian side of the border, wearing helmets and face coverings and carrying firearms. Between the migrants and the activists in the camp lay less than one hundred metres. But the presence of the border guards seemed to make this space unsurpassable.

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prevented. No answer was given. The Border Guard referred questions elsewhere, as did other law enforcement actors.

No commander appeared, and no individual accepted responsibility for the decision. The paramedics reminded the officers that they were under a legal obligation to provide assistance and that they could refuse unlawful orders. The officers remained in position. In the distance, a military truck approached carrying no visible registration plates. Soldiers disembarked and took positions alongside the police cordon. The woman remained beyond reach. The distance separating her from medical assistance was measured in metres; the distance separating the decision from the person responsible for it appeared considerably greater. Nothing in the landscape seemed extraordinary. There was no wall, no detention centre and no infrastructure of confinement. There was only a field, an ambulance, a police cordon and a group of people unable to move.

Fieldnote by one of the authors in Usnarz Górny, August 2021

The events at Usnarz Górny described above began on 8 August 2021 when a group of approximately sixty migrants from Afghanistan arrived in this field and were prevented from continuing their advance by Polish law enforcement agents.[38] The stand-off lasted several weeks during which a large deployment of law enforcement agents remained present and prevented the migrants from requesting asylum. The group was subjected to a process of gradual displacement towards the Belarusian side of the border. As the days passed, the group's size decreased, with individuals and smaller groups leaving under different circumstances, until only thirty-two people remained at the site. Over the following days, they were repeatedly prevented from moving forwards and progressively pushed back, until they were ultimately forced into Belarus during the night of 18–19 August – a sequence of events documented in Amnesty International's detailed visual investigation and spatial reconstruction.[39] Despite limitations, civil society actors remained present, provided assistance, attracted media attention, and documented the events towards different human rights reports and complaints.

38 For a full description of the events in Usnarz Górny, see A. Palęcka, Przemoc państwa i działania oddolne. Raport Fundacji Ocalenie z kryzysu humanitarnego na pograniczu polsko-białoruskim [State Violence and Grassroots Responses: Ocalenie Foundation Report on the Humanitarian Crisis at the Polish-Belarusian Border] (Warsaw: Ocalenie Foundation, 2022).

39 Amnesty International, "Poland: Digital Investigation Proves Poland Violated Refugees' Rights," September 30, 2021.



Figure 1.1. A group of migrants at the Belarus–Poland border in August 2021, close to the village of Usnarz Górny. Migrants are encircled by authorities from both sides, Polish authorities in front, Belarusian authorities at the treeline behind, blocking them from advancing or retreating, caught in a state of enforced immobility. Photograph by Maciej Moskwa, Górny, 2021.

On 20 August, the Polish Minister of the Interior and Administration issued a regulation effectively "legalising" pushbacks and mandating that unauthorised individuals be returned to the state border line without evaluating their claims for international protection. That same day, the Association for Legal Intervention (SIP), acting on behalf of the thirty-two Afghan nationals, lodged an application with the European Court of Human Rights. Five days later, on 25 August, the Court indicated interim measures requiring Poland to provide food, water, clothing, medical care, and, where possible, temporary shelter. These humanitarian measures were ignored by the Polish state officials. On the evening of 1 September 2021, activists, MPs, and journalists were forced to leave the site ahead of the midnight introduction of the state of emergency. From that moment, the group remained detained by state officials – cut off from public visibility, humanitarian monitoring, and external communication. This marked the emergence of a zone of concealed violence, shifting both migrants and the actions of law enforcement agents into a space beyond the reach of cameras and the witnessing gaze. Fundacja Ocalenie nonetheless managed to maintain telephone contact with some members of the group. Over the following days, leaked footage documented failed attempts to breach the fence, which were met with water cannons and tear gas. By October, seventeen of the migrants attempted to cross the border again and were subjected to violence, brief detention, and

pushback under emergency decrees. After seventy-seven days of remaining defiantly stranded at the border, the group dispersed into Belarus.

The Usnarz events summarised here crystallised a moment of heightened tension and marked a turning point in what came to be described as a "crisis" at the Poland–Belarus border. This "crisis" was increasingly framed by state authorities through the language of security, border defence, and hybrid warfare, while humanitarian organisations and civil society actors approached it primarily as a matter of denial of protection and human rights violations. These competing interpretations were not merely descriptive; they shaped the forms of intervention considered legitimate and the institutional responses that followed. Drawing on the conceptualisation proposed by Violeta Moreno-Lax, we use the term *crisification* to describe the process through which the movement of people across the border was transformed from a matter of migration governance into an emergency requiring exceptional measures.[40] Through political discourse, legal reforms, and operational practices, people seeking protection came to be represented as security threats and instruments of hostile state action. This framing enabled the introduction of extraordinary legal, military and administrative measures, while progressively restricting access to asylum procedures and humanitarian assistance. Although its intensity has varied over time, the crisification of the Poland–Belarus border has continued to structure border governance beyond the events of 2021.

This chapter asks: *Why and how did this process of crisification emerge? How was the plight of people in need of protection – both legal and humanitarian – turned into a security threat? Why did Poland not welcome the migrants arriving on its territory and allow them to seek asylum, but instead institute a militarised policy of closure and pushback?*

In this chapter, we argue that understanding the crisification of the Poland–Belarus border requires attention to two distinct but intertwined logics of *enmity* – by which we refer to a feeling of hostility directed at individuals or collectives. Enmity can operate at the individual level, but can also be a social and political process.[41] It can be shaped by different logics and here we focus on the two most salient logics in the construction of migrants as threats: those of race and geopolitics. Although these logics have distinct genealogies and evolved along different historical trajectories, they became increasingly intertwined during the 2021 process of the border's crisification. Following the collapse of migration-control cooperation between Belarus and the European Union

40 V. Moreno-Lax, "The 'Crisification' of Migration Law: Insights from the EU External Border," in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Immigration Law*, ed. S. B. Elias, K. Cope, and J. Goldenziel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); V. Moreno-Lax, "Crisis as (Asylum) Governance: The Evolving Normalisation of Non-Access to Protection in the EU," European Papers 9, no. 1 (2024): 179-208. https://doi.org/10.15166/2499-8249/752. See also New Keywords Collective, "Europe/Crisis: New Keywords of 'the Crisis' in and of 'Europe'," Near Futures Online, no. 1 (January 2016): 11-45.

41 A. Mbembe, Necropolitics, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478005858.

in 2021, the Belarusian authorities established a new, commercialised migration route by facilitating access to Belarusian visas and directing migrants towards the EU's eastern borders.[42] As of summer 2021, growing numbers of migrants from countries of the Global South such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Eritrea, and Somalia – whose mobility across the EU's borders has been illegalised by the EU's restrictive policies – were pushed forwards by Belarusian authorities.[43] These migrants from the Global South – already subject to processes of racialisation within the EU's migration regime – came to be embedded within regional geopolitical tensions and portrayed as instruments of the hostile foreign powers of Belarus and, increasingly, Russia. The convergence of these two logics of enmity conjured the figure of the migrant as a security threat and weapon transgressing Poland's national borders – and the borders of Europe itself. This shift enabled the introduction of exceptional measures, including military deployment, restrictions on access to asylum, and the progressive erosion of humanitarian and legal safeguards, aimed at preventing migrants from crossing the Poland–Belarus border.

Drawing on academic literature across different disciplines, such as postcolonial studies, critical border studies, discourse analysis, and legal and political analysis, the chapter traces how these racialised and geopolitical framings emerged across political discourse, media narratives, and institutional responses. We first address racial and geopolitical logics of enmity in turn, and how the process of crisification of the border in 2021 brought them together, by analysing changing discursive framings. At the same time, we locate these framings within broader processes through which migrant populations are differentially valued, selectively included or excluded, and positioned within hierarchies of belonging and economic usefulness. From this perspective, the crisification of the border did not simply produce migrants as enemies; it also reinforced existing distinctions between desirable and undesirable forms of mobility. Having analysed the dynamics of threat construction, we examine the forms of "counter-instrumentalisation" governance developed by Poland and the European Union to respond to this perceived threat. Finally, we analyse the encoding of logics of enmity into Polish law in a way that has increasingly stripped migrants of their rights, granted law enforcement agents exceptional powers, and criminalised civil society actors. These legislative changes have created the legal script for the recurrent practices of violence at the border, which we analyse in subsequent chapters.

42 Border Emergency Collective, *Zone of Hidden Violence*, visual report, 2022, Vimeo video, https://vimeo.com/738396988.; NOMADA Association, 2022.

43 The terms we use to describe human mobility across state borders have important implications. In this investigation, we follow the work of Scheel and Tazzioli and use the term "migrant" as "a person, who, in order to move to or stay in a desired place, has to struggle against bordering practices and processes of boundary making that are implicated by the national order of things." In turn, we use the adjective "illegalised" following authors such as De Genova and Bauder to highlight that illegality and criminality is a product of state law rather than an intrinsic feature of migrants. Finally, we use the term "Global South" despite the risk of homogenising it entails to point to the persisting but blurred geographies of global inequality that shapes the right to move across borders. S. Scheel, and M. Tazzioli. "Who Is a Migrant? Abandoning the Nation-State Point of View in the Study of Migration." *Migration Politics* 1 (1) (2022): 002; N. De Genova. "Spectacles of Migrant 'Illegality': The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion." Ethnic and Racial Studies 36 (7) (2013): 1180–98.; H. Bauder, "Why We Should Use the Term Illegalized Immigrant." RCIS Research Brief 1 (2013): 1–7.; S. Mau, F. Gülzau, L. Laube, and N. Zaun. "The Global Mobility Divide: How Visa Policies Have Evolved over Time", Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 41:8 (2015): 1192-1213; S. Mezzadra. "Challenging Borders: The Legacy of Postcolonial Critique in the Present Conjuncture." *Soft Power* 7, no. 14 (2020): 21–41.

The framing of migration within racial logics of enmity

Poland's racial logic of enmity towards migrants must be situated within broader processes of racialisation and securitisation that have shaped European migration governance. Following decolonisation, European states increasingly restricted the immigration of former colonial subjects while continuing to facilitate the arrival of migrants perceived as culturally and racially closer to essentialised constructions of European populations.[44] In the context of neoliberal restructuring and growing political contestation around migration, migrants from the Global South were increasingly framed as threats to national identity, social cohesion, and security. Although explicit racial classifications largely disappeared from migration law, racialised hierarchies continued to structure access to mobility, residence ,and protection in Europe.[45] Migrants from the Global South, however, were not passive recipients of the EU's regime of differential im/mobility but actively contested it by crossing Europe's borders without authorisation. Militarised border policies deployed to police their movement, in turn, heightened the "threat" migrants were framed as posing.[46] As a result, migrants from the Global South, particularly Black, Arab, and Muslim populations, came to occupy a prominent place within European imaginaries of threat.

Poland, which joined the European Union in 2004 and the Schengen Area in 2007, adapted these dynamics to its own historical and political context. Indeed, a number of scholars have argued that contemporary forms of racialisation in Poland cannot be understood simply as imports from western Europe, but as related to the negotiation of Poland's semi-peripheral position within Europe and shaped by the country's history and post-socialist transformations.[47]

This history helps explain how particular figures of racial and civilisational otherness – migrants in particular – came to occupy a central place in Polish political imaginaries as sites through which claims to Europeanness, security, and belonging could be articulated. As scholars have shown, Poland was not only historically represented as Europe's East by western Europe; it also produced its own internal and external "Orients."[48] In contemporary political discourse, the Muslim, the migrant, and the refugee increasingly became figures through which distinctions between Europe and non-Europe, civilisation and backwardness, belonging and exclusion were negotiated.[49] By opposing migrants and Muslims, who have long been constituted as Europe's radical Others, Poland has symbolically performed its belonging to "the West."[50]

44 S. Castles, H. d. Haas, and M. J. Miller, The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World, 5th ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

45 H. van Houtum, "Human Blacklisting: The Global Apartheid of the EU's External Border Regime," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28, no. 6 (2010): 957–976; S. Mau, F. Gülzau, L. Laube, and N. Zaun, "The Global Mobility Divide: How Visa Policies Have Evolved over Time," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41, no. 8 (2015): 1192–1213; M. Casas-Cortés and S. Cobarrubias, "Genealogies of Contention in Concentric Circles: Remote Migration Control and Its Eurocentric Geographical Imaginaries," in *Handbook on Critical Geographies of Migration*, ed. K. Mitchell, R. Jones, and J. Fluri (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019).

46 N. De Genova, "Spectacles of Migrant 'Illegality': The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion," Ethnic and Racial Studies 36, no. 7 (2013): 1180-98.

47 M. Boatcă, "No Race to the Swift: Negotiating Racial Identity in Past and Present Eastern Europe," Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge 5, no. 1 (2006): 91-104. I. Kalmar, *White but Not Quite: Central Europe's Illiberal Revolt* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022). B. Balogun, "Race and Racism in Poland: Theorising and Contextualising 'Polish-centrism'," *The Sociological Review* 68, no. 6 (2020): 1196-1211.

48 M. Bobako, "Semi-peripheral Islamophobias: The Political Diversity of Anti-Muslim Discourses in Poland," *Patterns of Prejudice* 52, no. 5 (2018): 448-460; E. Górska and K. Górak-Sosnowska, "The Other at the Border: 'Frontier Orientalism' in Politics and Law in Poland," *Patterns of Prejudice* 58, no. 1 (2024): 45-65.

49 L. Mayblin, A. Piekut, and G. Valentine, "'Other' Posts in 'Other' Places: Poland through a Postcolonial Lens?," *The Sociological Review* 50, no. 1 (2015); Balogun, "Race and Racism in Poland."

50 M. Bobako, "Semi-peripheral Islamophobias"

These processes have been observed repeatedly in relation to Poland's migration policies. Poland's negotiations towards its accession to the European Union fundamentally transformed its approach to migration, asylum, and border governance. Between 1998 and the country's EU membership in 2004, Poland was required to adopt the Justice and Home Affairs acquis, including substantial reforms of its border-control institutions, visa policy, and asylum system. This process involved the "modernisation" of the Border Guard according to EU standards, the introduction of new migration and asylum legislation, the establishment of refugee status determination procedures, and the alignment of visa policies with emerging European standards. These reforms, which culminated in Poland's inclusion in the Schengen Area in 2007, did more than merely prepare Poland for EU membership: they embedded the country into a broader European system of migration management and external border control, which emphasised limiting the arrival of migrants from the Global South. As a result, the status of Poland's eastern borders with Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia changed, and became increasingly securitised.

As Witold Klaus has demonstrated, Polish migration governance has been characterised by significant ambivalence, generating a differentiated regime of mobility in which migrants were selectively incorporated according to labour market demands and perceived cultural proximity.[51] Thus, over the 2000s, Poland continued to allow migrants from neighbouring countries to work while limiting the arrival of asylum seekers. Poland has consistently had one of the lowest recognition rates in Europe, and has adopted particularly harsh policies concerning Muslim asylum seekers, such as Chechens.[52] The treatment of Chechen asylum seekers in the early 2000s is revealing of the particular configuration of racial categories in Poland, and its fixation on Muslims. Although Chechens originated from the post-Soviet space and might have been regarded as racially and culturally proximate, they came to be framed primarily through the lens of their Muslim identity, and were targeted with exclusionary discourses and policies as a result. Indeed, despite the limited number of Muslims in Poland, public debate has increasingly portrayed Muslims as carriers of violence, cultural incompatibility, and civilisational threat. These dynamics became particularly visible during the so-called refugee crisis of 2015.[53]

51 W. Klaus, "Between Closing Borders to Refugees and Welcoming Ukrainian Workers: Polish Migration Law at the Crossroads," in *Europe and the Refugee Response: A Crisis of Values?*, ed. E. M. Goździak, I. Main, and B. Suter (London: Routledge, 2020).

52 Ibid.

53 Bobako, M. (2018). Semi-peripheral Islamophobias: the political diversity of anti-Muslim discourses in Poland. *Patterns of Prejudice*, *52*(5), 448-460.

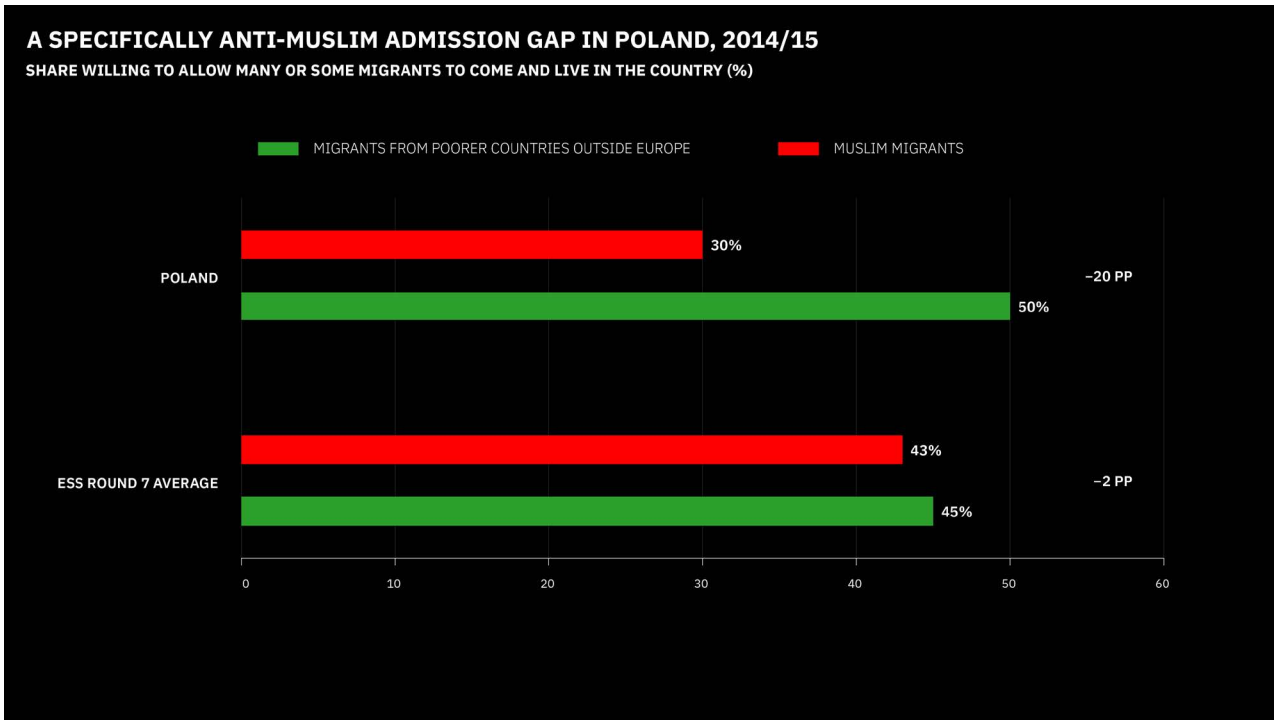


Figure 1.2. In European Social Survey Round 7, 50 per cent of respondents in Poland were willing to allow many or some migrants from poorer countries outside Europe to come and live in the country, compared with only 30 per cent for Muslim migrants. This 20-percentage-point gap was substantially wider than the two-point average across participating ESS7 countries. Source: European Social Survey Round 7 (2014/15), as reported in Heath et al., "How Do Europeans Differ in Their Attitudes to Immigration?" Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.[54]

The year 2015 marked a turning point in the consolidation of these narratives. In a highly polarised political environment, the Law and Justice (PiS) party successfully mobilised economic grievances, social anxieties, and cultural insecurities to build political support.[55] Although Poland was neither a primary destination nor a major transit country during the 2015 so-called "refugee crisis," migration became one of the central objects of political mobilisation. Public discourse increasingly framed migrants, particularly Muslims, as threats to national security, social order, and cultural cohesion. The proportion of respondents opposing the admission of refugees increased from 21 per cent in May 2015 to 61 per cent in April 2016.[56] This shift helped legitimise Poland's increasingly restrictive position on refugee relocation and asylum policies, which were frequently presented as a defence of Christian civilisation against the perceived failures of multicultural western Europe.[57]

54 European Social Survey, "ESS7: Second Edition of Data Released," European Social Survey, May 26, 2016, https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/news/article/ess7-second-edition-data-released.

55 Bill, Stanley, and Ben Stanley. 2020. "Whose Poland is it to be? PiS and the struggle between monism and pluralism." *East European Politics* 36 (3): 378–394.

56 Klaus, Witold, et al. "Refugees and asylum seekers in Central European Countries: Reality, politics and the creation of fear in societies." *Refugees and migrants in law and policy: Challenges and opportunities for global civic education*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018. 457-494.

57 TVN24. 2016. "Błaszczak po Szczycie ONZ: Przełom. W Dużej Mierze Zasługa Naszej Dyplomacji." TVN24.*pl*, September 20. https://tvn24.pl/polska/blaszczak-po-szczycie-onz-przelom-w-duzej-mierze-zasluga-naszej-dyplomacji-ra677549-ls3193166.

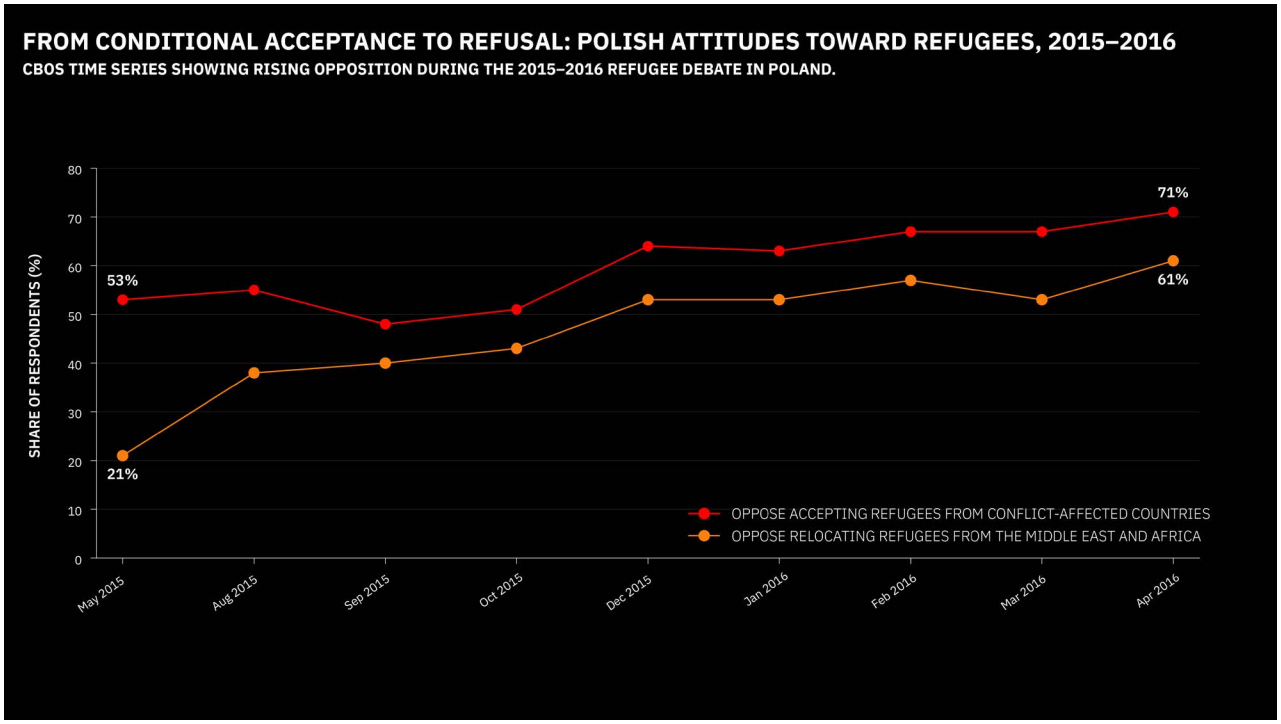


Figure 1.3. Opposition to accepting refugees from countries affected by armed conflict rose from 21 per cent in May 2015 to 61 per cent in April 2016. In a separate question, opposition to relocating refugees from the Middle East and Africa increased from 53 to 71 per cent. Because the questions differ, the two lines should be read as parallel indicators of hardening attitudes rather than as directly comparable measures. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

While very few refugees from Syria attempted to enter Poland in 2015, Chechen asylum seekers arriving during this period experienced the harsh consequences of these developments. From 2015 onwards, Polish authorities systematically restricted access to asylum procedures at the Brest–Terespol official border crossing point, despite repeated declarations by Chechen asylum seekers that they wished to apply for international protection. These practices were repeatedly challenged before the European Court of Human Rights, which found that Poland had violated its obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights by denying access to asylum procedures and exposing applicants to the risk of chain refoulement (M.K. and Others v. Poland, 2020; D.A. and Others v. Poland, 2021). The restrictive practices and violations of Chechen asylum seekers' rights prefigured important elements of the pushback regime that would be consolidated at the Poland–Belarus border as of summer 2021



Figure 1.4. Two photographs showing Chechen nationals fleeing persecution. The Brest railway station in Belarus, seen here from within, served as a border crossing point: people bought train tickets to travel to Terespol on the Polish side of the border. There, however, their applications for international protection were often not accepted, forcing them to return to Brest, rent accommodation, or stay in hotels and try to cross again. Some remained in this situation for months, making repeated attempts to lodge their applications. Lawyers on the Polish side were also frequently denied access to the people they represented. Photographs by Jędrzej Nowicki 2016.

From the above, we can better understand Poland's distinct racial formation, shaped by its semi-peripheral and post-socialist condition, and Poland's "aspirational whiteness."[58] Migrants from the Global South, and specifically those perceived as Muslim, have been increasingly framed as racial threats to the Polish nation, which itself has positioned itself as a bulwark of White Christianity, ready to defend Europe both against threatening invaders from without and from the liberal Europe that weakens and threatens Europe from within. By 2021, migrants arriving through Belarus encountered a political and discursive environment in which the figure of the "Muslim migrant" had already become strongly associated with danger, cultural incompatibility, and civilisational threat.[59] The events at the Poland–Belarus border therefore did not produce these racialised imaginaries anew. Rather, they activated and reconfigured narratives that had become consolidated in Poland over the previous years. The significance of 2021 lay not only in the persistence of these racialised constructions, but also in their articulation with a new set of geopolitical narratives through which migration increasingly came to be interpreted as a matter of national security and international conflict.

58 Kalmar, White but Not Quite. https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529213621.

59 Z. Samson, "(Un)deserving Victims: The Race-Gender-Geopolitics Nexus of Migration Discourses in Poland," Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 51, no. 1 (2025): 286-305. https://hdl.handle.net/1814/77284

60 G. Achcar, The New Cold War: The United States, Russia, and China from Kosovo to Ukraine (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2023). T. Ali, ed., Masters of the Universe? NATO's Balkan Crusade (London: Verso, 2000); S. Mezzadra and B. Neilson, The Rest and the West: Capital and Power in a Multipolar World (London: Verso, 2024).

The framing of migration within geopolitical logics of enmity

While racialised understandings of migration were among the conditions for the crisification of the border, they do not fully explain the exceptional measures introduced after 2021. These developments also relied on a distinct geopolitical framing that positioned migrants within narratives of hybrid warfare, hostile state action, and civilisational conflict between Russia, Belarus, NATO, and the European Union. The geopolitical position of states like Poland and Belarus have been fundamentally shaped by the strategic interplay between NATO's and Russia's imperial projects, which reconfigured the geopolitical landscape of both central and eastern Europe. [60]

Poland's position within this geopolitical landscape has significantly shifted over the last century. After the Second World War, Poland was included within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence and embedded within East–West logics of enmity. In 1949, twelve founding members came together to form the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a military and political alliance aimed at preventing the expansion of the Soviet Union. In response to West Germany's accession to NATO, the Soviet Union established the Warsaw Pact in 1955, together with its eastern European

satellite states, including Poland. The Pact became a key instrument of Soviet hegemony in central and eastern Europe, cementing Poland's position within Cold War logics of enmity.

This began to shift in 1989, as Poland's democratic transition marked the beginning of the end of Soviet influence in central and eastern Europe. A series of geopolitical ruptures, including the reunification of Germany in 1990, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the breakup of Czechoslovakia, opened the way for Poland's westward realignment.[61] This realignment was not merely a shift in military alliances; it entailed Poland's broader ideological and economic integration with western Europe and the Euro-Atlantic community, alongside the adoption of a neoliberal market economy. In December 1991, Poland signed an Association Agreement with the European Communities, laying the groundwork for closer political and economic ties, and ultimately integration. Poland formally applied for EU membership in 1994, demonstrating a clear commitment to aligning its future with the European project. In 2003, an EU membership referendum paved the way for Poland to officially join the European Union in 2004, alongside nine other nations.[62] Poland joined the NATO Alliance in 1999, followed by the 2004 NATO accession of the Baltic states of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia. Together, these processes firmly anchored Poland within Euro-Atlantic political, military, and economic structures.

This process displaced Europe's central axis to the East, consolidating interdependencies across greater central Europe, the Baltics, and eastern European countries, most importantly Poland.[63] Poland's shifting position has had important implications for its relations with its eastern neighbours: its eastern borders became at once the frontline of NATO's collective defence and the EU's external borders. From this position, Poland consistently advocated a cautious approach towards Russia, warned against overreliance on NATO–Russia cooperation mechanisms, and called for strengthening NATO's eastern presence.

While Poland has been re-aligned within Euro-Atlantic alliances, itself demonstrating clear expansionist ambitions, Russia's post-Soviet trajectory has been characterised by attempts to reassert influence across territories formerly situated within its sphere of domination, reflecting broader projects of imperial restoration and contributing to growing tensions with neighbouring states and Western political and security institutions.[64] Imperial revanchism has thus become a central feature of Russia's contemporary geopolitical imagination, shaping efforts to

61 M. Kuus, "Europe's Eastern Expansion and the Reinscription of Otherness in East-Central Europe," Progress in Human Geography 28, no. 4 (2004): 472-89.

62 I. P. Karolewski and M. Wilga, "Poland and the European Union," Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics (Oxford University Press, 2018).

63 Mezzadra and Neilson, Rest and the West.

64 A. Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011); A. Etkind, *Russia against Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023).

challenge the post–Cold War settlement and to reclaim a privileged sphere of influence in eastern Europe and the post-Soviet region. Russia's military campaign in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine, including its annexation of Crimea (2014), and, most recently, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, exemplify this trend, through which Russia has sought to redefine Europe's security architectures and reaffirm its imperial rank. This dynamic has had particular consequences for countries located along NATO's and the EU's eastern frontier, including Poland, where questions of security, sovereignty, and border control have become increasingly entangled with broader geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West.

Russia's military expansionism has only increased Poland's alignment with, and support for, the Euro-Atlantic alliance. In response to Russia's increasingly assertive foreign policy, culminating in the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Poland contributed to NATO's Readiness Action Plan and Enhanced Forward Presence, advocated for a permanent U.S. military presence, and, in 2020, signed the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement, which established the permanent headquarters of the U.S. Army V Corps Forward Command in Poland. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Poland has been one of Kyiv's principal backers, a critical logistical and military hub for NATO and U.S. assistance, one of the world's largest host countries for Ukrainian refugees, and a leading advocate of strengthening NATO's eastern flank.[65]

Poland's central role within the Euro-Atlantic alliance has been mirrored, on the other side of the geopolitical divide, by Belarus's position within Russia's regional project. Since Alexander Lukashenko assumed power in 1994 and consolidated an authoritarian regime, Belarus has become Russia's closest ally in the region, increasingly integrated with Moscow politically, economically, and militarily. This relationship has been further institutionalised through common mutual defence commitments, most recently in the 2024 Treaty on Security Guarantees within the Union State. Belarus's strategic importance to Russia was most clearly demonstrated by its role as a launchpad for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Thus, although Poland and Belarus are neighbouring states, they occupy opposite sides of one of Europe's principal geopolitical fault lines. The large-scale migrant crossings at the Poland–Belarus border in 2021 were therefore embedded in – and, following Balibar,[66] "overdetermined" by – this broader context of geopolitical rivalry. This geopolitical logic of

65 A. Tavares and W. Kolano, "The Role of Poland in Ensuring European Security," *Security Forum* 6 (2022): 25-26.

66 É. Balibar, Politics and the Other Scene (London: Verso, 2002).

enmity intersected with the racialised logic of enmity analysed above, reinforcing the construction of migrants not only as threats but also as instruments – or even weapons – of a hostile state. This geopolitical logic of enmity targeting migrants was further entangled with and reinforced by the racial logic of enmity we analysed above, leading to the framing of migrants as threats and weapons.

67 Rada Etyki Mediów, "Rada Etyki Mediów Ostro o TVP. Chodzi o Zdjęcia," *Onet.pl, September* 2021. https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/rada-etyki-mediow-ostro-o-tvp-chodzi-o-zdjecia/5syytj8. [link not available anymore]

68 D. Sitnicka, "'Krowa Kamińskiego' to stare nagranie z internetu. A w dodatku to klacz," OKO.press, September 28, 2021, https://oko.press/krowa-kaminskiego-to-stare-nagranie-z-internetu-a-w-dodatku-to-klacz.

The transformation of migrants into instruments of hybrid warfare

One of the press conferences organised by the Polish government in September 2021 – thus shortly after the declaration of the state of emergency at the Poland–Belarus border – provides a vivid example of how racial and geopolitical logics of enmity were brought together through the crisification of the border, which conjured a new figure of the migrant as both threat and weapon. During the event, government representatives presented photographs and intelligence materials allegedly documenting the identities and backgrounds of migrants arriving at the border. In the course of the presentation, Minister of the Interior Mariusz Kamiński, affiliated with the right-wing populist Law and Justice (PiS) party, claimed that among the migrants there were "drug addicts, paedophiles, and zoophiles."[67]



Figure 1.5. Government press conference during the 2021 Belarus–Poland border crisis, at which state officials presented migrants as security threats within the broader narrative of "hybrid warfare." Screenshot reproduced from OKO.press.[68]

At one level, migrants were represented as morally deviant and dangerous subjects whose presence threatened the social and cultural order of the nation. The language deployed by government officials drew upon familiar racialised and exclusionary tropes, transforming migrants into figures of contamination, criminality, and disorder. On another level, however, the same individuals were framed as instruments of a hostile operation orchestrated by the Belarusian regime and supported by Russia. In this second narrative, migrants increasingly ceased to appear as autonomous actors and instead became objects within a broader geopolitical confrontation. They were no longer merely dangerous outsiders; they were portrayed as tools, vectors, or even ammunition deployed by hostile states against Poland and the European Union.



Figure 1.6. A man from Afghanistan seeking international protection in Poland, caught between Polish and Belarusian state actors. Photograph by Maciej Moskwa, 2021.

The significance of this discursive shift – echoed since then in numerous political discourses in Poland and also at the EU level – lies in the fact that it brought together two distinct but mutually reinforcing logics of enmity. The first constructed migrants as threatening "Others" whose exclusion was necessary for the protection of the national community. The second transformed them into weapons deployed in a hybrid war, thereby relocating migration from the sphere of humanitarian and legal governance into the domain of national security and defence. What emerges through these intersecting logics is a double, and inherently unstable, status assigned to migrants at the Poland–Belarus border, on that oscillates between enemy–subject and weapon–object.[69] Together, these framings, and the new figure of the migrant they conjured, facilitated the emergence of a border regime in which exceptional measures could be justified simultaneously in the name of public security, state sovereignty, and protection against external aggression. The threatening discursive construction of migrants crossing the Polish-Belarus border since 2021 is even more striking for the contrast that can be observed in relation to the far larger numbers of Ukrainian refugees arriving in Poland as of 2014 and mostly since 2022, who were instead predominantly framed as culturally close and as fleeing the aggression of a common enemy, a framing that was important in justifying far more welcoming policies across the EU and in Poland.[70]

69 As Black studies scholars such as Fred Moten (2018) have emphasized, the process of instrumentalization of one groups of humans by another is deeply racialized, since it is predicated on the separation between those whose capacity for reason lends them the "exclusive suitability for instrumentalisation" (5) and those whose purported "absence of ethical "self-control"" predisposes them toward servility, and should thus be reduced to "being-instruments" in the hands of others (6). Whether we consider the practices of the Belarusian state instrumentalising migrants, or Poland and the EU's counter-instrumentalisation narratives, this racialisation plays out similarly i.e., a racial logic reduces migrants from the Global South to an indistinct and threatening mass of people are denied their humanity and reduced to a means towards an end. F. Moten, The Universal Machine (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

70 V. Charnysh, L. Peisakhin, N. Stoop, and P. van der Windt, "Understanding Refugee Assistance: Evidence on Syrian and Ukrainian Refugees in Poland," *Comparative Political Studies*, online first (2026); V. Hernes and K. Łukasiewicz, "Restrictive, Liberal, Selective or Universal? A Cross-National Analysis of European Countries' Policy Response to Forced Migrants from Ukraine," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 52, no. 2 (2026): 343-366; J. Adam and S. Hess, "Fortified Nationalism: Racializing Infrastructures and the Authoritarian Transformation of the Body Politic. A Field Trip to the Bifurcated Polish/EU Border Regime," *movements: Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies* 7, no. 2 (2023): 65-91.

While this novel framing of migrants as threats and weapons emerges clearly from our qualitative analysis, we have sought to corroborate these findings with quantitative discourse analysis as well. Working with Polish researchers from the I-CLAIM project,[71] we analysed this shift through a longitudinal corpus analysis of the words used to describe migrants and the terms associated with them in Polish media and political discourse.[72] The analysis is based on media corpora covering 2019–23 of four Polish newspapers representing different media profiles and political orientations, extended to 2024–25 for this research, and divided into quarterly sub-corpora.[73] Using AntConc, the study combined frequency and concordance analyses to trace not only the occurrence of key terms but also the changing associations through which migrants were framed across security, militarised, humanitarian, and racialised registers.[74] We also developed a "Threat Index," constructed from clusters of threat-related and humanitarian keywords, to measure shifts in the balance between securitising and humanitarian framings over time ,and to identify moments of discursive intensification across the corpus. While the extended corpus allows us to situate later developments, the analysis below focuses primarily on the 2021 rupture, when migration discourse at the . border was reorganised around the combined vocabularies of racialised threat, humanitarian exposure, and hybrid warfare

Our analysis reveals striking shifts in the discourse on migration in the course of the crisification of the border. The first visible transformation that emerges from our data is one of discursive intensity. Between Q2 and Q3 2021, the media corpus expands sharply, corresponding to the events at Usnarz Górny and to the broader transformation of the Poland–Belarus border into a central national and European political issue. The corpus then reaches its highest point in Q4 2021, when the border crisis becomes fully established as a public object of debate. A second moment of renewed intensity appears in Q3–Q4 2023, linked to the parliamentary elections, the referendum, which included manipulative questions related to migration, such as those on the EU relocation mechanism and the removal of the border barrier between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Belarus, and the so-called visa scandal. The extended series further shows that elevated attention persists into 2024–25, although these later years must be read cautiously because the corpus composition changes from 2024 onwards.

71 I-CLAIM, "Poland," project publication archive, I-CLAIM, accessed June 2026, https://i-claim.eu/project_category/poland/.

72 A detailed description of the corpus compilation procedure and analytical approach is provided in the methodological reports M. Rheindorf and B. A. Vollmer, "Methodological Note: Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis of Migration-Related Discourses in Media, Politics and Civil Society," I-CLAIM, 2025; A. Grzymała-Kazłowska and K. Homel-Ficenes, "*Narratives about Irregularised Migrants in Poland: Mass-Media, Politics and Social Organisations*," Country Report, I-CLAIM, 2025.

73 The analysis is based on media corpora compiled for the period 2019–2023 within the I-CLAIM project and subsequently extended to cover an additional two years (2024–2025). The 2019–2023 corpus consists of 1,298 articles (11,134,328 tokens) published in four major Polish newspapers: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, *Rzeczpospolita*, and *Fakt*. The 2024–2025 extension includes 720 (619,533 tokens) articles from *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, and *Rzeczpospolita*. These newspapers were selected to represent different media profiles and political orientations. *The corpora were compiled by retrieving all Polish-language articles containing combinations of migration and irregularity related keywords, including irregular, illegal, undocumented, migration, and immigration. The search strategy was designed to capture media coverage related to irregular migration across the selected newspapers. For the longitudinal analysis, the corpora were divided into quarterly sub-corpora and analysed using AntConc software. The sub-corpora vary in size, both in the number of articles and the total number of tokens, reflecting fluctuations in media attention to irregular migration over time.*

74 The analysis presented in this report combines two corpus-linguistic techniques: frequency analysis, (used to identify changes in the salience of selected lexical items over time) and collocations and concordance analysis (used to examine the contexts in which key words and phrases occur, with particular attention to linguistic patterns reflecting violent/securitising and humanitarian framings of irregular migration).

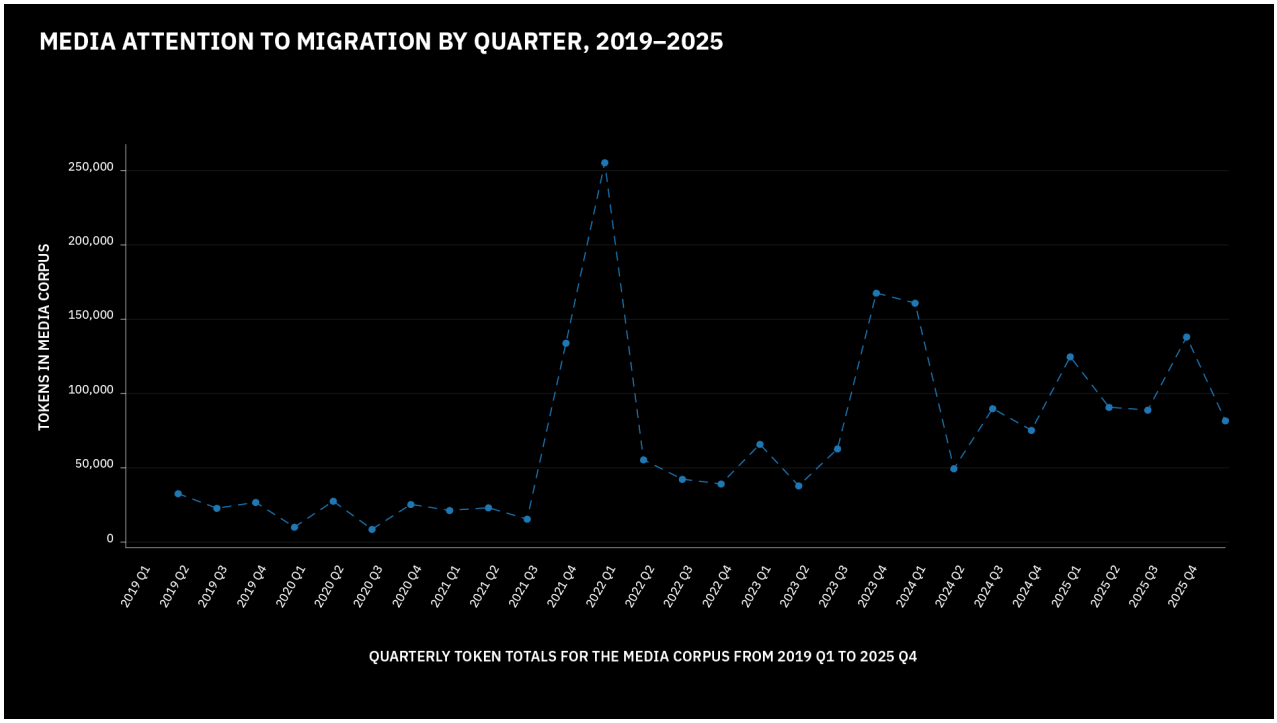


Figure 1.7. The figure uses quarterly token totals for the media corpus from 2019 Q1 to 2025 Q4. It measures the changing volume of media attention to irregular migration, showing the major Q3–Q4 2021 rupture, the 2023 reactivation, and the persistence of high media attention in 2024–2025, especially around Q4 2024 and Q3 2025. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

This quantitative rupture, however, should not be read only as an increase in the number of media articles. The more important transformation concerns the articulation between two logics of enmity: a racialised logic, already present before 2021, and a militarised geopolitical logic that becomes dominant during the border crisis. The data, which should be treated as a conservative reconstruction of selected racial and religious markers, shows that racialised and religious markers predate the 2021 border crisis.[75] References to Islam, Muslims, racism, Blackness, Jews, Christianity, and other civilisational and othering markers related to migration appear before the Poland–Belarus border becomes the dominant spatial frame. This supports the argument that 2021 did not create racialised hostility ex nihilo. Rather, the border crisis activated and redirected pre-existing racial, religious, and cultural threat imaginaries towards the Poland–Belarus border.

75 The racial and religious dimension requires a cautious reading, because terms explicitly related to race, religion and cultural othering were requested in the initial lexicon but were not fully incorporated into the final threat-index. For this reason, the figure below should be treated as a conservative reconstruction of selected racial and religious markers, rather than as a complete racialisation index.

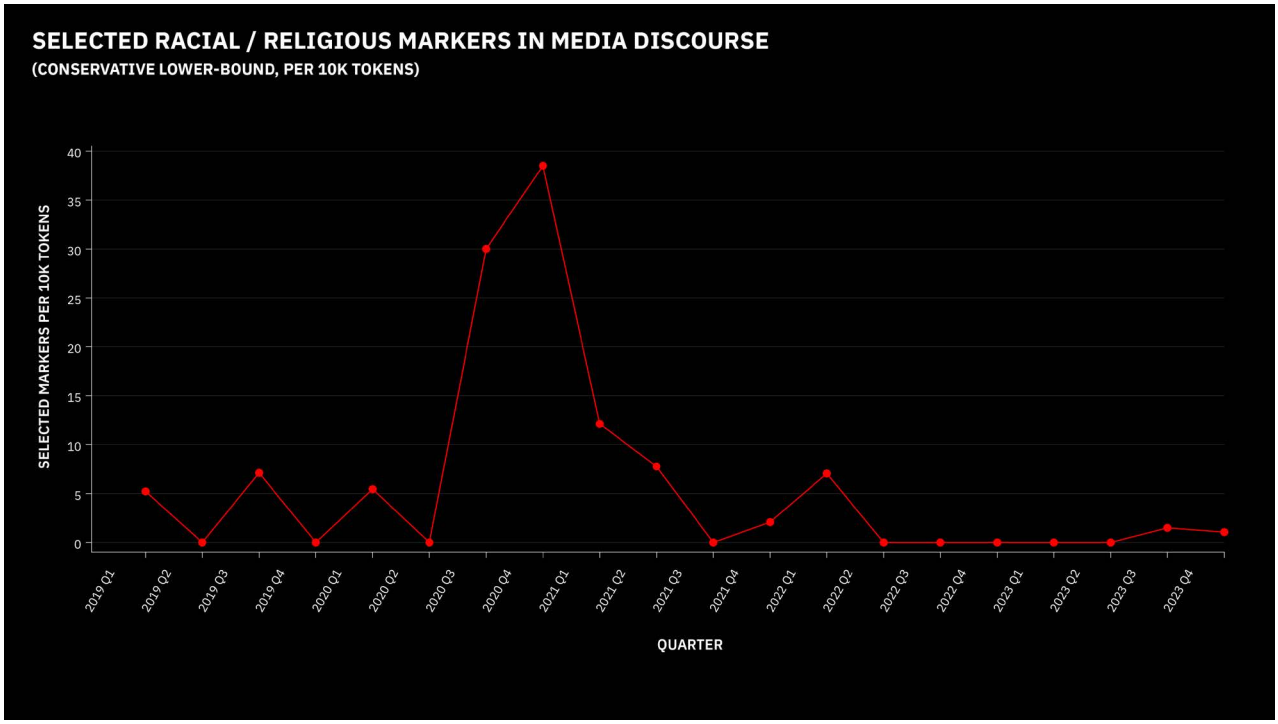


Figure 1.8. This figure represents racial/religious markers in media discourse, 2019–23. The terms included are: Islam/Islamisation, Islamic, Muslim/Muslims, Christianity/Christian, Jews, racism, Blackness, and related explicitly reported terms. The line represents selected racial/religious markers per 10,000 tokens. This figure is a conservative lower bound, not a full racialisation index. It shows that racial and religious othering was already present before 2021, then became available for rearticulation through the Belarus border crisis. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

While there are thus elements of continuity with pre-existing racial threat imaginaries, what changes from Q3 2021 onwards is the fusion of this racialised threat imaginary with a geopolitical grammar of hostile state action. The corpus shows a clear shift of attention to the Poland–Belarus border, with border- and security-related terms becoming overwhelmingly salient. At the same time, the vocabulary of hybrid warfare, attack, pressure, destabilisation, and propaganda becomes increasingly prominent. Migration is no longer framed only as irregular mobility, asylum, border crossing, or humanitarian suffering; it is increasingly interpreted as a form of hostile state action.

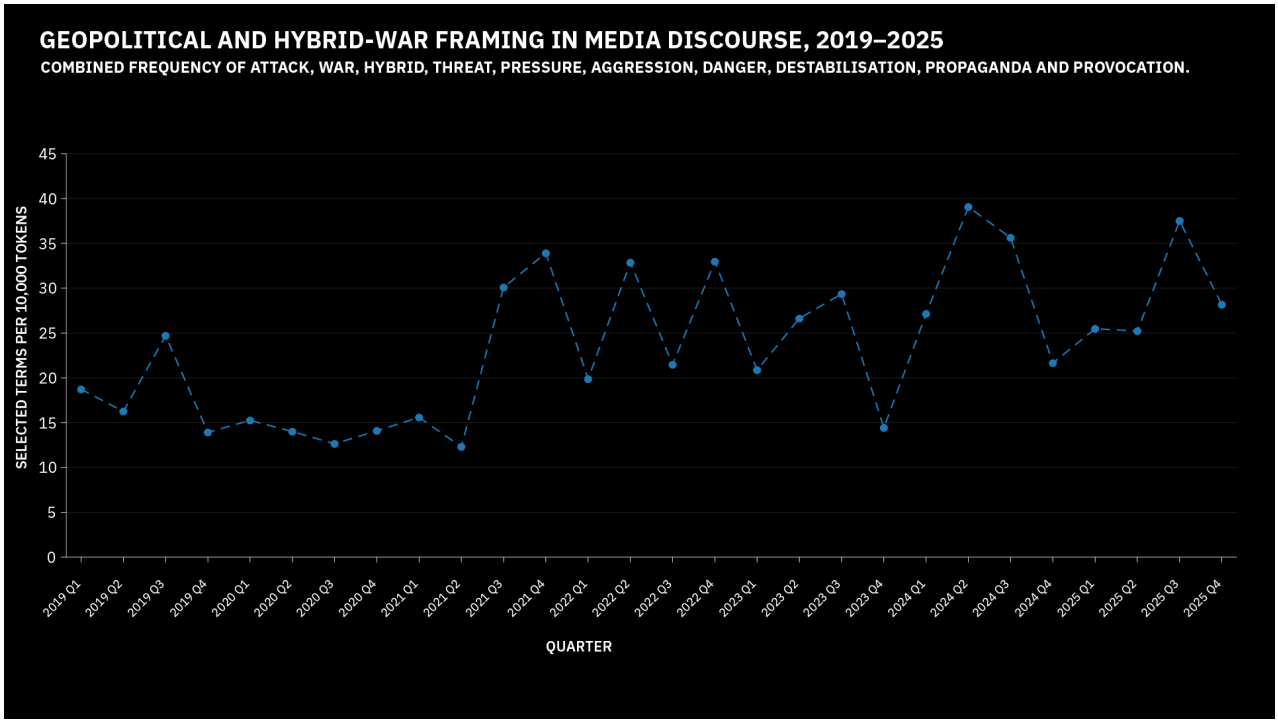


Figure 1.9. The figure uses a selected geopolitical/hybrid-war cluster from the cleaned media keyword rows, normalised by token totals per quarter. The terms included are: attack/to attack, war, hybrid, threat, pressure, aggression, danger, destabilisation, propaganda, and provocation. The line represents selected geopolitical and hybrid-war terms per 10,000 tokens. It shows a clear intensification from Q3–Q4 2021, when migration becomes increasingly interpreted through the grammar of hybrid warfare, hostile pressure, and externally orchestrated threat. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

This geopolitical framing intensifies further in Q4 2021. The vocabulary of escalation becomes central: aggression, attack, escalation, pressure, forcing, and surge. The term “weapons” becomes particularly significant, while references to Lukashenko, the Belarusian regime, propaganda, and provocation anchor migration discourse within a narrative of external coordination. Migrants are increasingly described not only as people crossing a border irregularly, but as elements of an operation directed by a hostile regime. By this point, the phrase “hybrid war” is firmly established as one of the dominant interpretive frames.

At the same time, humanitarian language does not disappear. The 2021 rupture is not a simple replacement of humanitarian language by threat language. On the contrary, the use of humanitarian vocabulary also rises sharply. References to bodies, death, dying, corpses, children, pregnancy, hypothermia, violence, and victims remain present and even intensify. Gendered vulnerability becomes more explicit within this register, with women, pregnancy, and children receiving particular attention as emblematic figures of suffering. Migrants therefore do not cease to be represented as vulnerable. Rather, their vulnerability is increasingly narrated inside a broader grammar of threat, emergency, and defence. The extended series further shows that this is not only a short-lived 2021 phenomenon. Although the composition of the corpus changes from 2024 onwards, the components of the threat-index workbook indicate that threat vocabulary remains highly salient through 2024–25, while humanitarian vocabulary also continues to be present. This confirms that

the relevant transformation is not the disappearance of humanitarian language, but its increasingly subordinate place within a discourse structured by securitisation, crisis, border defence, and hybrid attack.

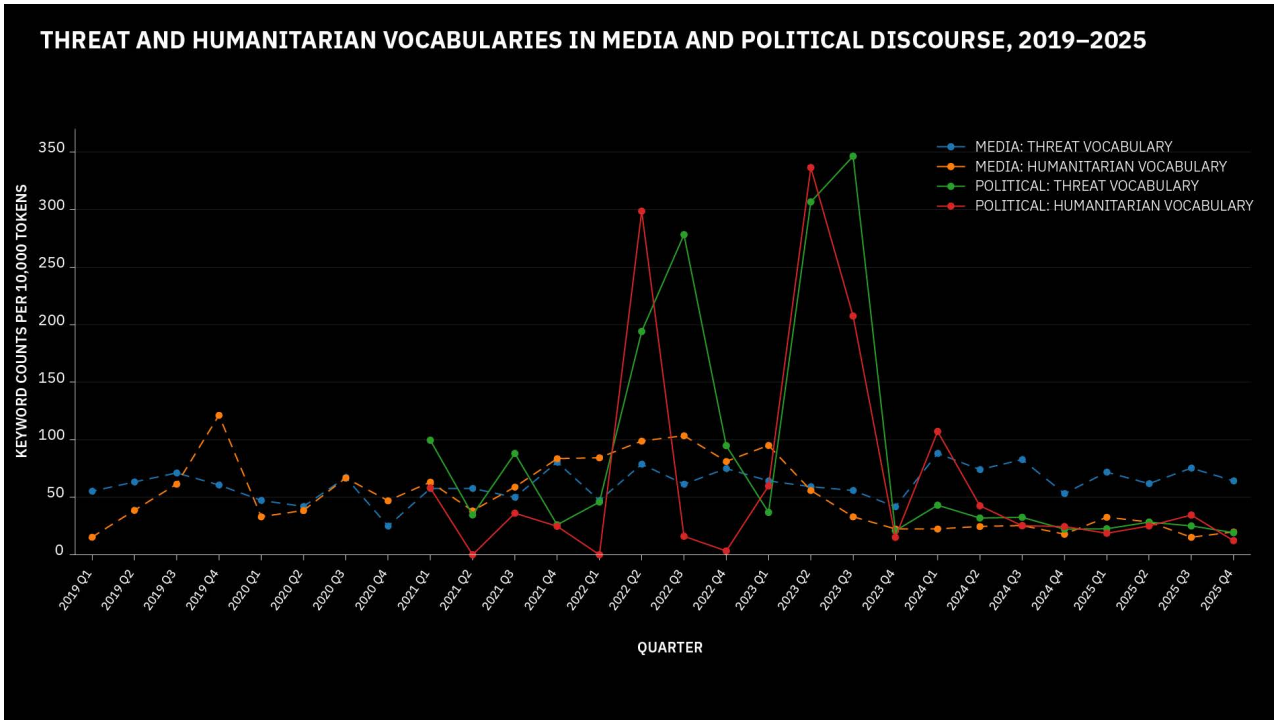


Figure 1.10. Threat and humanitarian vocabularies in media and political discourse; raw keyword counts per quarter. The blue line represents threat-related keyword totals; the orange line represents humanitarian keyword totals. This figure uses the components behind the threat-index workbook, not only the final net Threat Index. It shows that humanitarian language rises together with threat language in 2021; migrants' suffering remains visible, but becomes politically subordinated to a broader narrative of emergency, border defence, and hybrid attack. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

In this sense, the discursive shift observed in 2021 should not be understood as the complete disappearance of humanity from discourse. Migrants appear at once as suffering bodies and as security risks; as people exposed to death, cold and violence, and as instruments of Lukashenko's regime. However, the recognition of migrants as suffering persons remains politically insufficient to organise a response around protection, and the primary response, as we have seen in this chapter, is organised around mitigating the risk migrants have been framed as posing.

Taken together, the quantitative analysis supports the qualitative account of a double construction: migrants are racialised as dangerous outsiders and simultaneously objectified as instruments of Belarusian and Russian action. These logics reinforce one another. An indistinct, threatening group is easier to imagine as a manipulable weapon, while the weapon

metaphor makes exclusion, pushbacks, emergency measures, and militarisation appear as defensive necessities.

The impact of this discursive shift on public opinion has been significant and consolidated over time. Available CBOS trend data suggest that restrictive attitudes towards refugees from Africa and the Middle East, and later towards migrants more generally, were already high before 2021. The 2021 crisification of the border activated anti-migrant hostility and redirected it towards a specific border site. As we will discuss further in Chapter 6, this trend was perpetuated over the 2022–25 period.

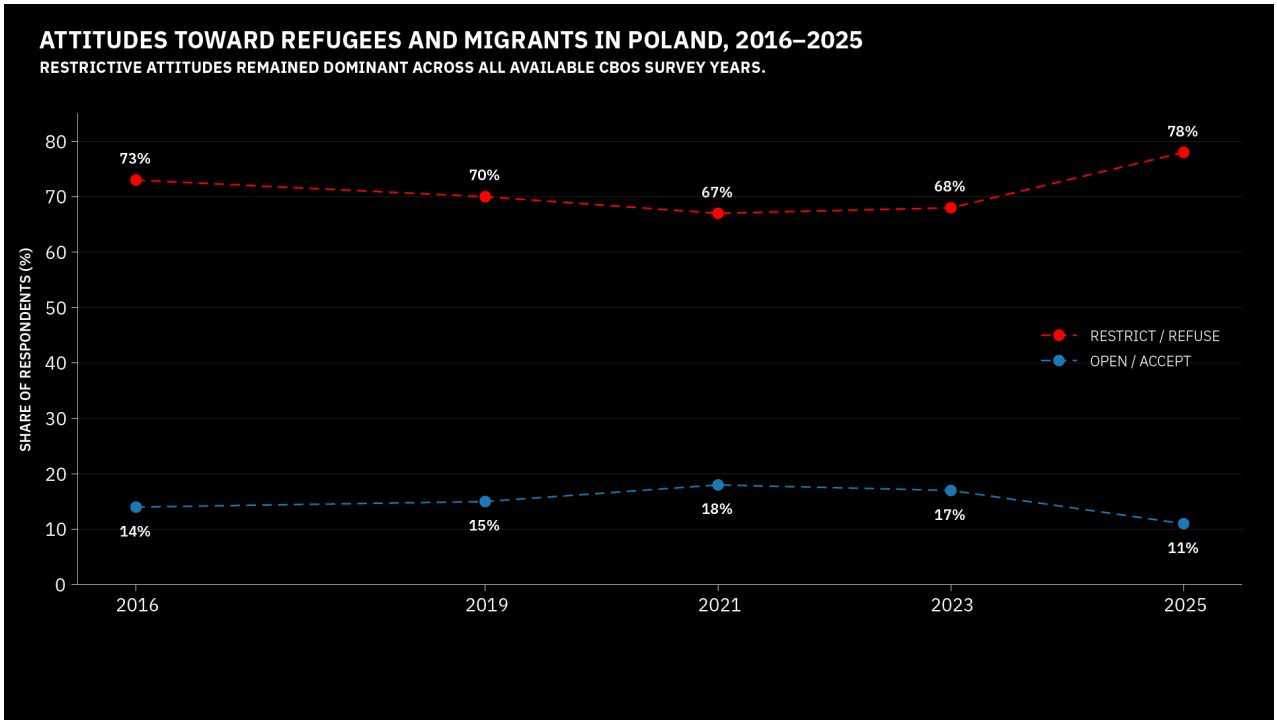


Figure 1.11. This figure uses the variables open-accept% and restrict-refuse% for the available survey years. The blue line represents the share of respondents favouring restriction/refusal; the orange line represents the share favouring openness/acceptance. This figure should be used as contextual evidence, not as a direct measure of media discourse. It shows that refusal/restriction was already high before 2021. The crisis should therefore be read as an activation and redirection of an existing hostile imaginary, rather than as its sudden creation. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

This broader climate of public hostility towards migrants also resonates with what we observed during fieldwork. In March 2025, during an exchange with a Border Guard officer, the officer recalled that, in the summer of 2021, she and her colleagues had initially provided migrants with food and clothing, recognising their vulnerability and shared humanity: "We are also mothers, daughters, right?" Yet she immediately added that "then things changed" and that migrants had become "threats, weapons in the hands of the Lukashenko regime." This brief exchange captures

the shift from humanitarian recognition to security suspicion and speaks directly to the questions raised at the beginning of this chapter. It suggests that a different response to the arrival of migrants may have been possible, at least within some segments of the population, even state officials. Yet this possibility was rapidly foreclosed by the entangled racial and geopolitical logics through which migrants were framed, transforming them from subjects at risk into risky subjects.[76]

The discourse analysis therefore supports the central claim of this section: the crisification of the Poland–Belarus border relied on and triggered the convergence of racial and geopolitical logics of enmity. Migrants were not only constructed as threatening outsiders, nor as passive instruments of Belarusian pressure. They were made to occupy both positions at once. It is precisely this unstable combination – racial enemy and geopolitical weapon – that helped legitimise the exceptional measures and violent bordering practices that constitute Poland's and the EU's counter-instrumentalisation governance, to which we now turn.

76 M. Tazzioli, "Migration and the Racialised Politics of Desire," Politics 45, no. 3 (2025): 475-489.

77 S. Cobarrubias e. al., "Interventions on the Concept of Externalisation in Migration and Border Studies," *Political Geography* 105 (2023): 102911.

Poland and the EU's counter-instrumentalisation governance

The analysis above helps us to understand the racial and geopolitical logics that led to the discursive construction of migrants crossing the Poland–Belarus border as threats and weapons. We now return in greater detail to Poland's policy and operational response to this perceived threat, first exemplified by the events at Usnarz discussed at the beginning of this chapter. The events that unfolded at the Belarusian border with EU member states in 2021 and the political responses of these states and the EU, must be examined against the backdrop of the EU's policies of border externalisation and Belarus's position within this framework before EU–Belarus relations rapidly deteriorated from 2020 onwards.

As EU migration policies increasingly denied access to non-European migrants, while "unwanted" migration across the EU's external borders continued, one of the key policy tools deployed by the EU to "solve" this "problem" of migration was the outsourcing of border control and migration management through "partnerships with third countries," commonly referred to as border externalisation.[77] In turn, the construction of migration as a threat by EU policymakers and the media enabled what EU policies define as "third countries" to use the politically salient

issue of migration as a bargaining chip in negotiating their asymmetric relations with Europe.[78] In other words, the core vulnerability of externalisation is that, by transferring responsibility for managing the EU's borders to non-European states, it also transfers political leverage to them. Time and again, non-European states have sought to increase their bargaining power by either threatening to cease controlling their borders or temporarily enabling border crossings – what the EU has increasingly come to refer to as the *instrumentalisation of migration.*[79] EU states and institutions have, in turn, responded to these events through a range of diplomatic measures and heightened border-control operations – what we propose to refer to as *counter-instrumentalisation governance.*[80] Within this field of (counter)-instrumentalisation, migrants are far from passive objects of contention in the hands of states. Rather, they "actively navigate" these diplomatic frictions,[81] mobilising the temporary cracks in Europe's architecture of border control created by these tensions to advance their own precarious journeys.

Belarus is not entirely new to the practice of exerting political pressure on the EU through migration. In 2002, even before Belarus became one of the EU's external borders, Lukashenko had already threatened: "If the Europeans don't pay, we will not protect Europe from these flows (referring to drugs and "illegal migration").[82] As early as 2003, the EU sought to task Belarus with different forms of migration management.

Despite moments of diplomatic friction, from early 2003 to 2020, Lukashenko's regime agreed to control migrants' movements on behalf of the EU in exchange for funding and other advantages, including a visa facilitation agreement with the EU that entered into force in 2020. Through €40 million in funding across fourteen projects spanning 2003–23, with roughly 78 per cent directed towards border surveillance, infrastructure, and guard training (see graph below), implemented by partners such as IOM, UNHCR, and ICMPD, the EU progressively externalised migration control to Belarus. In 2009, Frontex, the EU's border management agency, signed a working agreement with Belarus establishing a framework for gradual operational cooperation concerning border control and security.[83] The same year, Frontex headquarters were established in Warsaw, reflecting Poland's growing strategic importance within the EU's emerging border-security architecture and symbolising the increasing significance of the Union's eastern frontier in European migration governance.

78 G. Tsourapas, "Migration Diplomacy in the Global South: Cooperation, Coercion and Issue Linkage in Gaddafi's Libya," *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 10 (2017): 2367-85; N. El Qadim, "De-Europeanising European Borders: EU-Morocco Negotiations on Migrations and the Decentring Agenda in EU Studies," in *Critical Epistemologies of Global Politics* (Bristol: E-IR, 2017), 134-51. http://www.e-ir.info/2017/06/01/edited-collection-critical-epistemologies-of-global-politics/.

79 European Commission. (2021, December 14). *Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council addressing situations of* instrumentalisation *in the field of migration and asylum* (COM(2021) 890 final, 2021/0427(COD)). Publications Office of the European Union. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021PC0890; K. Czarnota, C. Heller, A. Mangione, R. Mussa, and P. Teunissen, "Entangled Logics of Enmity: Race, Geopolitics, and the Lethal Pushback Regime at the Polish-Belarus Border," *Citizenship Studies*, forthcoming; M. Gkliati, "Let's Call It What It Is: Hybrid Threats and Instrumentalisation as the Evolution of Securitisation in Migration Management," *European Papers* 8, no. 2 (2023): 561-78, https://doi.org/10.15166/2499-8249/675.

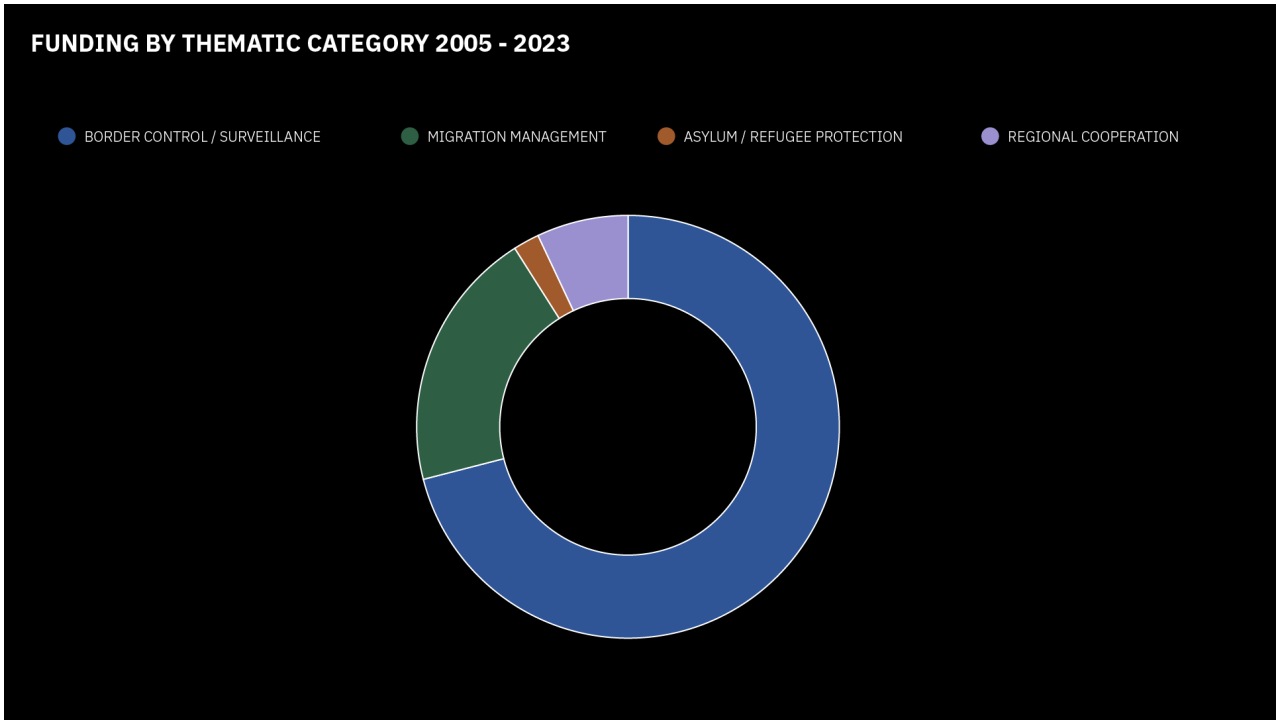
[78] Gkliati, "Let's Call It What It Is," 561.

80 K. Czarnota, C. Heller, A. Mangione, R. Mussa, and P. Teunissen, "Entangled Logics of Enmity."

81 J. Schapendonk, "On Wayfaring and Transporting: Understanding the Mobility Trajectories of African Migrants in Europe," in *Trajectories and Imaginaries in Migration*, ed. F. Hillmann, T. v. Naerssen, and E. Spaan (London: Routledge, 2018), 15-55.

82 G. Dyer, "Why Do We Need NATO?," *The Baltic Times*, November 28, 2002, https://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/7279/.

83 The core objectives were to counter unauthorized migration and related cross-border crime, strengthen border security between EU Member States and Belarus, foster mutual trust between border guard authorities, and facilitate joint measures.



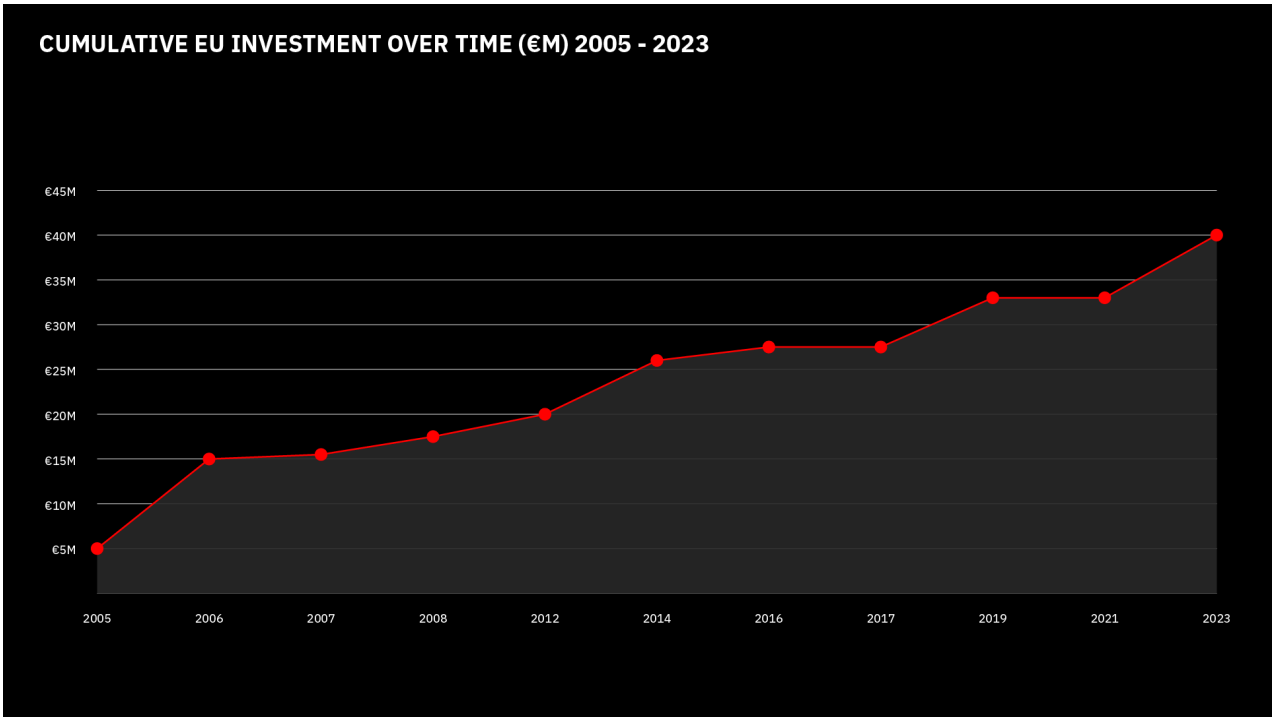


Figure 1.12. This graph illustrates that EU funding commitments toward Belarus-related migration and border-management projects rose steadily from 2005 and 2023. It is important to note, however, that these figures represent planned or committed project budgets at the time of signature, not necessarily funds fully disbursed or activities fully completed. Following the 2020 sanctions and the crisification of the border, although several projects were cancelled. Graphs by Border Forensics, 2026.

However, as of 2020, EU–Belarus relations were shaken in the wake of the contested Belarusian presidential elections. The August 2020 Belarusian presidential election, officially awarding victory to Alexander Lukashenko amid fraud claims,[84] sparked unprecedented protests. The regime's reaction was violent, resulting in over 35,000 detentions, more than a thousand documented torture cases, and several enforced disappearances.[85]

84 W. Benedek, *OSCE Rapporteur's Report under the Moscow Mechanism on Alleged Human Rights Violations Related to the Presidential Elections of 9 August 2020 in Belarus* (Warsaw: OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2020), https://cdn.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/2/b/469539.pdf.



Figure 1.13. A protest in Minsk, Belarus, 2020. Photograph by Jędrzej Nowicki, 2020.

The European Union responded by introducing sanction packages against the government of Belarus and key regime figures as of October 2020, with sanctions expanded over the following years. By mid-2023, thirteen sanctions packages, targeting more than 200 individuals and thirty-seven entities, including state banks, had frozen €2.5 billion in assets and banned €1.7 billion in exports, according to EU Council data.[86]

85 Human Rights Watch, "Belarus: Violence, Abuse in Response to Election Protests," *August* 11, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/11/belarus-violence-abuse-response-election-protests.

86 Council of the European Union, "Timeline – EU Sanctions Against Belarus," Consilium, last reviewed February 26, 2025, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-belarus/timeline-eu-sanctions-against-belarus/.

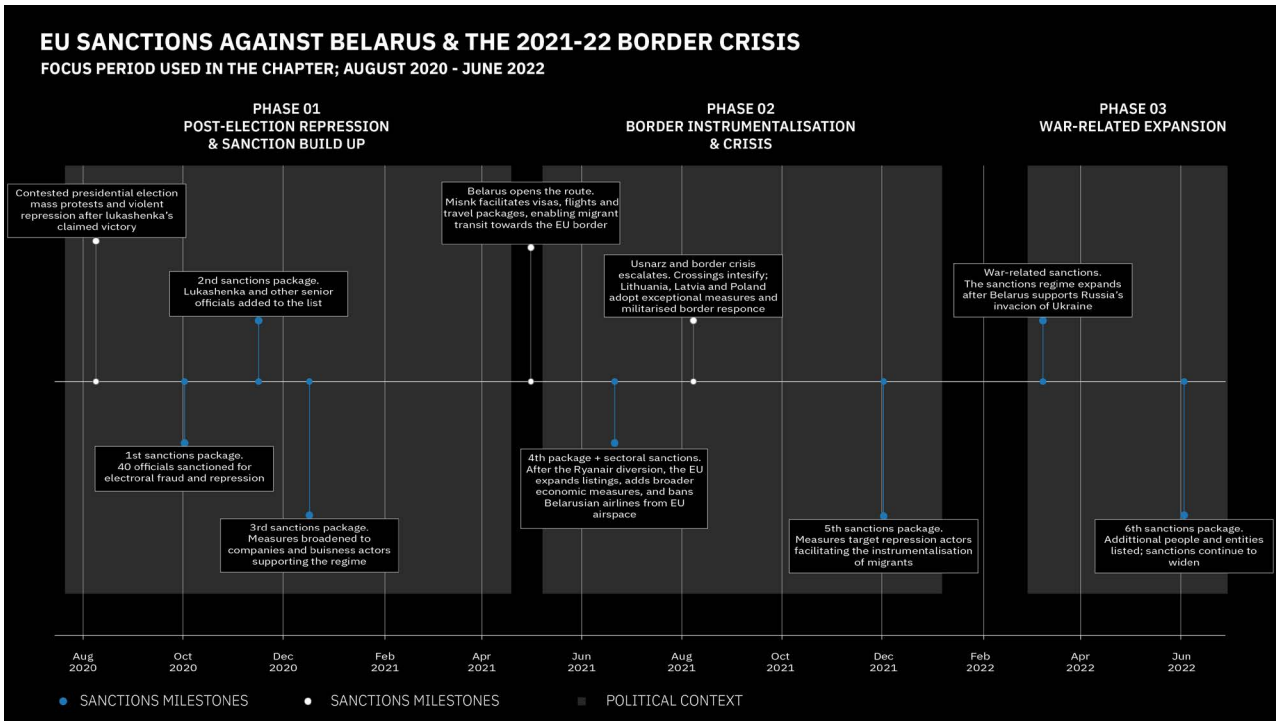


Figure 1.14. Timeline of sanctions imposed against Belarus, June 2020–June 2022. Timeline by Border Forensics, 2026.

In response to these sanctions in May 2021, Lukashenko's regime sought to undermine the EU's policies of border externalisation by exploiting the movement of migrants to pressure Europe. The authorities in Minsk – in cooperation with Russia – wove a complex commercial infrastructure linking Belarusian state institutions, diplomatic missions, Belarusian airlines (Belavia), the KGB, authorised tour operators, and private travel agencies operating across Iraq, Turkey, and other countries. Access to Belarus became a purchasable service, marketed through travel packages combining visas, flights, accommodation, and transport. The authorities further enabled the transit of thousands of migrants through Belarus's highly militarised borders with Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania.[87] Because other avenues for accessing European territory had been increasingly sealed off over the previous years, migrants seized the opportunity presented by this alternative route into Europe. Some embarked on flights to Belarus from their countries of origin, while others, who had been caught in impasses at other European borders, decided to reroute via Belarus. Ultimately, this led to the channelling of thousands of migrants towards Belarus' borders with European countries. What emerges from our analysis is that Belarus' instrumentalisation of migration should not be seen in isolation from the broader field of conflictual relations surrounding migration across Europe's borders. Belarus strategically exploited long-standing tensions and deficiencies within the European migration and asylum regime, including the lack of safe and legal pathways for migration and access to protection. In a moment of rising tension with the EU, Belarus mobilised the political leverage that EU border externalisation policies had given it and began enabling migrants' unauthorised movement across EU borders.

87 Border Emergency Collective, *Zone of Hidden Violence*, visual report, 2022, Vimeo video, https://vimeo.com/738396988.



Figure 1.15. A group of soldiers on display during a visit by Defence Minister Mariusz Błaszczak. The line stands behind a row of concertina wire, facing Belarus, 2021. Photograph by Maciej Moskwa, 2021.

As the events of summer 2021 unfolded, and more people arrived and found themselves trapped at multiple locations along the borders of Belarus, EU member states and institutions responded by adapting the existing toolbox of counter-instrumentalisation governance to a context of heightened geopolitical tension. Indeed, these actors, as well as NATO officials, condemned the situation in militarised terms, framing Belarus's actions as a "hybrid threat" and an "instrumentalisation of migrants."[88] Legitimised by this militarised framing and the construction of the figure of the migrant as threat and weapon, as we discussed above, authorities in EU neighbouring countries – Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania – instituted exceptional measures and legislation and deployed militarised means of border control at a rapid pace.[89] Lithuania was the first to act, declaring an "extraordinary situation" in July 2021, passing a parliamentary resolution explicitly designating the migrant presence as "hybrid aggression," and amending its Law on the Legal Status of Foreigners to bar access to the asylum process.[90] Latvia declared a state of emergency that prohibited the registration of asylum claims within the border zone and authorised the use of physical force against migrants at the border.[91] Poland followed in August 2021 with a series of legal changes and operational measures at the border, including the erection of fences and the deployment of military personnel, aimed at preventing migrants' crossings and restricting access to the border by civil society actors. The measures taken by all three states received different degrees of financial and political support from the EU, to which we will return in Chapter Five, [92] Poland's response,

88 See, for example, European Commission, Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council Addressing Situations of Instrumentalisation in the Field of Migration and Asylum, COM(2021) 890 final, 2021/0427(COD) (Publications Office of the European Union, December 14, 2021), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021PC0890; European Commission, "Statement by President von der Leyen on the Situation at the Border between Poland and Belarus," European Commission Press Corner, November 8, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_21_5867.

89 A. Ancite-Jepifánova, "*Beyond the 'Hybrid Attack' Paradigm: EU-Belarus Border Crisis and the Erosion of Asylum Seeker Rights in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland*," re:constitution Working Papers, no. 35 (Forum Transregionale Studien, 2024), https://perspectivia.net/receive/pnet_mods_00006572.

90 Human Rights Monitoring Institute, "Lithuania's Response to the Migrant Crisis: Milling About in Confusion, Curtailing Human Rights, and Building a Wall," *Liberties.eu, August* 12, 2021, https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/lithuania-migrant-crisis/43723.

91 De:border // Migration Justice Collective, "Containment and Abandonment at the EU-Belarus Border," accessed July 16, 2026, https://debordercollective.org/interventions/containment-eu-belarus-border/.

92 See, the Joint Communication *Responding to State-Sponsored Instrumentalisation of Migrants at the EU External Border* (JOIN(2021)32 final) published on 23 November 2021 by the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, which marked a decisive moment in the EU's official interpretation of the Belarus border crisis. While not the first institutional response to the events at the border, it was the first comprehensive policy document to consolidate the crisis within a coherent security framework centred on the notions of "state-sponsored instrumentalisation" and "hybrid threat".

which we focus on in this report, experienced the highest number of crossings and asylum applications.[93] Poland's response was also markedly greater than that of its Baltic counterparts, involving a more extensive deployment of border forces and more complex infrastructural measures. Most importantly, the human cost of Poland's response was far greater: the number of deaths recorded in the Białowieża Forest and surrounding border areas significantly exceeded those documented elsewhere along the Belarus frontier[94]. We now turn to the policies and legislation that the Polish government put forwards, before the following chapter examines in more detail the operational means deployed at the border itself.

93 In the Proposal for provisional emergency measures for the benefit of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland it says the following:

Because of this instrumentalisation, in 2021 as of 21 November, 7 831 third country nationals have entered the territories of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland from Belarus in an unauthorised manner, compared to 257 in the entire 2020. In addition, there have been 2 676 asylum applications in Lithuania, 579 applications in Latvia and 6 730 applications in Poland. In addition, 42 741 attempts to cross have been prevented by the three Member States. While an exact estimate would be difficult to give, up to 10 000 more migrants may be currently stranded in Belarus with further arrivals on a daily basis. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex-:52021PC0752

94 According to Sienos Grupe, between 2021 and 2026, 11 people have lost their life at the border between Belarus and Lithuania. At the Latvian-Belarusian border 15 people are recorded to have lost their life. See Sienos Grupė / gribupalidzetbegliem.lv, "FAQ about the Latvia-Belarus Border," accessed June 2025, https://gribupalidzetbegliem.lv/en/faq-about-lv-by/.

The encoding of enmity into law

In Poland, the counter-instrumentalisation governance deployed in response to the "threat" of migration involved a series of rapid policy and legislative measures that were adopted from August 2021. Poland fast-tracked a set of legal amendments, emergency decrees, and new laws through which the entangled logic of enmity was *encoded*. Here, the framing of migrants as threats and weapons made it possible to create a flexible and selective enforcement of laws that protect sovereignty while sidelining the rights of people crossing the border and dismantling migrants' access to asylum protection, while the framing of activists as "helpers of the enemy" served to justify their criminalisation. As we will see in the following chapters, these new laws and decrees have *scripted* the functioning of a militarised and lethal pushback regime.



Figure 1.16. Senate committees during the adoption of the Act sanctioning the construction of the state border wall, 26 October 2021. Photograph by Kancelaria Premiera, 2021, licensed under CC BY 3.0 PL.

In the course of our research, we have generated a detailed timeline of the main legal amendments, new laws, and emergency decrees that Poland instituted over time.[95] Together, these measures institutionalised rightlessness and impunity by introducing major changes to the rights of migrants, infrastructure and law enforcement agents, and civil society actors, which we address in turn.

95 As background we have drawn in particular on the legal changes documented in reports published over the last years by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (hfhr.pl) and the Association for Legal Intervention (https://interwencjaprawna.pl).

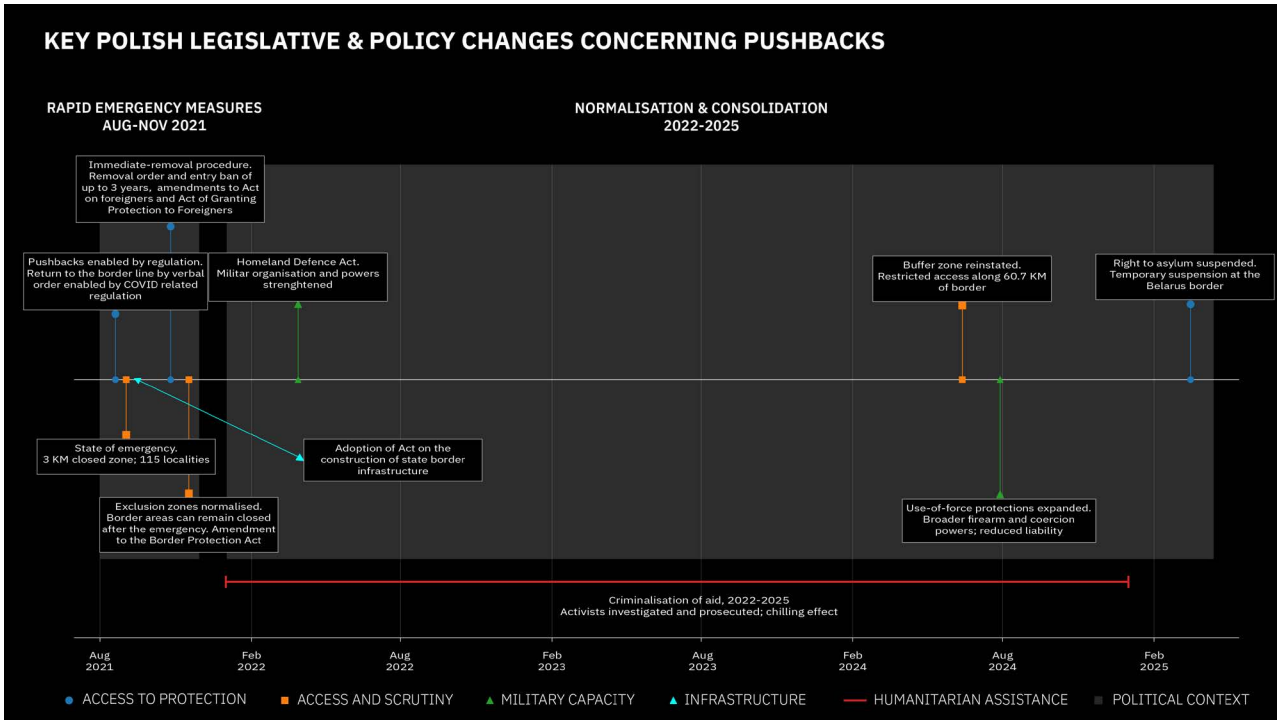


Figure 1.17. This timeline shows how emergency measures introduced in 2021 were progressively converted into ordinary legal powers and subsequently renewed or expanded. Timeline by Border Forensics, 2026.

An essential step was the limiting of migrants' rights to access protection via asylum procedures. On 20 August 2021, the Polish government adopted COVID-related regulations to enable pushbacks to Belarus. Since then, every person who crossed the border in an unauthorised manner was to be returned to the state border line.[96] Moreover, on 23 August 2021, the government submitted to Parliament a bill amending the Act on Foreigners and the Law on Granting Protection to Foreigners in the Territory of the Republic of Poland.[3] The draft law was aimed at accelerating the expulsions of foreign nationals immediately after the unauthorised crossing of the external border of the EU. On 26 October 2021, the amendments entered into force. They introduced a new legal instrument for the expulsion of people who had crossed the border without authorisation. Under Article 303b of the Act on Foreigners, the Border Guard may issue a decision ordering the immediate return of a person apprehended after an unauthorised border crossing, accompanied by an entry ban of up to three years. [97] As emphasised by human rights experts, this has amounted to an attempt to "legalise illegality,"[98] since the law legalised pushbacks, which, however, violate Poland's constitutional, European, and international obligations. Furthermore, domestic courts began questioning the legality of these measures as early as 2022, finding that pushback operations violated fundamental principles of refugee and human rights law. The Polish government has, however, doubled down on its hard line, and in March 2025, the Polish Parliament passed a new amendment to the Law on International Protection, which allows for the temporary suspension of the right to asylum along the border zone with Belarus. As a result of these laws and their flexible implementation at the border, migrants entering irregularly have increasingly been deprived of

96 Rozporządzenie Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji z dnia 20 sierpnia 2021 r. zmieniające rozporządzenie w sprawie czasowego zawieszenia lub ograniczenia ruchu granicznego na określonych przejściach granicznych.

97 The amendment to the Act on Granting Protection to Foreigners, adopted on 26 October 2021, further institutionalised the exclusionary logic of the border regime. By allowing the Head of the Office for Foreigners to refuse to examine asylum applications submitted by persons who had entered Poland irregularly, it significantly restricted access to the asylum procedure. Critics argued that the measure effectively transformed irregular entry – often an unavoidable consequence of seeking protection at the Belarusian border – into a basis for denying access to refugee status determination altogether. In practice, these decisions were issued in a largely summary and discretionary manner, including in relation to individuals in situations of particular vulnerability, with limited opportunities for an individual assessment of protection needs

98 K. Czarnota and M. Górczyńska, *The Lawless Zone: 12 Months of the Polish-Belarusian Border Crisis* (Warsaw: Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 2023), https://hfhr.pl/upload/2023/09/the-lawless-zone.pdf.

protection, and their exclusion has been made (il)legally coherent rather than extraordinary.[99] The undermining of asylum law in Poland is part of a broader global trend towards the death of asylum.[100]

In addition to stripping migrants of their rights, new laws have granted greater flexibility to the military in the use of force and the installation of security infrastructure. Most importantly, in October 2021, the Polish senate adopted the Act on the Construction of State Border Protection Installations[101,] which allowed to initiate the construction of the physical barrier across the entire border between Poland and Belarus. Additionally, as we will describe in more detail in the next chapter, between summer 2021 and November 2021, the number of soldiers, border guards, and police officers increased sharply from a few hundred to many thousands, especially in relation to the events at Kuźnica of 8 November.[102] The increased deployment of personnel to the border zone was accompanied by a key legislative push, with the enactment of the Homeland Defence Act (*Ustawa o obronie ojczyzny*),[103] enacted on 23 March 2022 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which strengthened Poland's defence capabilities by reorganising Armed Forces regulations. In June 2024, following the death of a Polish soldier at the border, the Polish Parliament adopted legislation expanding the circumstances under which soldiers, Border Guard officers, and other uniformed services may use firearms and coercive measures when they perceive a threat to themselves or others.[104] While such measures were presented as necessary responses to escalating security risks, they further consolidated the legal framework underpinning the militarisation of the border.

At the same time, legislative measures were adopted to limit independent scrutiny of state practices. In September 2021, a state of emergency was introduced in the Podlasie region, establishing a restricted-access zone covering 115 localities within approximately three kilometres of the border and excluding journalists, humanitarian organisations, and most members of the public. This exceptional measure was subsequently normalised through amendments to the Border Protection Act on 17 November 2021, which empowered the Minister of the Interior to establish exclusion zones even after the expiration of the state of emergency. As discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, exclusion zones were reinstated and extended repeatedly between 2021 and 2025, most recently in June 2024, with restrictions on access to the border area remaining in force today.

The legal environment surrounding humanitarian assistance also became

99 A. Gündoğdu, "From the Colony to the Border: Lawful Lawlessness of Racial Violence," in *Lawless Zones, Rightless Subjects: Migration and Asylum in De- and Re-territorialized Borders Regimes*, ed. A. Shachar and S. Benhabib (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

100 A. Mountz, *The Death of Asylum: Hidden Geographies of the Enforcement Archipelago* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

101 https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia-en/senate-committees-have-adopted-the-act-on-the-construction-of-state-border-protection-installations

102 Al Jazeera, "Please Save Us: Refugees Face Death at Poland-Belarus Border," *November* 14, 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/14/please-save-us-refugees-face-death-at-poland-belarus-border.

103 Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Poland, "More Troops and More Money for Defence – the Council of Ministers Adopted a Draft Homeland Defence Act," Government of Poland, October 26, 2021, https://www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/more-troops-and-more-money-for-defence--the-council-of-ministers-adopted-a-draft-homeland-defence-act

104 Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, "Negative Opinion on the New Rules for Use of Firearms at Border," July 1, 2024, https://hfhr.pl/en/news/new-rules-for-use-of-firearms-at-border.

increasingly restrictive. Criminal liability for facilitating irregular migration is primarily grounded in Articles 264(3) and 264a(1) of the Criminal Code, while provisions of the Code of Petty Offences have been repeatedly used against individuals operating in the border zone. Although these provisions were originally intended to combat migrant smuggling and regulate access to border areas, they increasingly became tools for investigating, prosecuting, and policing humanitarian actors. This culminated in several high-profile proceedings against activists providing assistance to migrants, including a criminal case lasting from 2022 to 2025. Although the defendants were ultimately acquitted, the proceedings themselves generated a significant chilling effect, discouraging humanitarian engagement and independent monitoring of the border.[105]

105 K. Czarnota, J. Jagura, and A. Kula, Kryminalizacja solidarności: Raport z działań antyrepresyjnych [Criminalizing Solidarity: Report on Anti-Repression Activities] (Warsaw: Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, in cooperation with Kolektyw Szpila, in partnership with Medico International, 2025), https://hfhr.pl/upload/2025/09/kryminalizacja_solidarnosci_raport_hfpc_2025.pdf.

Taken together, these legal developments reveal more than a series of isolated legislative responses to a border crisis. They constitute a broader transformation of the legal order at the border, embedding logics of enmity into law, administration, and everyday governance. Migrants increasingly ceased to appear as rights-bearing individuals and instead became framed as threats, instruments of hostile states, or risks to national sovereignty. At the same time, state agents were granted expanded discretionary powers, while journalists, humanitarian actors, and civil society organisations faced growing restrictions on access, scrutiny, and assistance. The result was the progressive institutionalisation of rightlessness for some and impunity for others. While these changes to the law established the legal conditions for the lethal pushback regime, for that regime to materialise, logics of enmity not only needed to be encoded into law, but also to materialise at the border itself – the focus of the next chapter.

The emergence of the push-back regime beyond the humanitarian–security divide

The analysis presented in this chapter contributes to our understanding of the dynamics shaping the Poland–Belarus border by going beyond the dominant tendency to interpret the events either as a humanitarian crisis requiring protection or as a security crisis requiring defence. While these competing framings have structured much of the public and political debate since 2021, they both risk obscuring a more fundamental question: how, and through what processes, did migration come to be constituted as a threat in the first place, and in a way that enabled such

an exceptional response?

In this chapter, we have argued that the 2021 border events should not be understood simply as an objective emergency to which states responded. Rather, through a process of crisification which has had political, legal, and discursive dimensions, migration was transformed into an exceptional problem requiring exceptional forms of governance. Through this process, people seeking protection increasingly ceased to appear as rights-bearing subjects and came to be represented as threats, risks, instruments, or weapons deployed in a way that threatened Poland and the EU. We have shown that this process of crisification further involved the articulation of two historically distinct but mutually reinforcing logics of enmity. The first was a racial logic rooted in longer histories of Islamophobia, racialisation, and the construction of migrants from the Global South as culturally and civilisationally threatening outsiders. The second was a geopolitical logic that situated migration within narratives of hybrid warfare, hostile state action, and confrontation between Russia, Belarus, NATO, and the European Union. It was their convergence that enabled the figure of the migrant to be simultaneously constructed as both enemy-subject and weapon-object. The process of crisification has not only resulted in the production of threat narratives but, through counter-instrumentalisation governance, has also materialised in crucial legal and institutional effects. Indeed, the framing of migration as a threat and crisis facilitated the normalisation of exceptional measures, including pushbacks, restrictions on access to asylum, the militarisation of the border, and limitations on humanitarian action.

The logics of enmity crafted and adopted by state actors have not gone unchallenged. Indeed, as the opening description of the Usnarz Górny events exemplifies, these state logics have been met with the logics of humanity and solidarity embodied by numerous activists. These too have their own distinct genealogies, and many activists supporting migrants today have connected their action to anti-fascism, Holocaust memory, or environmental activism.

Nonetheless, despite the courage and persistence of these individuals, and the complex systems of collective support they have established over time, they have not succeeded in preventing the consolidation of the pushback regime. Indeed, what initially appeared as a temporary response to an extraordinary situation gradually became embedded within ordinary border governance and was normalised. While the final chapter returns to the discursive, legal, and political processes that have enabled

this consolidation over time, we now turn to the concrete manifestations of the logics of enmity at the border, which have created the material conditions that allow violence and violations to occur.



Figure 1.18. A green light displayed as a symbol of solidarity with migrants at the Poland–Belarus border, part of the "Zielone Światło" (Green Light) initiative launched in October 2021, through which residents of Podlaskie signalled they would offer shelter, food, and assistance to migrants after dark. Photograph by Maciej Moskwa, Michałowo, 2021.

CHAPTER 2. THE ARCHITECTURE OF ENMITY

We were sitting at a table with an activist from Podlaskie Ochotnicze Pogotowie Humanitarne (POPH) when suddenly a phone rang. The activist received a phone call from seven people that crossed the Polish border from Belarus and were stranded near the border village of Kondratki.

We followed the activist and volunteer groups as they left for this intervention with the aim of providing necessities and support to the seven people in distress. We got into a car and drove with the solidarity group towards the given coordinates. As we approached on a country road, a car cut across and stopped our vehicle. Two officers in civilians' clothes came towards us and took out their badges. "Why are you here? What are you doing in the area?" they questioned.

In the meantime, around us, a sequence was set in motion. Soldiers on foot with dogs entered the tree line, pushing inward. Roadblocks were set in each access or corner of the forested zone, and quads were patrolling the open plough land. The tactic seemed clear: close every exit of the forest with a roadblock or a patrol team so that people cannot leave the tree line without being detected.

The border guards in civilian's clothes, allowed us to move after more than an hour of document checks, yet started following us from afar in all our movements, to ensure we did not cross the tree line. I asked one of the border guards trailing us through plough land whether the forest was dangerous. He said "yes." I asked: "wolves? bison? bears?" He didn't hesitate. "No. Illegal migrants." That was the reason for them to trail us, follow us, thinking we might lead them to those who rang the alarm phone. We continued, we moved along the surrounding of the forested area. At some point we observed the militaries, border guards and vehicles suddenly leaving the area, losing interest in tracking our movement any longer.

For several hours we walked through the forest. The forest seemed empty. The activists we were accompanying assumed that the seven who called in the morning might have been caught. We left before it was dark. A group of us decided to drive one hour to the Michalowo border guard station to request

> updates on the group in distress, they refused to talk to us. Later that night the confirmation came through a text message arriving from the other side of the border, the seven people were caught and forced back into Belarus.
>
> Fieldnotes, March 2025 Podlasie

The vignette at the start of this chapter is a field note from an intervention that took place in March 2025 during a field trip with the organisation Podlaskie Ochotnicze Pogotowie Humanitarne (POPH). The vignette exemplifies how, in the wake of the 2021 crisification of the border, entangled logics of geopolitical and racial enmity have shaped Poland's counter-instrumentalisation governance. These logics are not only expressed in political discourses, media representations, and legislation that we discussed in Chapter One, but simultaneously materialise in multiple, decisive ways at the Poland–Belarus border, which we will turn to in this chapter. This has fundamentally transformed the different landscapes that make up the Poland–Belarus borderlands, particularly the forests, and the lives of the people crossing or inhabiting them. In this chapter, we ask:

How have the entangled logics of geopolitical and racial enmity translated into material practices and infrastructures of border enforcement across the Poland–Belarus borderlands? And how have these material manifestations of logics of enmity shaped the practices and strategies of migrants, humanitarian actors, and law enforcement actors alike?

To explore these questions, we follow geographer Derek Gregory in conceiving of these different materialisations as an "architecture of enmity."[106] Gregory's conceptualisation allows us to shift our focus from the "rhetorical spaces" of enmity addressed in the previous chapter to the construction and consolidation of an "architecture of enmity as material fact."[107] Concretely, we understand the architecture of enmity in this context as the different material manifestations of racial and geopolitical logics of enmity, that both the Polish and the Belarusian states have erected or repurposed throughout the landscape in the aim of governing migration. Together, these different materialisations have constructed an expansive cross-border territory in which violence is not only systematic and widespread, but, as we will see in more detail in the next chapter, is partly inflicted through the organisation of the territory itself.[108]

106 D. Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

107 Gregory, *Colonial* Present, 58.

108 In this our approach in this chapter draws on a range of perspectives in the humanities that converge in a more-than-human sensibility, and for which the categories human, nature and technology are located on a continuum rather than corresponding to clear-cut categories. "Things" enter multiple and always evolving relations – or assemblages. In this perspective, humans have no monopoly over the capacity to act, rather they are one amongst multiple "actants": unlike the term "actor", an actant can be either human or non-human, it is that which does something, produces effects and alters situations, independently of any intentionality. However, the agency of actants is variegated and does not depend solely on the nature of the actant, but rather on its assemblage with other actants. Importantly, our focus on the role of non-human entities in no way lessens the responsibility of state actors; rather, it allows us to better account for their role in producing forms of violence that are mediated by border infrastructures and the environment. B. Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications Plus More Than a Few Complications," *Soziale Welt* 47 (1996): 369-81. J. Bennett, "The Force of Things: Steps Toward an Ecology of Matter," *Political Theory* 32, no. 3 (June 2004): 347-72. For an example of the use this approach in the context of Polish-Belarussian see: N. Judzińska and R. Sendyka, "The Crisis on the Polish-Belarusian Border. Sites and Things," *Sprawy Narodowościowe. Seria Nowa* 54 (2022): 1-35, https://doi.org/10.11649/sn.2845.



Figure 2.1. Border infrastructure at the Poland–Belarusian border. A 5.5-metre steel fence and electronic surveillance system sit alongside older, low-tech methods of control, such as a patrol road and a guard scanning the treeline with binoculars. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, November 2024.

The chapter proceeds by analysing the different pillars and components of the border's architecture of enmity. Because the border's architecture is built on, and partly repurposes, a preexisting ground – made of environments with particular geophysical characteristics, human inhabitation, and political organisation – we start by describing the borderland's environment and history. We then analyse in detail each of the main pillars of the architecture of enmity: the restricted access zones, different border enforcement actors, and border infrastructures and surveillance technologies. We show that this architecture is not only built on and adapts to a particular environments, but that the latter is strategically recruited in support of border enforcement logics. Finally, this chapter demonstrates how the architecture of enmity generates hierarchical positions and dispositions for the actors within it. We focus specifically on how the architecture affects migrants, local residents, NGOs, and law enforcement agents' relationships to the environment, conditions of in-visibility, and their capacity to move across space. In turn, we show that the architecture is also transformed by the actors, including those who contest it – such as migrants' seeking to cross the border and those acting in solidarity with them. Taken together, in this chapter we argue that the architecture of enmity constructed across this borderland plays an essential role in creating the conditions that have enabled a regime of forced im/mobility and violence. Indeed, within this architecture, both Belarusian and Polish border authorities violently contain and circulate

migrants seeking to cross the border, exposing them to combined and cumulative forms of violence which we address in the following chapters.

This chapter's analysis of the Poland–Belarus border draws on a broad range of methods, integrating different data sources to understand how the entangled logics of enmity materialised as an architecture of enmity. It centres on four primary data sources: document analysis, observations, semi-structured interviews, and open-source investigative techniques. Document analysis involved a review of national legislation, policy documents (Polish and Belarusian, where accessible), construction contracts, reports from civil society organisations, and media coverage. Observations focused on our team's presence in border regions on the Polish side, which allowed for direct engagement with local communities and border guard officials. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders, including twenty-eight interviews with residents living near the border, NGO workers, and activists assisting migrants, and twelve interviews with law enforcement personnel. Furthermore, several informal conversations with the actors, especially law enforcement agents during delegation visits gave us important insights of the border. Open-source investigative (OSINT) methods allowed us to broaden the scope of inquiry and study areas that were difficult for us to access physically, such as the Belarusian side of the border. This included remote sensing techniques and satellite imagery analysis to track infrastructure development and environmental conditions. We also analysed publicly available social media data by both Belarusian and Polish border guard channels to understand their surveillance technologies. These diverse sources were brought together to triangulate findings, enhancing the validity and reliability of our analysis.

While we aimed for a balanced perspective on the different materialisations of the architecture of enmity across both sides of the Poland–Belarus borderland, we could not visit the Belarusian side of the border, and access to state information is limited. This has impacted our ability to fully explore the Belarusian dimensions of the border regime. Nonetheless, by triangulating our methods, we were able to partly make up for our limited access through relying on available Belarusian government publications and independent media reports (where accessible) and OSINT methods, in particular satellite imagery analysis.

The environmental and human history of the borderland

The crisification of the Poland–Belarus borderlands, which we discussed in the previous chapter, is often considered to have begun around the Usnarz Górny events in August 2021, and has since spread across the borderlands. The centre of gravity of the process of border crossing and border reinforcement has been located in the Podlaskie Voivodeship, particularly around the ancient Bialowieża Forest. Over time, this spatiality expanded from this centre, extending southward, in particular, to the Lublin Voivodeship along the Bug River that forms the border between Poland and Belarus. The political centrality of this region and its framing through logics of security and defence constitute a marked change in relation to its rather peripheral status prior to 2021. Indeed, until then, the borderlands were primarily seen through overlapping logics of ecological conservation, scientific research, and nature tourism. The landscape straddling the Polish–Belarusian frontier is one of the oldest continuously forested territories in Europe, and it forms the ground layer over which the architecture of enmity has been erected. The Białowieża Forest, one of the last and best-preserved remnants of ancient lowland forest in Europe, spans both sides of a long-controlled and securitised border. Since 2021, this border and its forested landscape have been further transformed into a heavily militarised zone.



Figure 2.2. Photographs from the Białowieża Forest. Photographs by Peter Teunissen, 2024- 2025.

The region's landscape is defined by diverse terrains, including flat plains, marshes, low hills, shallow river valleys, dense ancient forests, and small settlements and agricultural lands. This landscape began to form approximately 12,000 years ago, when the glaciers retreated, and the forest slowly assembled itself; first, pioneer vegetation, followed by pines, spruce, and oaks, accumulating in layers over thousands of seasonal cycles.[109] During summer, the forest canopy closes, darkening the forest ground. In autumn, fallen leaves cover the forest floor; winter brings subzero temperatures and snow. River floods spill into the marshes; new growth alters the terrain, and the forest undergoes renewal, adding yet another seasonal layer. Dead and fallen trees are left to decompose naturally in the strictly protected parts of the forest, in an uninterrupted cycle of decay and regeneration. These cyclical processes have formed a unique ecosystem that have shaped how the entangled logics of enmity would materialise along the Poland–Belarus border.

The forest was long used as a space for hunting, and from the 16th century it gradually became a royal hunting ground. That enclosure prevented widespread agricultural cultivation, large-scale settlement, and urbanisation. A dedicated royal forest guard of roughly several hundred members, including beaters, riflemen and foresters, further reinforced this protection. This allowed ecological processes to continue, with limited human disruption, for centuries. [110] As a result, the forest retained its old-growth characteristics and stands today as one of Europe's last-remaining ancient forests.



Figure 2.3. A painting of the Białowieża Forest by Johann Heinrich Müntz, ca. 1780–98 – among the earliest known paintings of the ancient woodland along the present-day Poland–Belarusian borderlands..[111]

109 A. Kujawa, A. Orczewska, M. Falkowski, M. Blicharska, B. Adam, L. Buchholz, and A. Zalewska, "The Białowieża Forest – A UNESCO Natural Heritage Site – Protection Priorities," *Leśne Prace Badawcze* 77, no. 4 (2016): 302; T. Samojlik, I. D. Rotherham, and B. Jędrzejewska, "Quantifying Historic Human Impacts on Forest Environments: A Case Study in Białowieża Forest, Poland," *Environmental History* 18, no. 3 (2013).

110 T. Samojlik, A. Fedotova, P. Daszkiewicz, and I. D. Rotherham, Białowieża Primeval Forest: Nature and Culture in the Nineteenth Century (Rotherham, UK: Springer International Publishing, 2020).

111 Johann Heinrich Müntz, *Biełavieskaja pušča* [Białowieża Forest], ca. 1780–98, Wikimedia Commons, accessed August 28, 2026, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bie%C5%82avieskaja_pu%C5%A1%C4%8Da._%D0%91%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%8F_%D0%BF%D1%83%D1%88%D1%87%D0%B0_%28J._M%C3%BCntz,_1780-98%29.jpg.

Today, Podlasie in Poland and neighbouring Grodno Oblast in Belarus are known for their lowland woodlands, home to European bison, wolves, and lynx, which have attracted tourists and wildlife researchers. This has resulted in a layered system of concentric environmental protection zones, with sections inaccessible to the public. Since these restrictions also concern activists seeking to support migrants, these nature protection areas have also played a role in enabling both the mechanisms of violence targeting migrants that we will discuss further on. The environmental zones are the following:

112 UNESCO World Heritage Centre. "Białowieża Forest – Map of Inscribed Extension." 2014. https://whc.unesco.org/document/132364.

Transborder Environmental Zone

This area is a transborder UNESCO World Heritage Site that covers 141,885 hectares: 63,000 ha in the Polish forest and 78,885 ha in the Belarusian forest. This zone, as seen in Figure 4, does not hold physical entry restrictions.

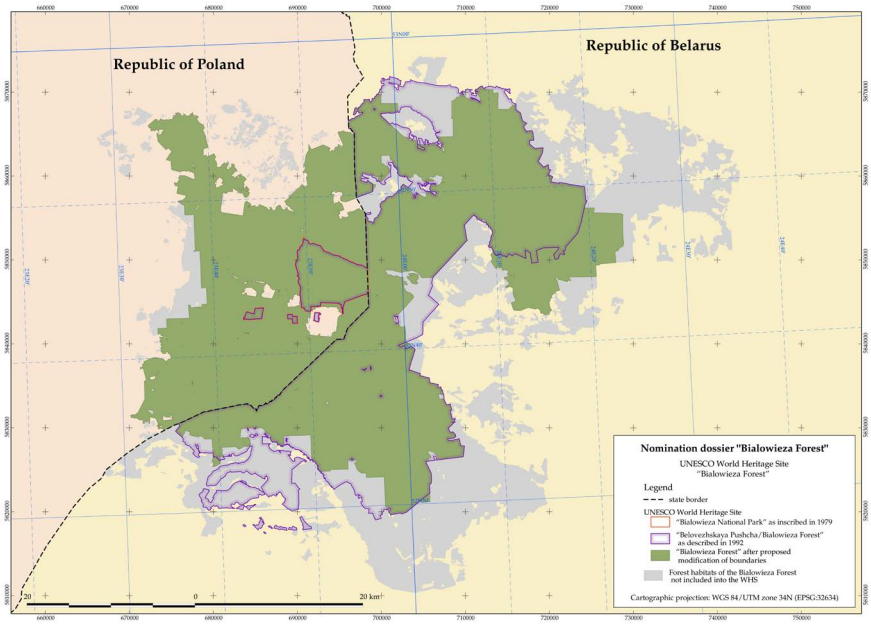


Figure 2.4. Map of the UNESCO World Heritage Site as a transboundary environmental zone. Map by UNESCO, 2014.[112]

Poland Environmental Zones

→ **Strict Nature Reserve (Rezerwat Ścisły) 4,747.17 ha:** The innermost core, off-limits without authorisation. Tourists are limited to groups of ≤10 with a mandatory official guide; no motor vehicles, no bicycles (without a separate permit), and no commercial activity are allowed. Enforced by National Park Rangers.

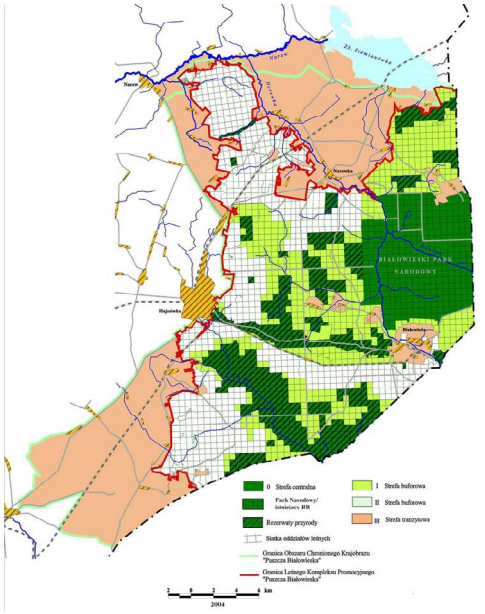
→ **Active Management Zone (Strefa Ochrony Czynnej) 4,104.63 ha:** Surrounds the strict reserve. There are marked trails and scientific monitoring is permitted; commercial forestry and off-trail access is prohibited without authorisation. Enforced by park rangers.

→ **National Park Buffer Zone:** Ring of forest around the park. Open to the public; hunting and economic activity are restricted

→ **Nature Reserves within State Forests:** There are 20 natural reserves outside the National Park, within the broader Białowieża Forest that is managed by Lasy Państwowe. Two are strictly protected; the rest permit limited access. The enforcement falls to the State Forests service rather than park rangers.

→ **Natura 2000:** an EU-wide environmental conservation framework and does not hold strict exclusion zone.[113]

113 Generalna Dyrekcja Ochrony Środowiska, "Natura 2000," Government of Poland, accessed June 29, 2026, https://www.gov.pl/web/gdos/natura-2003.



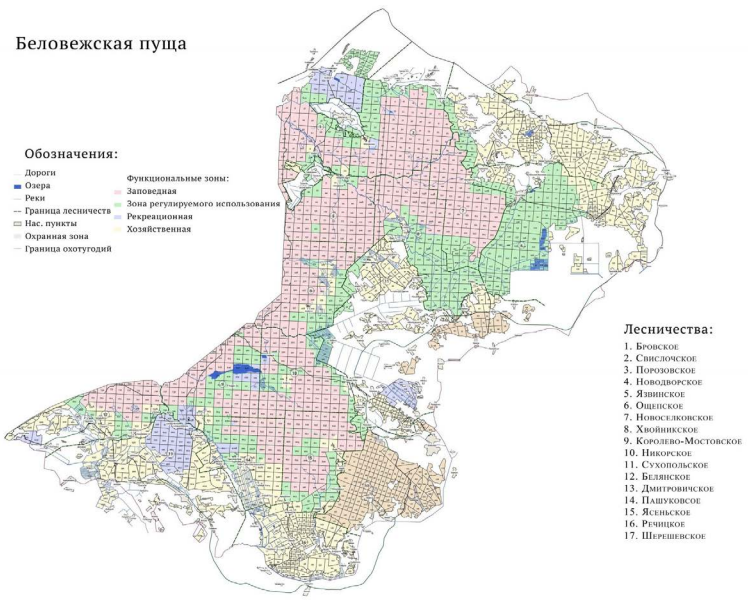


Figure 2.5. Forest and environmental zones around Białowieża Forest, showing the forest districts (Browsk, Hajnówka, and Białowieża), the strictly protected reserves, and the boundaries of the Białowieża National Park and its Strict Reserve. Map by Białowieża National Park, n.d..[114]

Figure 2.6. Map of Belovezhskaya Pushcha forest in Belarus, showing the different environmental zones. Map by bp21, n.d..[115]

114 Białowieski Park Narodowy, "Strefy ochrony Rezerwatu Biosfery Białowieża," accessed August 28, 2026, https://bpn.com.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=125.

115 Belarusian Polesie, "Map of the Belarusian Polesie Protected Areas (BP2012)," BP21.org.by, accessed June 29, 2026, https://bp21.org.by/p/2016/map-bp2012-big.jpg.

Belarusian Environmental Zones

The territory of Belovezhskaya Pushcha has been divided into four functional zones in which the level of protection varies.

- → **Wilderness Protection Zone (Core Zone) 58,297 ha:** Strictly protects intact natural areas of old-growth coniferous and deciduous forest. Only scientific research and conservation activities are permitted, and these are enforced by State Forest Rangers.

- → **Regulated Nature Zone Area 37,905 ha:** Area dedicated to ecological study, preservation, and restoration of ecosystems characteristic to Belovezhskaya Pushcha, alongside the sustainable use of natural resources and protection of historical and cultural heritage.

- → **Regulated Recreational Use Area 8,008 ha:** Supports tourism, recreation, and cultural activities, while monitoring the impact of recreational pressure on ecosystems.

Economic Activity Zone 45,872 ha: Accommodates administrative, residential, and operational facilities, tourist services, and the economic activities of both the National Park and the local population. No access restrictions apply.

Changing Borderline

Despite its ecological continuity, the Białowieża Forest and the broader region have been shaped by shifting imperial and national frontiers, with borders moving not just across the landscape but also through people's lives. Archaeological research has shown that the forest has been inhabited at various points since at least the first century BCE,[116] and has been claimed, divided, and redefined by successive powers that controlled it. From the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to the Russian Empire, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the forest was repeatedly redefined in its purpose, as a borderland, a hunting ground, and a resource for the extraction of wood and labour.[117]

116 Samojlik, Rotherham, and Jędrzejewska, "Quantifying Historic Human Impacts."

117 T. Snyder, The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

118 *Mappa Polski za panowania Stanisława Augusta w roku 1777* [Map of Poland during the Reign of Stanisław August in the Year 1777], published in Warsaw, 1859, Biblioteka Uniwersytecka im. Jerzego Giedroycia w Białymstoku, call no. K-1820, accessed June 2026, http://igrek.amzp.pl/details.php?id=1762031.

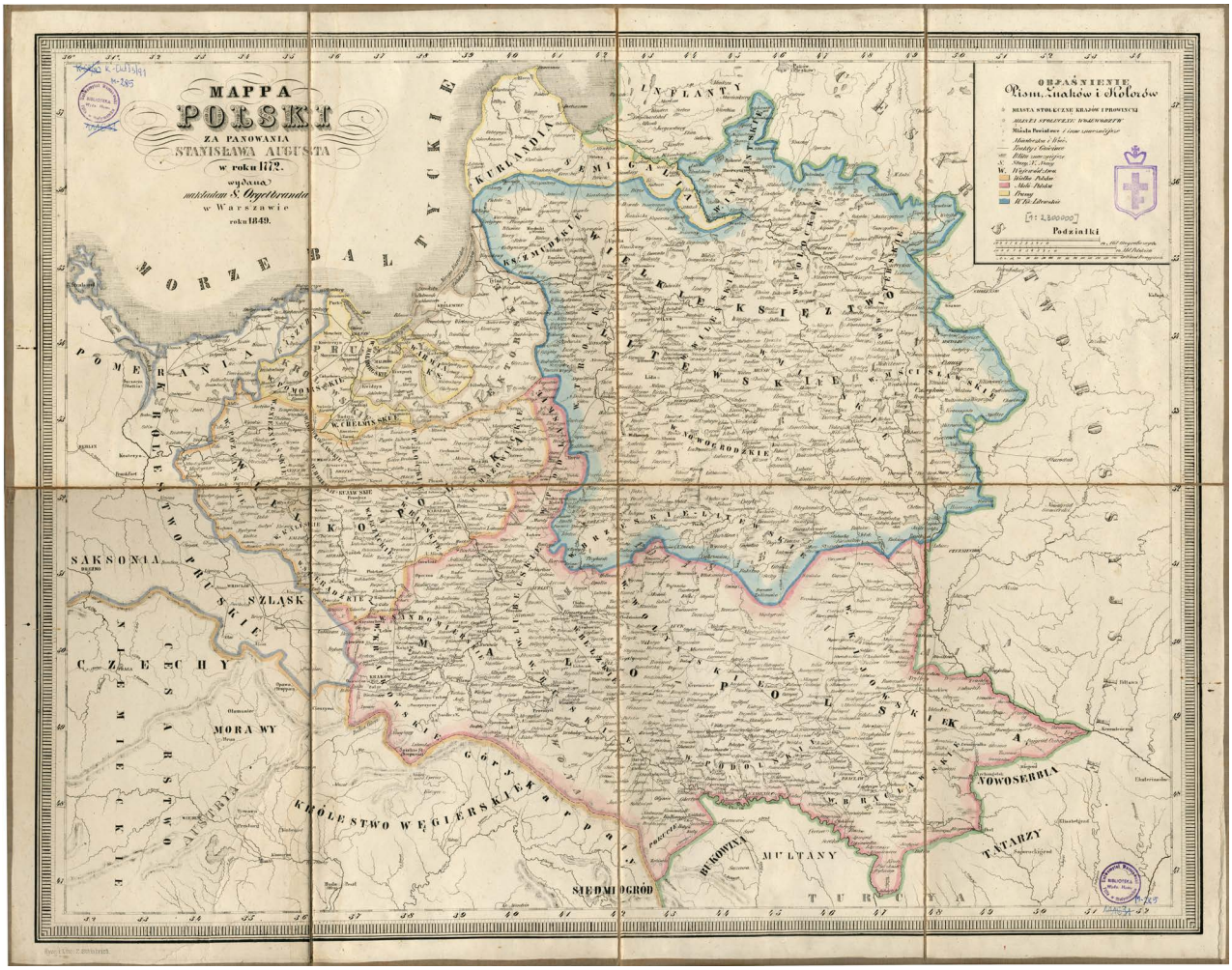


Figure 2.7. Map showing the borders of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, 1772–1849, with Białowieża Forest visible on the left, in the northeastern part of the Commonwealth near the present-day Polish–Belarusian border. Map from 1859, held at the University Library in Białystok..[118]

With these shifting powers, Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian communities mixed across this space for centuries, forming a linguistic and cultural mosaic where Orthodox Christians, Muslim Tatars, Jews, and Catholics lived at the forest's margins.[119] The collapse of the Russian Empire in 1918 and the Treaty of Riga in 1921 split the forest for the first time between Poland and Soviet Belarus. Research led by Natalia Judzińska, as part of this investigation, has traced how borders moved back and forth across the area over the last one hundred years, sedimenting the space with distinct border infrastructures, but also with violence and trauma, which we will turn to now.

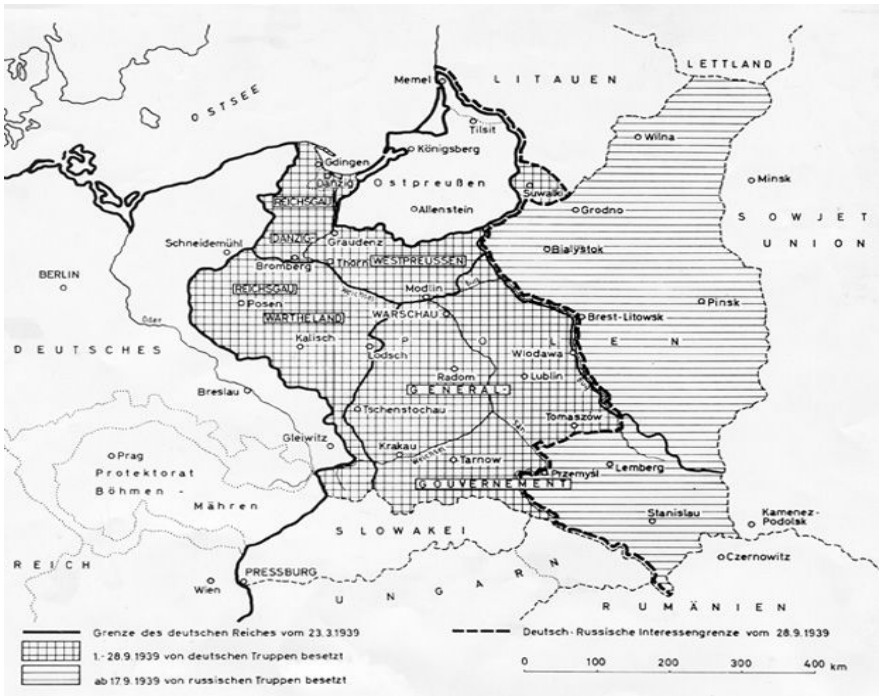


Figure 2.8. Map of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. The solid black line represents the border of the German Reich on 23 March 1939; the checkered territory was occupied by German troops from 1–28 September 1939; the striped territory was occupied by Soviet troops from 17 September 1939. Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, via German History in Documents and Images. [120]

In 1939, based on the "non-aggression pact" between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, which included a secret protocol that divided Eastern Europe into distinct spheres of influence, both entities invaded and occupied Poland.[121] The "Molotov-Ribbentrop pact," as it has been called, followed rivers, such as the Bug, the Pisa, Narew, Vistula, and San rivers that were quickly fortified by both sides (see Figure 8). The German invasion of Poland, led to the flight of approximately 300,000 Polish Jews to the east of Poland in search of refuge from Nazism.[122] Testimonies described how Jews fleeing the advancing military of Nazi Germany towards the Soviet-occupied territories were stranded in a stretch of

119 M. Barwiński, "Borderland of Nations, Religions and Cultures – The Case of Podlaskie," European Spatial Research and Policy 24, no. 2 (2017): 111-25; K. Konczewska, "Granice pogranicza. Studium przypadku dawnej parafii usnarskiej na Grodzieńszczyźnie," Poradnik Językowy, no. 1 (2024): 89-108.

120 Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz. "German-Soviet Boundary and Friendship Treaty – The New Borders after the Division of Poland (September 28, 1939)." In *German History in Documents and Images*. Accessed March 17, 2026. https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/nazi-germany-1933-1945/ghdi:image-2005.

121 Snyder, *Reconstruction of Nations*.

122 M. Nesselrodt, "Kto, kiedy i dlaczego? Ucieczki polskich Żydów przed Niemcami do Związku Radzieckiego jesienią 1939 i latem 1941 r. w perspektywie porównawczej," Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały 18 (2023): 19-47, https://doi.org/10.32927/zzsim.954.

land along the borderline, refused entry by the Soviets, and unable to go back.[123] The group waited days in rain and mud, starving, with no bread and distant water. These historical accounts reveal striking parallels with the experiences of migrants trapped in the Poland–Belarus borderlands today.



Figure 2.9. A border guard beside border posts and barbed wire near Stołpce, on the Polish–Soviet border, 1934. Photograph by Willem van de Poll, 1934, Dutch Nationaal Archief.[124]

Two years later, in June 1941, Nazi Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, invading the Soviet Union across the demarcation line the two powers had established following their joint partition of Poland in 1939. During the German occupation, the forest served as a site for military operations, partisan resistance, and genocide. Local communities were subjected to forced labour, and Jewish populations were either deported to death camps or ghettos, or executed in the forest.[125] The forest's density concealed acts of violence, including mass shootings, executions, and the destruction of entire communities. Simultaneously, the dense vegetation and challenging terrain provided refuge for Jewish, Polish, and Soviet partisans, enabling some to organise resistance from within the forest.

123 Jan T. Gross, Upiorna dekada: Eseje o stereotypach na temat Żydów, Polaków, Niemców, komunistów i kolaboracji 1939-1948 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Austeria, 2007); H. Kruk, The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the Camps, 1939-1944, ed. a. t. B. Harshav (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); L. Zessin-Jurek, "No Man's Land: Between Refugee Geography of Małkinia and Holocaust Memory of Treblinka," East European Jewish Affairs (2026): 1-23, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501674.2026.2612701; J. T. Gross, Opowieści kresowe 1939-1941 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Austeria, 2019).

124 Willem van de Poll, "Grenswacht bij grenspalen en prikkeldraad bij Stoubcy" [Border guard at border posts and barbed wire near Stołpce], 1934, Fotocollectie Van de Poll, Nationaal Archief, access no. 2.24.14.02, item no. 190-1156, CC0, http://hdl.handle.net/10648/aea07312-d0b4-102d-bcf8-003048976d84.

125 See the Virtual Museum of the History of Jews in Bialowieza for a more detailed description of these events:
"The Jagiellońskie Gravel Pit (Podolany)," Virtual Museum of the History of the Jews in Bialowieza, accessed July 13, 2026, http://www.jewish-bialowieza.pl/memory-spaces/the-jagiellonskie-gravel-pit/; "The Pruzhany Ghetto," Virtual Museum of the History of the Jews in Bialowieza, accessed July 13, 2026, http://www.jewish-bialowieza.pl/memory-spaces/the-pruzhany-ghetto/.



Figure 2.10. A monument located within the Strict Protection Area of Białowieża Forest marks the site where people who resisted the Nazi occupation were killed and buried during the Second World War. The site forms part of a wider landscape of mass executions and clandestine burials scattered across the forest, embedding the history of political violence within what is today one of Europe's most strictly protected natural areas. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, August 2024.

After the Second World War, new borders divided the landscape between Poland and the Soviet Union; under the August 1945 border agreement between the Polish Provisional Government of National Unity and the Soviet Union, a joint Polish–Soviet Delimitation Commission was tasked with the precise delimitation and demarcation of the border.[126] The new border partly followed rivers and cut through forested terrain. Where sections ran through dense forest and marshes, such as the Białowieża Forest, precise ground demarcation proved difficult, so, wherever possible, rivers such as the Svisloch were used as demarcation lines instead. Along the land border, a hundred-metre-wide zone was cleared of vegetation, and more than 3,000 hectares of forest and vegetation were cut to ensure visibility and to build access roads for border guard patrols.[127] Adjacent to this cleared zone ran a narrower strip, about ten metres wide, which was regularly ploughed. In addition to delimiting and demarcating the border line, its main purpose was to ensure visibility and tracking movement through the traces left behind in the sand.

126 The postwar border broadly followed the Curzon Line (1919), as confirmed by representatives of the USSR, the United States, and Great Britain at the Yalta Conference in February 1945. Over the years, the border line was adjusted several times, each time accompanied by the forced resettlement of local populations to one side or the other along ethnic lines. In her research on the Polish-Belarusian border, Katarzyna Konczewska draws attention to the informality of the delimitation commission: "According to the interviewees, the decisive factor in determining whether a farm would be on the Polish or Belarusian side was often the hospitality shown to the soldier who drew the border on the map" (Konczewska, "Granice pogranicza"). See also P. Eberhardt, "Formowanie się polskiej granicy wschodniej po II wojnie światowej," *Dzieje Najnowsze* 50, no. 2 (2018): 87–118, https://doi.org/10.12775/DN.2018.2.05; M. Kietliński, "Delimitacja polskiej granicy wschodniej 1944-1950," *Zeszyt Naukowy Muzeum Wojska* 15 (2002): 110-19.

127 D. Stola, Kraj bez wyjścia? Migracje z Polski 1949-1989 (Warsaw: IPN, ISP PAN, 2020), 40-46.

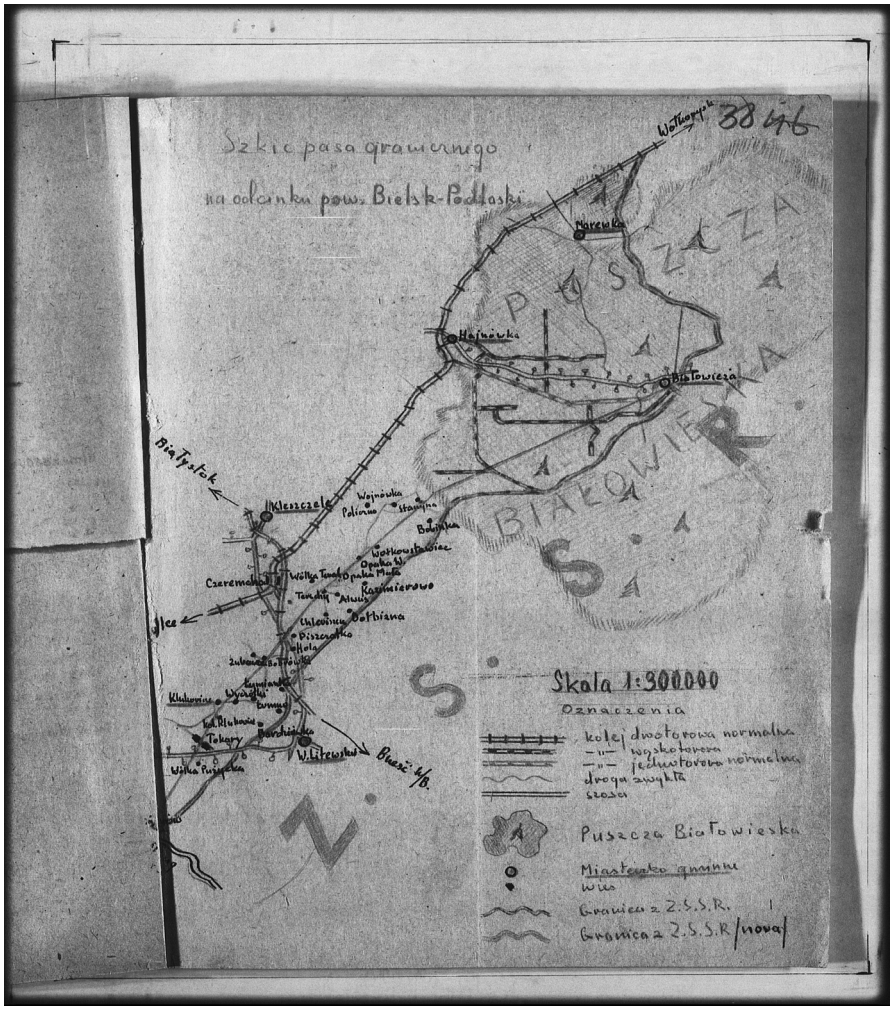


Figure 2.11. Map prepared by the Polish–Soviet Joint Delimitation Commission, showing Białowieża Forest, the initial Curzon Line, and the borderline established by the delimitation committee, 1945–1948. Held at the State Archive in Białystok.

What began as a cleared strip was rapidly hardened into a militarised frontier. By 1947, Soviet authorities had 1,410 km of barbed wire fencing, 1,337 watchtowers, 560 observation points, 1,217 bunkers, and 63 km of trenches.[128] This infrastructure, commonly referred to as *Sistema,* система in Russian*,* which included the control and tracking strip, контрольно-следовая полоса (КСП), was continuously developed. In the 1980s, its one-metre-high fence was replaced by a two-and-a-half-metre-high fence.[129] This border infrastructure was designed primarily at the time to prevent people from leaving the Soviet Union undetected, a logic that stands in sharp contrast to how the same border infrastructure was repurposed as of 2021 to push migrants towards Poland and the European Union. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, this border infrastructure was handed over to the newly independent Republic of Belarus.[130]

128 D. Stola, Kraj bez wyjścia? Migracje z Polski 1949-1989 (Warsaw: IPN, ISP PAN, 2020), 40-46.
I. Skowrońska, "Oznakowanie granic," Muzeum Polskich Formacji Granicznych, January 29, 2025, https://muzeumsg.strazgraniczna.pl/muz/sluzba/infrastruktura-graniczn/1945-1990/oznakowanie-granic-1/teksty/64319,Oznakowanie-granic.html.

129 Nowak et al. write that the 1-meter symbolic fence, was mostly symbolic, was replaced in 1981 due to the solidarity movement and the regions' geopolitical transformation. See K. Nowak, V. Fenchuk, M. Niedziałkowska, I. Stachowicz, Ł. Kuberski, T. Samojlik, and N. Selva, "Supporting Wildlife Movement Amid the Rise of Border Infrastructure" (2026); B. Jędrzejewska and W. Jędrzejewski, Predation in Vertebrate Communities: The Białowieża Primeval Forest as a Case Study, vol. 135 (Berlin: Springer Science & Business Media, 1998).

130 N. Judzińska and I. Hajdarowicz, "Walking Along the Borderscape: Borderwalk as a Method of Presenting and Collecting Data," Narodna umjetnost: hrvatski časopis za etnologiju i folkloristiku 62, no. 2 (2025): 61-80.



Figure 2.12. Polish Border Protection Forces and Soviet border guards at border post no. 1398, 1980s. Photographer unknown, Archiwum Straży Granicznej, reproduced on Geoforum.[131]

A Forgotten Area

In the post–Cold War phase, the Poland–Belarus borderlands have faced significant challenges due to limited educational and healthcare infrastructure, financial constraints, and a lack of economic diversification.[132] This had various political and economic causes that we cannot discuss in detail; however, it has resulted in the continuous emigration of the local population, as seen in Figure 13 which shows a steady demographic decline between 2004 and 2022. Depopulation has deepened existing infrastructural gaps: as communities shrank, the commercial and political case for investment weakened. Among the most tangible expressions of the infrastructural underdevelopment of this region is its poor mobile phone coverage, which we observed during our fieldwork and which, as we will see further on, has constituted an important factor in limiting migrants' capacity to navigate the borderlands or call for help. While long a relatively calm and peripheral area, the region had nonetheless become a site of increased contestation around environmental issues prior to 2021. In 2017, the Polish government, led by Law and Justice, initiated a plan for intensive logging in the ancient Białowieża Forest, leading to the mobilisation of ecologists and environmentalists, some of whom relocated to the area.[133] The experience gained through this campaign, including organising, coalition building, and direct action, proved fertile ground for fostering solidarity and building infrastructures of solidarity with migrants crossing the border from Belarus to Poland five years later.[134]

131 GeoForum, "Wojsko – Oznakowanie granic Polski w latach 1946-1990," accessed June 29, 2026, https://geoforum.pl/?menu=47155,47282,47284&page_nr=2&link=wojsko-oznakowanie-granic-polski-lata-1946-90.

132 GeoForum, "Wojsko – Oznakowanie granic Polski w latach 1946-1990," accessed June 29, 2026, https://geoforum.pl/?menu=47155,47282,47284&page_nr=2&link=wojsko-oznakowanie-granic-polski-lata-1946-90.

133 See among others Samojlik et al., Białowieża Primeval Forest.

134 Tour Guide, activist, and environmentalist. Guided Tour, observations, and informal interview, by Peter Teunissen. Białowieża Forest, August 2024;Tour Guide, activist, and environmentalist. Guided Tour, observations, and informal interview, by Research Team. Białowieża Forest, March 2025; Wildlife Photographer, Journalist, and Local Residence. Interview by Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025.

The construction of the architecture of enmity

Starting with the crisification of the border in 2021, the entangled logics of geopolitical and racial enmity have led to a decisive and rapid transformation of the Polish–Belarusian borderlands, which residents described to us as an abrupt rupture of everyday life.[135] Unprecedented military means were deployed, in response to the perceived military threat from Russia and Belarus, and the threat that migrants' crossings were framed as constituting. From one day to the next, rural roads that had previously been quiet became logistical arteries for military armoured vehicles; unpaved forest roads were marked with deep tyre tracks; and checkpoints proliferated along roads and in front of everyday public spaces, such as restaurants and supermarkets. What had long been considered a calm and peripheral rural border area was recast as something closer to a war zone overnight—a description that emerged repeatedly in interviews with local inhabitants.[136] As we observed, surveillance towers punctuate the terrain, while troops on foot in green balaclavas, armoured vehicles with obscured licence plates, and patrol cars circulate continuously, in what seemed to us like routine monitoring operations.

135 Tour Guide, activist, and environmentalist. Guided Tour, observations, and informal interview, by Peter Teunissen. Białowieża Forest, August 2024; Tour Guide, activist, and environmentalist. Guided Tour, observations, and informal interview, by Research Team. Białowieża Forest, March 2025; Wildlife Photographer, Journalist, and Local Residence. Interview by Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025; Biologist 3. Interview by Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025.

136 Wildlife Photographer, Journalist, and Local Residence. Interview by Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025.



Figure 2.13. The border fence cutting through the landscape, seen from the perspective of a village on the Polish side of the border. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, 2025.

At the same time, the local population as well as international activists converged on the area to support migrants and contest their violent treatment. The logic of solidarity they embodied – against the logic of enmity – materialised in everyday practices and complex systems of collective support, including safe houses for migrants and activists' bases, and hotlines for migrants, all woven together through human relations.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the militarised border regime further expanded in what can be understood as a broader war regime, one in which military logics increasingly shape social, economic, and political life beyond the border zone itself. The unprecedented war preparedness across Poland, and Europe more broadly, manifested in rising military expenditure, large-scale troop deployments, and intensified integration into NATO structures. Following the passage of the Homeland Defence Act in Poland in February 2022, military expenditure in 2023 reached over $31.6 billion, more than doubling the previous year's spending and representing an all-time high in Poland's recorded history. This also represented the highest spending, as a share of GDP among NATO members, placing Poland at the forefront of European militarisation.[137]

137 Chancellery of the Prime Minister (Poland), "More Troops and More Money for Defence – the Council of Ministers Adopted a Draft Homeland Defence Act," Gov.pl, February 22, 2022, accessed June 25, 2026, https://www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/more-troops-and-more-money-for-defence--the-council-of-ministers-adopted-a-draft-homeland-defence-act; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Defence Investment of NATO Countries (2014-2026)*, press release (Brussels: NATO Press & Media, July 3, 2026), PDF, https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/finance/def-exp-2026-en.pdf.



Figure 2.14. A Rosomak 8×8 armoured personnel carrier, manufactured in Poland. The photograph was taken outside the home of journalist and environmental activist Adam Wajrak, in the village of Teremiski, Podlasie. Photograph by Adam Wajrak, 2024.

This financial trajectory and deployment of military means and resources have deeply transformed the border regime. The availability of unprecedented resources has enabled the rapid expansion of troop deployments, the construction of permanent infrastructures, and the acquisition of advanced surveillance and weapons systems. It has also created institutional incentives, within both the military and political spheres, for the continued expansion of the security apparatus. The border, in this context, also functioned as a political and economic resource: a justification for expenditure, a space for military training and readiness, and a stage for the performance of national sovereignty. This militarisation was both conditioned by, and reinforced in turn, a climate of fear and threat, violence and hostility.

138 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database," updated April 26, 2026, accessed July 13, 2026, https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex. 55.

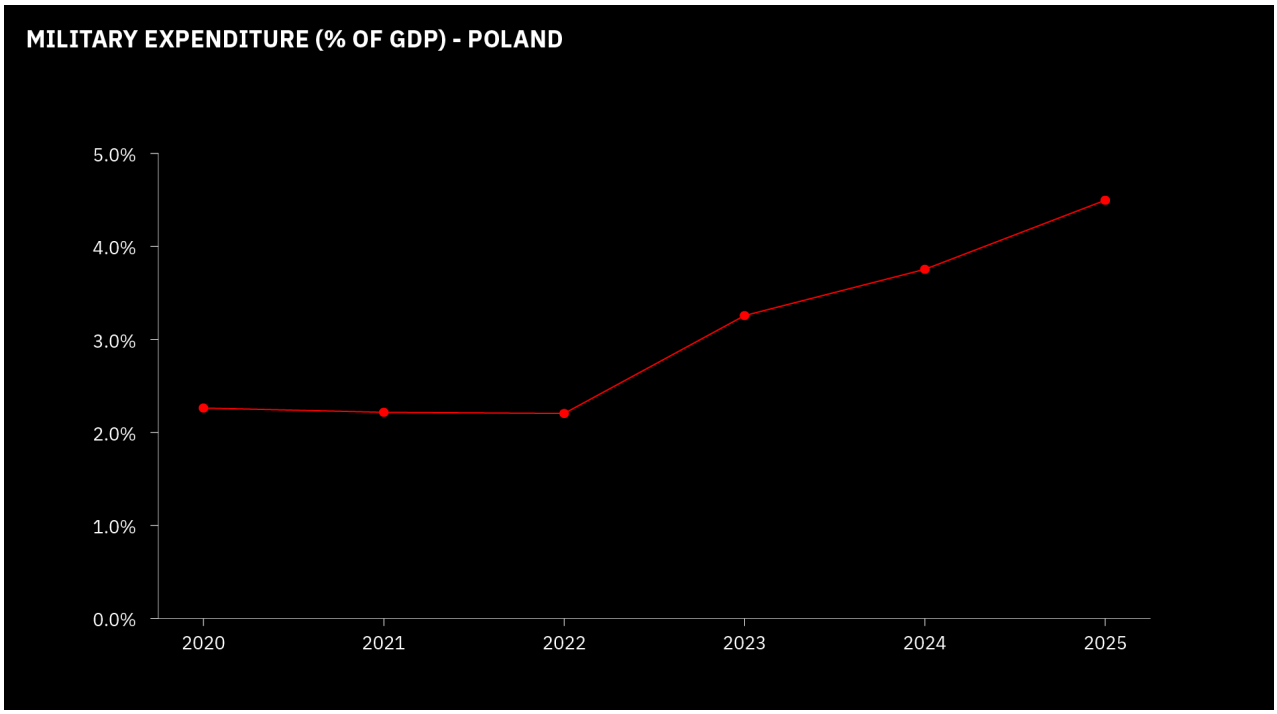


Figure 2.15. Poland's military expenditure as a share of GDP open-source data provided by SIPRI. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.[138]

The effects of this militarised regime materialised in space and extended into the intimate fabric of daily life through the three main pillars of its architecture of enmity: exclusion zones, the deployment of troops and personnel, and border infrastructures and surveillance technologies. The environment sedimented over millennia in this area has been embedded into this architecture and enlisted in the service of border enforcement work.

Exclusion zones and the production of a controlled space

The militarised border regime emerged from overlaying new security and military zones – which we call the "exclusion zone" – over the already demarcated restricted access zone in the natural preservation areas. Exclusion zones are present on both sides of the border, and those on the Polish side have changed shape, location, and scale several times across the past five years. These exclusion zones are restricted areas where access is controlled or entirely forbidden, creating a security buffer that is enforced by security forces such as the military, police, and border guards. As a result, certain areas were made legally and socially distinct from the surrounding landscape. In this sense, exclusion zones do not solely reflect the militarisation of the border; they actively produce it, inscribing the logic of enmity into the organisation of landscape, movement, and in/visibility.

On both sides of the border, these legal and territorial arrangements have produced a series of bounded zones, which overlap and intersect with each other and have evolved over time. Their establishment enabled the interception, forced circulation, containment, and deterrence of racialised migrants within an expanded borderland, one that extends far beyond the territorial limits of the border, while simultaneously limiting the capacity for civil society actors to intervene and hold state actors accountable, thereby de facto creating a hidden zone of violence.

Belarus's "border zone" and the "border strip"

The Belarus border regime is a deeply layered system of controlled and restricted zones, designed to regulate, surveil, and limit movement in order to facilitate border enforcement activities. Central to this system are two historically distinct but interconnected spatial demarcations: the "border zone" and the "border line," also known as the "border strip."[139] At the intersection of these two zones, there is the former Soviet border infrastructure also known as "Sistema," discussed above as part of the historical context, which we will return to later in this chapter.

139 In this report we will use the term border strip to refer to the exclusion zone closer adjacent to the state border line, as, border line can be confusing with state border line, and the area refers to a zone, and not merely a line. State Border Committee of the Republic of Belarus. "Border Zone and Borderline." State Border Committee of the Republic of Belarus, "Border Zone and Borderline," accessed June 18, 2026, https://gpk.gov.by/en/border-zone-borderline/.

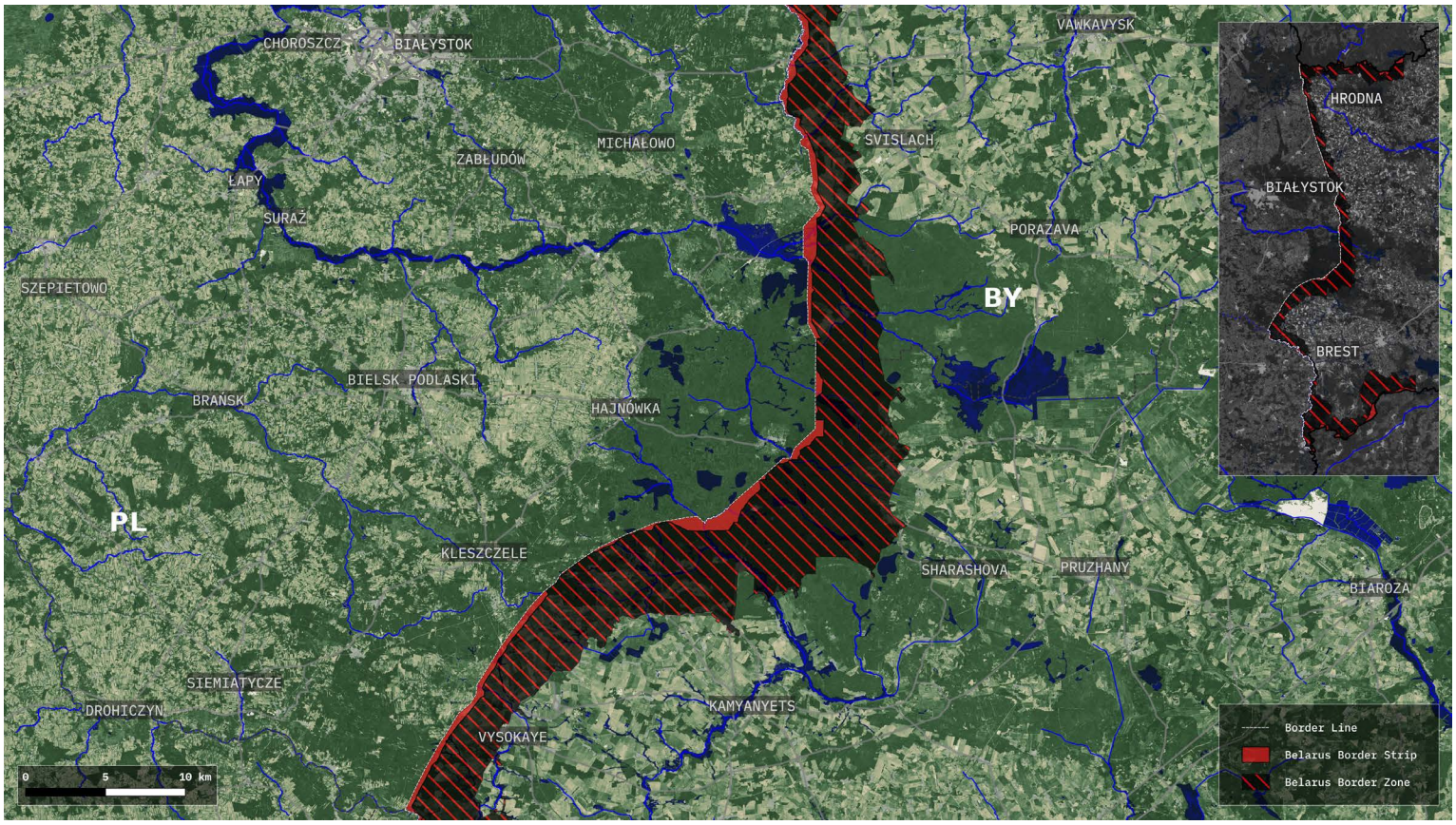


Figure 2.16. The exclusion zones of Belarus, also known as the border zone and the border strip, where access, movement, and documentation are tightly controlled by the Belarusian State Border Committee. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Border Zone

The border zone is the outermost layer of Belarus's border security system, which extends in some sections up to 30 km into the territory. When migrants aim to cross the border from Belarus to Poland, this is the first security zone that they must navigate, which is marked with signs as seen below. Within this zone, there are residential areas, houses, and villages that only residents are allowed to move through with the appropriate authorisations. According to some accounts provided by migrants who attempted the crossing,[140] and a claim also made by Belarusian state authorities in their online communication,[141] residents would inform authorities of suspicious activities.

140 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

141 News.BY, "День на границе. Специальный репортаж," YouTube video, 28:04, May 28, 2016, https://youtu.be/mGe-RXhA4n0?t=764.

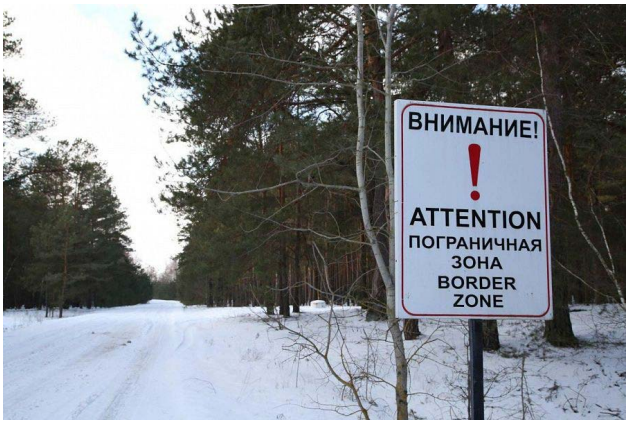




Figure 2.17. Road sign warning against entry into the border zone and border strip. Photographer Belarusian Border Guard Service, date and location unknown.[142]

Border strip

Adjacent to the state border of Poland and Belarus is the so-called "border line," or "border strip," a narrower operational corridor of up to 10 km running directly alongside the state border itself.[143] Within this border strip there are several buildings, some of which were verified as military infrastructure. Those who intend to access the "border strip," must submit an application stating their planned location, time, and personal details that can be accepted or rejected.[144] As a result, civil society actors, independent monitoring bodies, and press delegations were only allowed entry into highly performative press events organised by Belarus's authorities and never independently. Testimonies collected by WAM[146] and the investigation by Border Emergency Collective[147] describe how migrants try to enter this zone undetected. However, evading its heavy surveillance proves incredibly difficult.

Furthermore, exit from the border strip is also heavily controlled by Belarusian military and border agents. CSOs and testimonies from WAM described different practices by Belarusian authorities at the border strip, practices that, as noted by activists and volunteers, shifted over time.[148] Testimonies repeatedly described how migrants were not allowed to leave the border strip by Belarusian border guards without either a cash payment or the surrender of visual material documenting Polish border guards' involvement in violence.[149] Such material has been used directly in Belarusian state propaganda, amplifying narratives of geopolitical tension with Poland. In other cases, Belarusian authorities allowed injured migrants to leave the border strip and return to Minsk or elsewhere in Belarus, outside the immediate border area.

Poland's shifting exclusion zones

On the Polish side of the border, a series of successive exclusion zones have also been erected. With the crisification of 2021, the Polish government introduced several exclusion zones through emergency decrees that have played an important role in the configuration of its militarized border

142 139 State Border Committee of Belarus, "Border Zone and Borderline."

143 From here onwards, we use the word border strip to refer to the area adjacent to the state border line. See footnote 37.

144 State Border Committee of Belarus, "Border Zone and Borderline."

145 See also Human Constanta, "Missing and Dead Migrants in Belarus: Law and Practice," September 19, 2024, accessed June 29, 2026, https://humanconstanta.org/en/missing-and-dead-migrants-in-belarus-law-and-practice/.

146 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

147 Border Emergency Collective, Zone of Hidden Violence, Vimeo video, 14:35, 2022, accessed June 29, 2026, https://vimeo.com/123456789.

148 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

149 We Are Monitoring. *Testimony Database*. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

regime. On 2 September 2021, at the request of the Council of Ministers, President Andrzej Duda issued a regulation declaring a thirty-day state of emergency in parts of the Podlaskie and Lubelskie Voivodeships including 183 villages and towns.[150] This thirty-day zone was extended and a "temporary ban of staying" was subsequently renewed several times. As seen in Figure 18, between 2021 and 2025[151] the exclusion zones expanded in some areas, while contracting others. In general, these exclusion zones remained in force and largely preserved their original scope. Its effects were far-reaching: access to the designated area was restricted for civilians, journalists, humanitarian actors, and solidarity groups.[152] As result the exclusion zones have also been a site of contention.



Figure 2.18. Photograph of a sign marking the exclusion zone, with the border barrier visible in the background alongside a house and agricultural land. Photograph by Charles Heller, 2025.

150 Chancellery of the Prime Minister (Poland), "The Safety of Poland Comes First – State of Emergency Near the Border with Belarus," Gov.pl, September 3, 2021, https://www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/the-safety-of-poland-comes-first--state-of-emergency-near-the-border-with-belarus.

151 Poland, Border Guard Headquarters (Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej), "(EN) Belarus – Restrictions at the Border," last modified July 19, 2024, accessed June 25, 2026, https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/cudzoziemcy/obowiazujace-ograniczenia/13496,EN-BELARUS-RESTRICTIONS-AT-THE-BORDER.html; Republic of Poland, Regulation of the Council of Ministers of 2 September 2021 on Limitation of Freedoms and Rights in Relation to the Declaration of a State of Emergency, Journal of Laws (Dziennik Ustaw) 2021, item 1613, accessed June 25, 2026, https://dziennikustaw.gov.pl/D2021000161301.pdf; Republic of Poland, Regulation of the President of the Republic of Poland of 2 September 2021 on Declaration of a State of Emergency in Parts of the Podlaskie Voivodeship and in Parts of the Lubelskie Voivodeship, Journal of Laws (Dziennik Ustaw) 2021, item 1612, accessed June 25, 2026, https://dziennikustaw.gov.pl/D2021000161201.pdf; Republic of Poland, Regulation of the Minister of the Interior and Administration of 2 September 2021 on Limitation of the Right to Own Firearms, Ammunition and Explosives as well as Other Types of Weapons, Journal of Laws (Dziennik Ustaw) 2021, item 1614, accessed June 25, 2026, https://dziennikustaw.gov.pl/DU/2021/1614.

152 Activist Base 2. "Mapping Crisification 1." Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025; Lawyer, local resident, and activists. "Mapping Crisification 2." Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025; Teramiski School. "Mapping Crisification 3." Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025; We Are Monitoring Association, *We Have Only One War: Violence Against Migrants at the Polish-Belarusian Border* (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie We Are Monitoring, 2024).

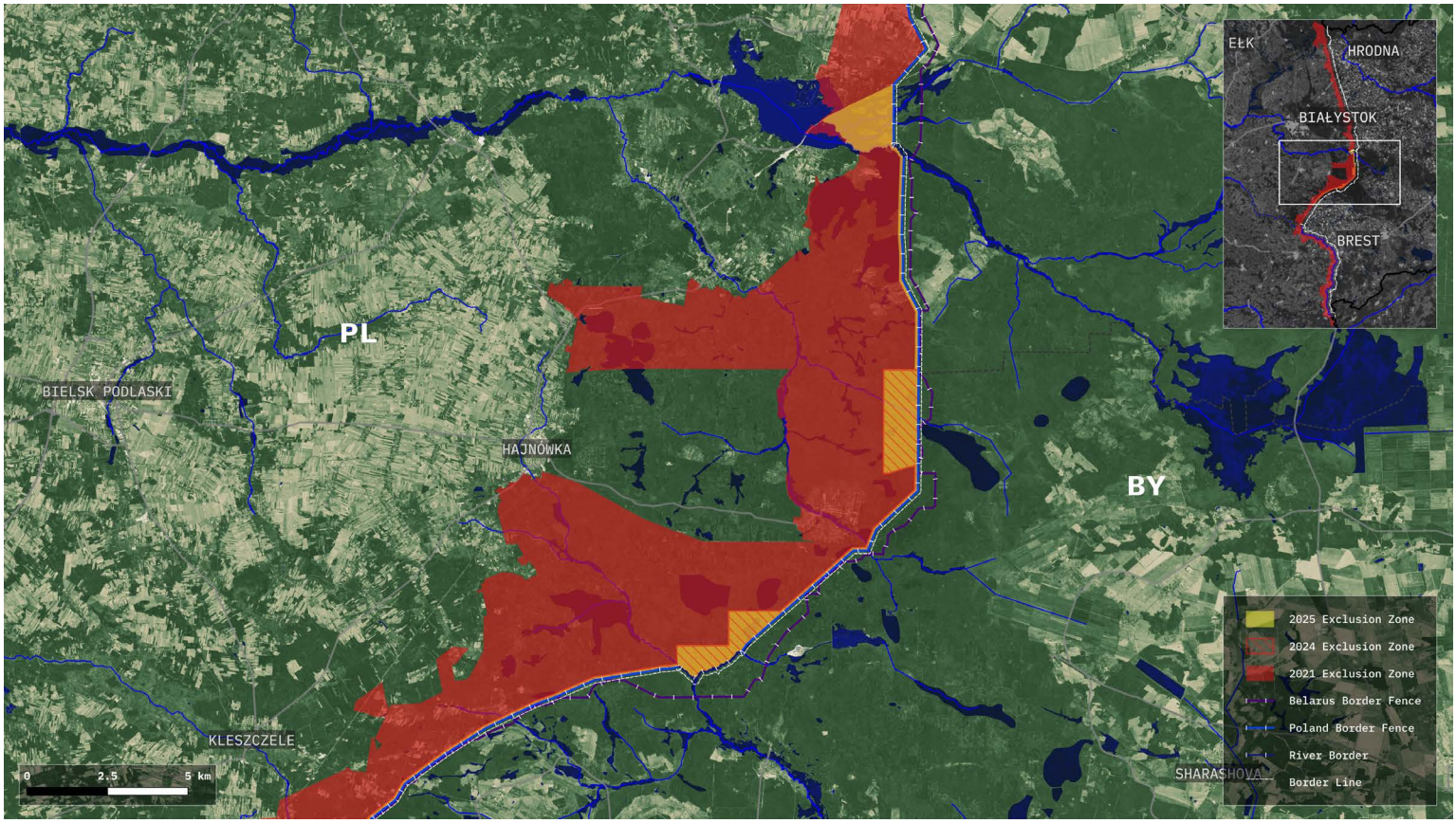


Figure 2.19. Map of Poland's exclusion zones along the Belarusian border, introduced, extended, and expanded in 2021, 2024, and 2025. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

The spatial function of the exclusion zones

The exclusion zones that have been erected on both sides of the Poland–Belarus border operate as a political technology, constituting bounded territories where the ordinary architecture of rights, visibility, and social life is deliberately reorganized. When a state designates a zone as restricted, it does not merely exclude people from a place. It produces a new kind of space governed by different rules, different bodies, and a different relationship between power and those subject to it. In this sense, it constitutes a form of governance that relies on spatial restriction to control both im/mobility and in/visibility.

Since 2021, both the Polish and Belarusian exclusion zones have operated as a mechanism of double closure: first, they prevent migrant mobility through territory while sealing off the area from humanitarian actors, which prevents migrants from receiving humanitarian aid; second, they shield it from public scrutiny, enabling practices that would likely face significant legal and political challenge under conditions of greater transparency. Here, these exclusion zones shape what is visible or not and to who, and thus operate through a regime of in/visibility marked by unequal power relations.[153] The exclusion of legal and humanitarian aid is not an accidental consequence of the security logic, but a key element of how the zones function, one that generates important effects for migrants,

153 C. Heller and L. Pezzani, "Intervention: Forensic Oceanography – Tracing Violence Within and Against the Mediterranean Frontier's Aesthetic Regime," in *The Handbook of Displacement* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 453-58.

as we will see in more detail in the next chapter. As a consequence of this exclusion, migrants in acute medical distress, with injuries, in hypothermia, or suffering from dehydration cannot be reached by humanitarian organizations. These exclusion zones do not function independently. They are brought into being, maintained, and operationalised by a range of actors.

Security personnel and military troops

On both sides of the border, a multiplicity of agencies and forces are deployed within and around the border and its succession of exclusion zones, each operating under distinct mandates, legal frameworks, and chains of command. Together it produces a layered and often opaque enforcement landscape. The militarised regime at the Polish–Belarusian border is the product of an expanding and heterogeneous assemblage of military, paramilitary, security actors, and satellite entities. The relationships, roles, and mandates of these different actors have evolved in response to shifting political conditions on both sides of the border, through the emergency deployments of 2021, to the consolidation of permanent operational frameworks by 2024–25.

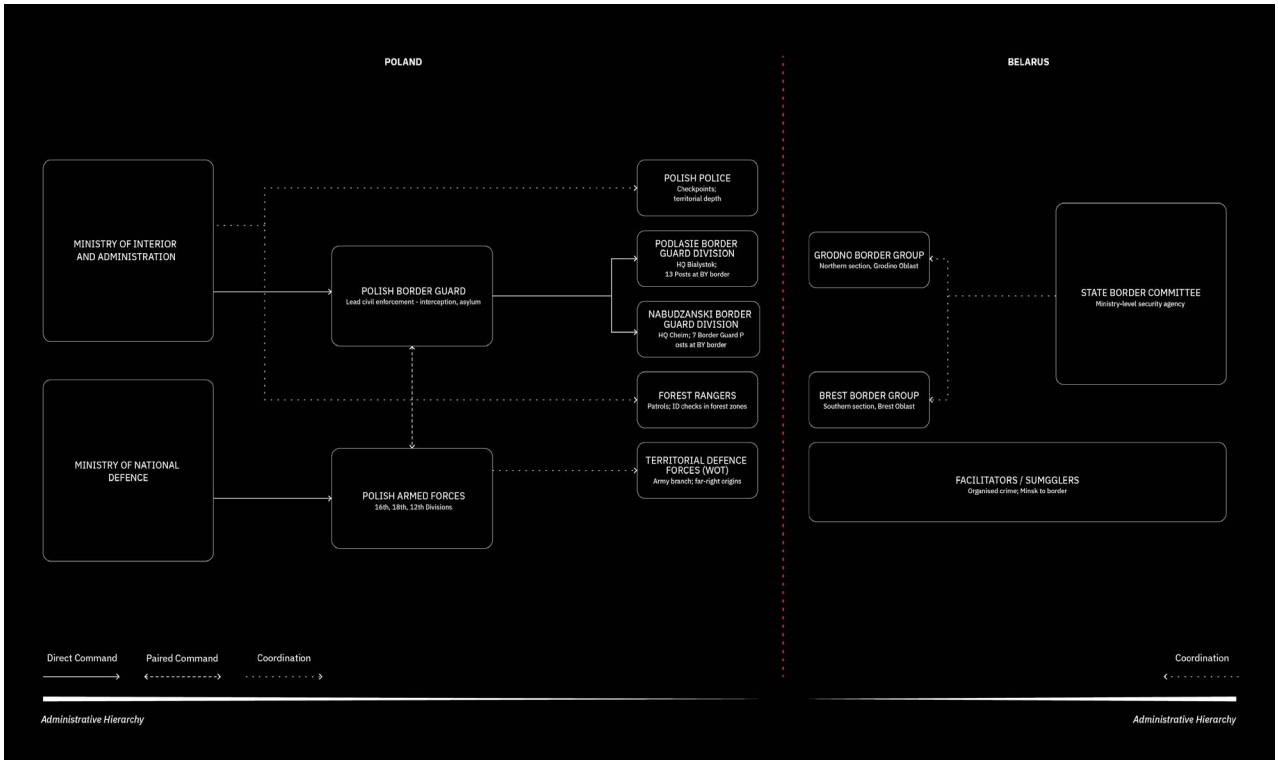


Figure 2.20. Diagram of the law enforcement and security actors operating at the Poland–Belarus border. Diagram by Border Forensics, 2026.

Belarusian authorities and facilitators

The State Border Committee of the Republic of Belarus (Государственный пограничный комитет Республики Беларусь) is the state security agency responsible for enforcing Belarus's borders. It operates through eleven territorial units, two of which cover the approximately 400-km border with Poland. The Grodno Border Group oversees the northern section, running from the tripoint with Lithuania southward through Grodno Oblast, while the Brest Border Group covers the southern section through Brest Oblast down to the tripoint with Ukraine. The Border Guard Service is responsible on the ground for controlling the border and enforcing the border zone and strips. Up until 2020, the State Border Committee cooperated with its Polish counterparts and participated in several EU-funded projects to investigate cross-border crimes, combating irregular migration, and for the development of border technologies.[154]

As discussed in the previous chapter, since 2021, the Belarusian services have facilitated, to varying degrees over time, the movement of migrants across this border. According to Polish authorities, the primary goal of this migration route extends beyond border crossing itself and is understood as a strategic effort to stretch Polish security forces and resources along the border, functioning as a deliberate test of Poland's capacity to handle such a security challenge.[155] As border crossings became operationally more complex, third-party facilitators became involved.[156] According to interviews with law enforcement agents and testimonies of migrants collected by We Are Monitoring, these organisers are believed to function with the consent and logistical support of Belarusian authorities. Journeys are typically facilitated from the country of origin, but also run through cities like Istanbul, to Moscow, Russia, to the Belarusian capital, Minsk, to the border region. Here, migrants either cross independently or with the assistance of guides. Once migrants cross the border, and after moving far enough into the Polish territory, often at the edges of the forest, drivers pick them up and transport them further into Poland or abroad.

154 Belarusian Border Guards have received EU funding, often distributed through UN agencies such as IOM and ICMPD. One example is the SURCAP programme (Strengthening Surveillance Capacity on the Green and Blue Border between Belarus and Ukraine), which ran across two phases: the first (2012–2014) allocated €1.3 million to Belarus, while the second (2014–2016) doubled this to €2.68 million. Equipment procured included surveillance cameras, seismic sensors, communication equipment, and patrol vehicles and boats, supplied to Belarus's State Border Committee via IOM. Additional projects introduced X-ray scanners at Bruzgi and an automated video control system under the Eastern Partnership Integrated Border Management initiative. The most recent bilateral example is the BorderProtect project (2019), funded under the ENI Cross-Border Cooperation Programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine 2014–2020, through which Polish partners installed Digital Mobile Radio systems and thermal imaging equipment under EUROSUR, while Belarus received an optical-fibre perimeter alarm system, terrain vehicles, quad bikes, a motorboat, thermal accessories, and joint training. Joint Technical Secretariat, "BorderProtect," ENI Cross-Border Cooperation Programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine 2014–2020, accessed 2025, https://www.pbu2020.eu/en/projects2020/197; E. Ekeberg, "Equipping a Dictator," OCCRP / Danwatch, January 31, 2019, https://occrp.org/en/eurostotheeast/equipping-a-dictator; IOM, *Final Internal Evaluation of SURCAP Phase II* (Vienna: IOM Regional Office for Southeastern Europe, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 2017), https://evaluation.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl151/files/docs/resources/Border%20Belarus%20Ukraine%20SURCAP%20Final%20Report%202017.pdf; European Commission, *Action Fiche for Eastern Partnership Integrated Border Management Project – Strengthening Surveillance and Bilateral Coordination Capacities at the Belarusian-Ukrainian State Border*, CRIS No. 2013/024-829, Annex 2 of the Commission Implementing Decision on the ENPI East Regional Action Programme 2013 Part II (Brussels: European Commission, 2013), https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2017-03/enpi_2013_c2013_8293_rap_east_partii_ibm_surveillance.pdf.

155 Podlaskie Regional Border Guard Unit. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Białystok, 8 March 2025.

156 C. Simon (Head of Risk Analysis Unit, Frontex), interview by Research Team, 2025; Nadbużański Regional Border Guard Unit, delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team, Chełm, October 17, 2025.



157 creengrab from powerpoint presentention: Nadbużański Regional Border Guard Unit. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Chełm, 17 October 2025

Figure 2.21. A still from drone footage viewed by the research team at the Polish Border Guard Regional Station in Chełm, November 2025 (the full footage was requested but not made accessible for use). The footage shows a group of people being transported from the fence to an area closer to the border with Poland. Screenshot of the Presentation by the Nadbużański border guard division in Chełm, viewed October 2025.[157]

Polish law enforcement agencies

Polish Border Guard (Straż Graniczna)

The Polish Border Guard (Straż Graniczna) is the main agency responsible for border protection, border control, and the enforcement of immigration legislation. The agency is a civil law enforcement body that falls under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, with its headquarters in Warsaw (Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej). The mandate of the agency includes border surveillance, immigration control, customs, and trafficking of goods and people and officers might be equipped with several types of firearms alongside less-lethal tools, such as service dogs, batons, pepper spray, and tasers. The Border Guard is divided into ten regional divisions (*Oddziały Straży Granicznej*), of which two are responsible for the Poland–Belarus border; the Podlaskie Border Guard Division, with its HQ in Bialystok, and the Nadbużański Border Guard Division with its HQ in Chelm. These regional division are subdivided into Border Guard posts (*Placówki Straży Granicznej*), responsible for day-to-day patrolling, surveillance, and border control. The Podlaskie Border Guard Division operates a total of sixteen border guard stations distributed across Poland's national borders with Belarus and Lithuania, of which thirteen border guard posts are tasked for the border with Belarus. The Nadbużański Border Guard Division operates a total of twenty border guard posts, of which seven are responsible for the border with Belarus, while thirteen stations operate at the border with Ukraine.

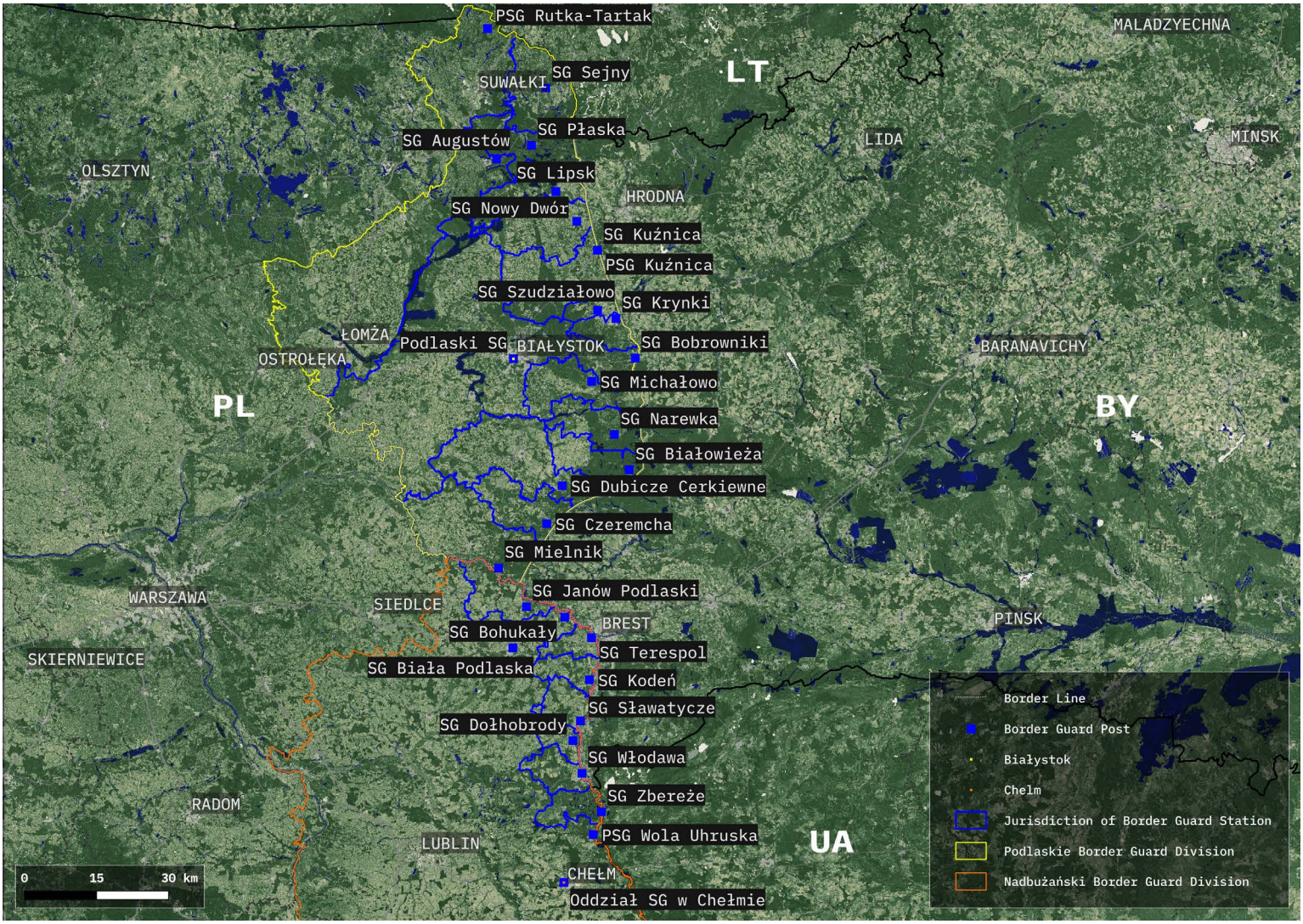


Figure 2.22. Map of Polish Border Guard jurisdiction areas at the border. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Prior to the crisification of 2021, border guards were mainly locals from the Podlaskie and Lubelskie voivodeship who were used to "routine" border work, such as ID checks at official border crossing points or patrolling border strips. During our fieldwork, border guards described this to us as a calm and familiar environment.[158] Around mid-2021, this shifted significantly, and has since evolved gradually into a mandate of enforcement and intensified surveillance, alongside broader infrastructural, political, and legal transformations. In contrast to Latvia and Lithuania, Poland did not invite Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, to support Poland with direct border enforcement practices along its land border.[159] Instead, following the crisification of 2021, the Border Guard increased its collaboration with other law enforcement agencies, such as the military and regular police forces. The Border Guard remains the formal lead authority for border enforcement and the primary institution responsible for the interception and processing of migrants, including registering and lodging their asylum application.[160]

158 Podlaskie Regional Border Guard Unit. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Białystok, 8 March 2025.

159 Frontex, deployed staff at selected land border crossing points, airports and in the Baltic Sea region, and supported Poland with deportation of migrants right to stay in the EU and on specialised training for border and coast guard officers. It is important to note, that as far as we could assess, Fontex did not operate along the 'green border.' See Frontex, "Frontex Executive Director and Chief of Polish Border Guard Visit EU's Eastern Border with Belarus," news release, November 21, 2025, https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-executive-director-and-chief-of-polish-border-guard-visit-eu-s-eastern-border-with-belarus-r2ZFoz.

160 Podlaski, Border Guard Commander 1. Interview by Research Team, Bialystok, 10, March 2025; Białowieża Border Guard Station. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Białowieża, 9 March 2025.



Figure 2.23. Border guards and military personnel in Białowieża. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, March 2025.

Within the Border Guard, a search-and-rescue team was instituted in 2024,[161] with the task of supporting people in distress or life-threatening risk.[162] However the search-and-rescue team was faced with increasing criticism from civil society organisations concerning their role in contributing to situations that would harm migrants or expose them to risk of death, as well asthe absence of adequate medical training beyond basic first aid, combined with a lack of essential equipment such as stretchers[163]. This undermined any credible search-and-rescue capacity and made their mandate more performative than genuine in the eyes of non-state actors involved in supporting people in distress at the border. Furthermore, although the Border Guard maintains dedicated search-and-rescue units, it bears no institutional responsibility for locating missing persons, a mandate that in Poland rests instead with the Police.[164]

The Polish Armed Forces

The immediate militarisation of the border in 2021 was characterized by rapid and escalating military troop deployments by the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland, commonly referred to as the Polish Army (Wojsko Polskie, WP, in Polish), which consolidated significantly across the years to come. In August of that year, over 900 Polish soldiers were deployed to the border in response to what was framed as a surge in crossings.[165] By October, the Ministry of National Defence had increased this figure to

161 G. Baranowska, K. Czarnota, O. Wanicka, M. Czachor, and M. Sośniak, *Disappearances on the Polish-Belarusian Border: Pushbacks as a Factor in Enforced Disappearances in Poland* (Warsaw: Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 2024), https://hfhr.pl/upload/2024/12/disappearances-on-the-polish-belarusian-border-report-hfhr.pdf.

162 Bobrowniki Border Guard Station. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Bobrowniki, 9 March 2025; D. Tilles, "Poland Sets Up Search-and-Rescue Teams to Help Migrants Crossing Belarus Border," *Notes from Poland, March* 11, 2024, accessed June 29, 2026, https://notesfrompoland.com/2024/03/11/poland-sets-up-search-and-rescue-teams-to-help-migrants-crossing-belarus-border/.

163 Grażyna Baranowska, Katarzyna Czarnota, Olga Wanicka, Marcin Czachor, and Marcin Sośniak, *Disappearances on the Polish-Belarusian Border: Pushbacks as a Factor in Enforced Disappearances in Poland* (Warsaw: Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 2024).

164 Baranowska et al., *Disappearances on the Polish-Belarusian* Border.

165 Al Jazeera, "Polish Army Deployed to Belarus Border Amid Migrant Surge," *August* 18, 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/18/polish-army-deployed-to-belarus-border-amid-migrant-surge.

3,000, and within days the number doubled again to 6,000 soldiers, drawn from the 16th, 18th, and 12th Divisions, deployed in support of the Border Guard.[166] These figures represent a qualitative transformation: within a matter of weeks, a peripheral frontier had become one of the most heavily militarized stretches of border in Europe. Under ordinary circumstances, border protection in Poland is the responsibility of the Border Guard rather than the Armed Forces. The large-scale deployment of military personnel therefore represented an exceptional expansion of the military's role in domestic border enforcement.

166 Al Jazeera, "Poland Nearly Doubles Troop Numbers on Belarus Border," *October* 19, 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/19/poland-almost-doubles-troop-numbers-on-belarus-border.

167 Ministry of National Defence (Poland), "Operation RENGAW. On the Polish-Belarusian Border, the Military Task Force Begins Its Work," Gov.pl, August 12, 2023, https://www.gov.pl/web/national-defence/operation-rengaw-on-the-polish-belarusian-border-the-military-task-force-begins-its-work.



Figure 2.24. A temporary makeshift military camp in the forest near the Poland–Belarus border. The image shows a military truck with its licence plate obscured by a piece of cardboard. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, March 2025.

The process of militarisation further intensified in the wake of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. In August 2023, the Ministry of Defence launched Operation RENGAW,[167] a name that reads as the reverse of "Wagner," invoking the Russian paramilitary group then based in Belarus. The operation placed military command over border operations in a formalised task-force structure, with up to 4,000 soldiers deployed under a unified command and a further 6,000 held in reserve. In August 2024, RENGAW was succeeded by Operation Safe Podlaskie (Bezpieczne

Podlaskie),[168] which represented a further and even more substantial expansion. The number of soldiers involved rose to 17,000–18,000 directly stationed at the border, with a further 9,000 on 48-hour standby. Command was assigned to Major General Arkadiusz Szkutnik of the 18th Armoured Division, underscoring the operation's explicitly military rather than law-enforcement character. Safe Podlaskie was explicitly designed as a transitional arrangement, intended to pave the way for the establishment of a permanent Border Protection Component (KOP) by 2028, signalling the long-term institutionalisation of military involvement in border governance.[169]

168 Polskie Radio, "Poland Launches New Military Operation on Belarus Border," *July* 31, 2024, https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7784/Artykul/3409144,poland-launches-new-military-operation-on-belarus-border.

169 Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej, "KOP – nowa tarcza bezpieczeństwa na wschodniej granicy," June 30, 2026, accessed July 13, 2026, https://media.terytorialsi.wp.mil.pl/informacje/872828/kop-nowa-tarcza-bezpieczenstwa-na-wschodniej-granicy.

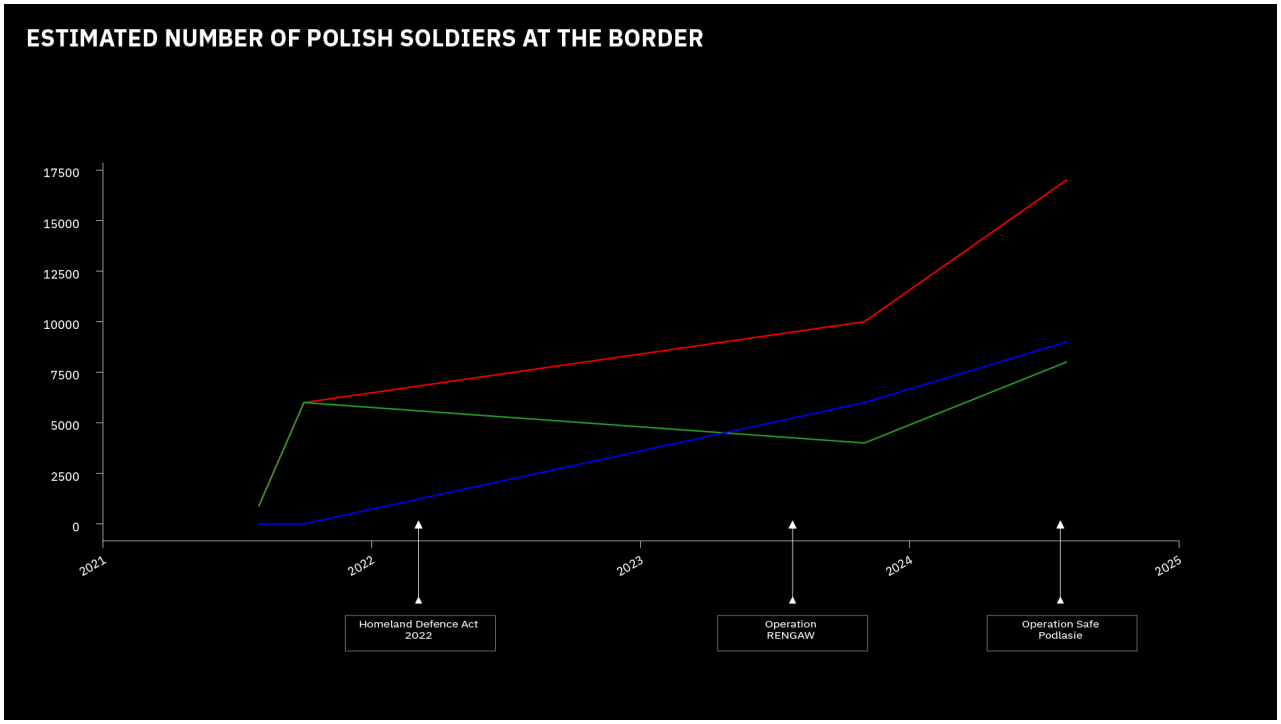


Figure 2.25. Announced deployment of Polish troops, 2021–2024, at the Poland–Belarus border, compiled from multiple public announcements. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

Although the military is not normally tasked with migration control, it has taken on a significant role in supporting border operations. Soldiers assist with patrols, provide logistical support, and have been involved in building and maintaining physical barriers along the border. Across interviews with local volunteers and civil society actors, many have reported the involvement of the Polish Armed Forces in border operations, including apprehensions and pushbacks of migrants, but also the setting up of roadblocks in the forest, preventing locals from moving around the forest.[170] They have been observed assisting in pushbacks by transporting people in trucks, apprehending them, and handing them over to the

170 Activist Base 2. "Mapping Crisification 1." Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025; Lawyer, local resident, and activists. "Mapping Crisification 2." Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025; Teramiski School. "Mapping Crisification 3." Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025; Activist Base 3. "Mapping Crisification 4." Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025.

Border Guard.[171] Their presence contributes to framing the situation less as routine border management and more as an issue of national defence. According to our conversation with Border Guard commanders, each Border Guard post is assigned the commander of the Border Guards, paired with a commander of the army.[172] As we will see below, many Border Guard posts have undergone a significant infrastructural expansion to host military barracks, canteens, military vehicles, parking and training facilities for the army.

Territorial Defence Forces (WOT)

In addition to conventional military forces, Poland's Territorial Defence Forces (Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej, WOT) represent a politically distinctive addition to the national security landscape. WOT is an armed volunteer branch of the Polish armed forces that was founded in 2017 under a far-right government, and drew heavily from paramilitary and nationalist movements, with some recruits transitioning directly from those structures.[174] WOT's main tasks include presenting a deterrence posture, conducting operations within the Strategic Defence Operation, coordinating crisis management, countering hybrid and asymmetric warfare, and promoting patriotic values and education.[175] WOT volunteers undergo a sixteen-day basic training to become a volunteer and serve in the Territorial Defence Forces.[176] The force is shaped by a distinct ideological orientation centred on the protection of land, nation, and family.[177] Its structure comprises a Brigade Command in Białystok, alongside light infantry battalions in Suwałki, Łomża, Bielsk Podlaski, and Hajnówka, effectively covering the full geographical range of the borderland region.[178] Operationally, it is positioned as a branch partner, closely monitored by the regular armed forces. Activists and locals reported to us, in conversations, that they had interactions with, and were stopped by, WOT. Meanwhile, one WOT volunteer mentioned to us informally that he had conducted stop-and-search operations targeting migrants.

The Polish police (Policja)

The Polish police is a central state institution responsible for maintaining "public order," preventing crime, leading search-and-rescue operations, and "safeguarding internal security."[179] Since 2021, the police have taken on a supporting role alongside the Border Guard and the Armed Forces at the Poland–Belarus border partly through the *zapora operation.* This operation ran until December 2024, which deployed police units from

171 Activist Base 2. "Mapping Crisification 1." Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025; Lawyer, local resident, and activists. "Mapping Crisification 2." Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025; Teramiski School. "Mapping Crisification 3." Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025.

172 Krynki Border Guard Station. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Krynki, 8 March 2025.

173 Bobrowniki Border Guard Station. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team.Bobrowniki, 9 March 2025; Białowieża Border Guard Station. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Białowieża, 9 March 2025; Janów Podlaski Border Guard Station. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Janów Podlaski, 16 October 2025.

174 B. Bruns, "Security Through Emotions: Narratives of Temporal and Spatial Belongings of the Polish Territorial Defence Forces," Canadian Slavonic Papers 64, no. 4 (2022): 445-67.

175 Ministry of National Defence (Poland), "Territorial Defence Forces," Gov.pl, accessed July 14, 2026, https://www.gov.pl/web/national-defence/territorial-defence-force; M. Zieliński, "WOT na granicy," Polska Zbrojna, Wojskowy Instytut Wydawniczy, accessed July 14, 2026, https://pzevo.azurewebsites.net/home/articleshow/36253?t=WOT-na-granicy.

176 Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej, "Szkolenie – warianty," Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej, accessed July 13, 2026, https://terytorialsi.wp.mil.pl/szkolenie-warianty.

177 M. Fornůsek and M. G. Bartoszewicz, "Modern Army for Modern Times or Private Paramilitary? Polish Territorial Defense Force as a Benchmark Case in Conflict Evolution," *Democracy and Security* 20, no. 1 (2024): 69-93, https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2023.2220108.

178 Territorial Defense Forces (Poland), official website, accessed July 13, 2026, https://terytorialsi.wp.mil.pl/.

179 Police of the Republic of Poland, "The Polish Police," About Polish Police, accessed July 13, 2026, https://info.policja.pl/ine/about-us/190685,The-Polish-Police.html.

across the country on a rotational basis, including counter-terrorism specialists, criminal and traffic police, service dog handlers, and police pilots.[180] In the first weeks following the crisification, the Polish police supported border guards and the military at the border line. Only later, while the army and Border Guard focused on the immediate "strip," the exclusion zone, and the forested areas, the police shifted its operational focus towards Poland's interior, and the national territory more broadly.[181] According to our interviews with the border guards, approximately 340 policemen were assigned to assist in border protection efforts.[182] Police units have been involved in area security, logistical coordination, and the enforcement of the rules concerning restricted zones near the border. Border guards further reported that police are involved in licence-plate recognition and the control of vehicles transporting, or suspected to be transporting, migrants.[184] The sustained police presence at the Belarus border reflects a broader pattern: the progressive securitisation of the border, where traditional policing functions have become deeply intertwined with migration control and national security operations.

Finally, the police play a central role in responding to cases of missing persons and the discovery of unidentified bodies at the border.[185] They are responsible for searching for missing persons, maintaining contact with their families, cooperating with relevant organisations, using national and international databases, collecting DNA reference samples from relatives where appropriate, and cooperating internationally in cross-border missing-person cases.[186] In the context of deaths at this border, HFHR has pointed to serious shortcomings in initiating search-and-rescue operations, which we will discuss in more detail in Chapter Four. Furthermore, the fact that the Border Guard, acting under the amended legal framework carry out pushbacks, which contributes to migrants going missing at the border, while the Police is responsible for searching for missing persons, reveals a fundamental institutional contradiction.

Forest rangers

The forest rangers are tasked with protecting the forest and balancing conservation with visitor guidance, operating under the authority of the Ministry of Climate and Environment. As discussed above, the protected areas along the border in Poland are divided into two distinct categories: the Białowieża National Park and the State Forest reserves. Within the National Park, law enforcement and conservation duties are carried out by park guards (*strażnicy parku*), while the State Forest reserves are overseen by forest guards (*strażnicy leśni*). In this investigation, we refer

180 InfoSecurity24, "Policjanci wracają do domu. Operacja 'Zapora' zakończona," *December* 20, 2024, accessed June 26, 2026, https://infosecurity24.pl/sluzby-mundurowe/policja/policjanci-wracaja-do-domu-operacja-zapora-zakonczona.

181 Podlaskie Regional Border Guard Unit. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Białystok, 8 March 2025.

182 Podlaskie Regional Border Guard Unit. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Białystok, 8 March 2025.

183 InfoSecurity24, "Policjanci wracają do domu."

184 Podlaskie Regional Border Guard Unit. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Białystok, 8 March 2025

185 Komendant Główny Policji, Wytyczne nr 3 Komendanta Głównego Policji z dnia 13 czerwca 2018 r. w sprawie wykonywania przez Policję niektórych czynności związanych z postępowaniami o udzielenie ochrony międzynarodowej, Dziennik Urzędowy Komendy Głównej Policji, no. 77, June 13, 2018, accessed June 26, 2026, https://edziennik.policja.gov.pl/DU_KGP/2018/77/akt.pdf.

186 Baranowska et al., *Disappearances on the Polish-Belarusian* Border. https://hfhr.pl/upload/2024/12/disappearances-on-the-polish-belarusian-border-report-hfhr.pdf

to both law enforcement agents as forest rangers.

In 2016 and 2017, forest rangers became involved in enforcement operations against activists defending the preservation of the Białowieża Forest. Rangers were deployed to secure logging operations, confront protesters, and keep timber extraction moving. Reports from that period stated that the State Forests brought in additional rangers specifically to deal with blockades, and activists described rangers' interventions as increasingly forceful, including physical removal and coordination with police.[187] Since March 2021, an agreement has been in place between the Białowieża National Park and the Podlaskie Border Guard Division for joint patrols by Border Guard officers and Park Rangers, aimed at tourist and border safety, and information-sharing on illegal migration, poaching, and nature destruction between the Park and the Border Guard's Białowieża and Narewka Posts.[188] Forest rangers have also monitored and enforced restrictions on access to protected areas when civil society actors have sought to enter them to support migrants.[189]

187 Państwowe Gospodarstwo Leśne Lasy Państwowe, "Strażnik leśny," Słownik leśny, accessed July 22, 2026, https://www.lasy.gov.pl/pl/edukacja/slownik/s/straznik-lesny.

188 Białowieża National Park (BPN), "Podpisanie porozumienia o współpracy pomiędzy Podlaskim Oddziałem Straży Granicznej a Białowieskim Parkiem Narodowym," Bpn.com.pl, March 17, 2021, https://bpn.com.pl/index.php?id=3775&option=com_content&task=view.

189 Tour Guide, activist, and environmentalist. Guided Tour, observations, and informal interview, by Peter Teunissen. Białowieża Forest, August 2024; Biologist 3. Interview by Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025.

Intra-enforcement cooperation

Based on conversations and explanations from border guards and the Polish army, we were able to trace the main lines of responsibility of the multiple enforcement actors in Poland (see diagram below). Importantly, these response lines are not sealed from one another; they are dynamically interconnected by the continuous flow of data from infrastructure to personnel, and enforcement decisions that constitute the operational metabolism of the border and the daily functioning of the architecture of enmity. The border line itself and the exclusion zone constitute the primary operational space of the Border Guard, supported by regular army units and, in designated areas, by WOT patrols. A broader buffer zone extending into the surrounding region is subject to police and WOT presence, with vehicle tracking, identity checks, and the surveillance of civil society actors functioning as mechanisms of access control. Urban nodes and operational centres, connected to the border infrastructure by data and logistical links, serve as the processing and command hubs through which the spatial information generated at the frontier is transformed into operational responses, as the next section will detail further.

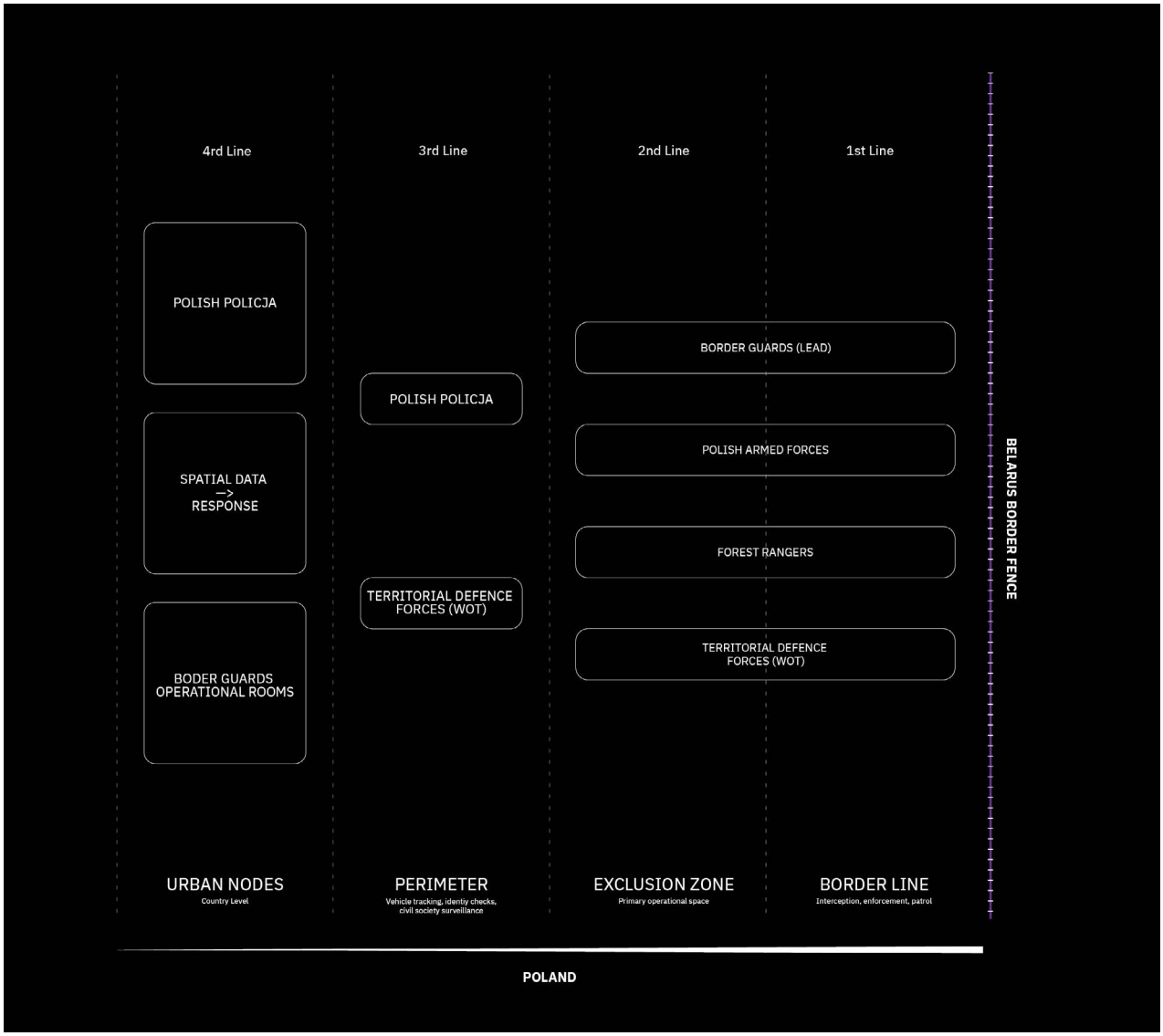


Figure 2.26. Operational lines of Polish law enforcement and security services deployed along the Poland–Belarus border. Diagram by Border Forensics, 2026..

Vehicles of control

The actors discussed above in Poland and Belarus operate a wide range of vehicles and equipment to carry out their daily operations across the border area, which have become highly visible across the borderlands. This inventory spans a broad spectrum, ranging from quad bikes used to move swiftly across open terrain, to pickup trucks, vans for the transport of people, and mobile observation towers equipped with thermal vision capabilities. These assets reflect the practical, field-level nature of border enforcement and surveillance work. Military agencies on both sides, however, rely on a notably different and heavier set of equipment, with their inventories consisting of larger military trucks and tank-like reconnaissance vehicles suited to more intensive operational demands. The images below show the extent and diversity of equipment and logistics that both Polish and Belarusian counterparts have deployed at the border.



Figure 2.27. Multiple land vehicles used by the Nadbużański Border Guard Division. Screengrab from a PowerPoint presentation, Nadbużański Border Guard Division. [190]





Figure 2.28. Vans and a speedboat belonging to the Belarusian State Border Committee. [191]

Aerial surveillance

The Polish Border Guard and supporting military units increasingly use drones as a core surveillance and response tool along the eastern frontier. These unmanned aerial systems are an important component of the "electronic surveillance system," providing real-time aerial monitoring of remote forested areas. Drones allow operators to detect movements, track groups of migrants, and coordinate patrols more efficiently than ground units alone. Equipped with thermal imaging and night-vision capabilities, drones are particularly useful in low-visibility conditions and identify individuals making unusual attempts at crossing or avoiding detection. In some cases, as presented by the Border Guards, drones are also used to document incidents, support search-and-rescue operations, or gather evidence related to smuggling networks.[192]

190 Screengrab from powerpoint presentention: Nadbużański Regional Border Guard Unit. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Chełm, 17 October 2025.

191 State Border Committee of the Republic of Belarus, Telegram channel post.

192 Janów Podlaski Border Guard Station. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Janów Podlaski, 16 October 2025.



Figure 2.29. Quadcopter drone operated by the Polish Border Guard. Photograph by Anka Kolber, 2025.

Third pillar: Border infrastructures and technologies

The assemblage of law enforcement actors composing the human component of the architecture of enmity is connected to a broad range of infrastructural and technological components. Militarisation has developed through the deployment of troops as well as the evolution of technological surveillance and militarised infrastructural installations. We trace the multiple types of infrastructure and technological components of the architecture of enmity: from the dual-use installation of military barracks in Poland to military camps in Belarus nested in the forest, to patrol roads tothe complex layers of border walls installed across both countries' borderlands to the rivers recruited into border enforcement.

Military installations and dual-use formations

A series of overlapping infrastructural components have progressively re-shaped the physical and strategic character of the borderlands. Alongside troop deployments, military infrastructure is scattered across the border through installations such as military camps and barracks, and the expansion or construction of roads for heavy vehicles and patrol formations. Most of these military infrastructures serve dual purposes, supporting both migration control and war preparedness – defence on the Polish side, while, on the Belarusian side, military infrastructure facilitated the "instrumental movement" of migrants towards Poland. Importantly, the dual-use logic of Poland's border infrastructures signals a qualitative shift towards counter-instrumentalisation, where the management of migration and preparation for conflict escalation have become mutually constitutive. We analyse Belarusian and Polish military infrastructures in turn.

Belarusian military infrastructure

In Belarus, former Soviet military bases, storage facilities, military camps, and barracks are scattered across the border strip. With the crisification of the border, some of these facilities have been repurposed to facilitate Belarus's "instrumentalisation" of migration. Through remote sensing techniques, corroborated with migrants' accounts, we were able to identify some of the facilities where migrants have been held by the Belarusian authorities. These infrastructures are nested in the forest and serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, these sites serve a military function, accommodating military personnel and installations such as helipads and shooting ranges. On the other hand, they are locations where migrants are forcibly detained and exposed to violence, before being forced or instructed to move, often towards the Polish border, or after being pushed-back again into the border strip (see Chapter five).

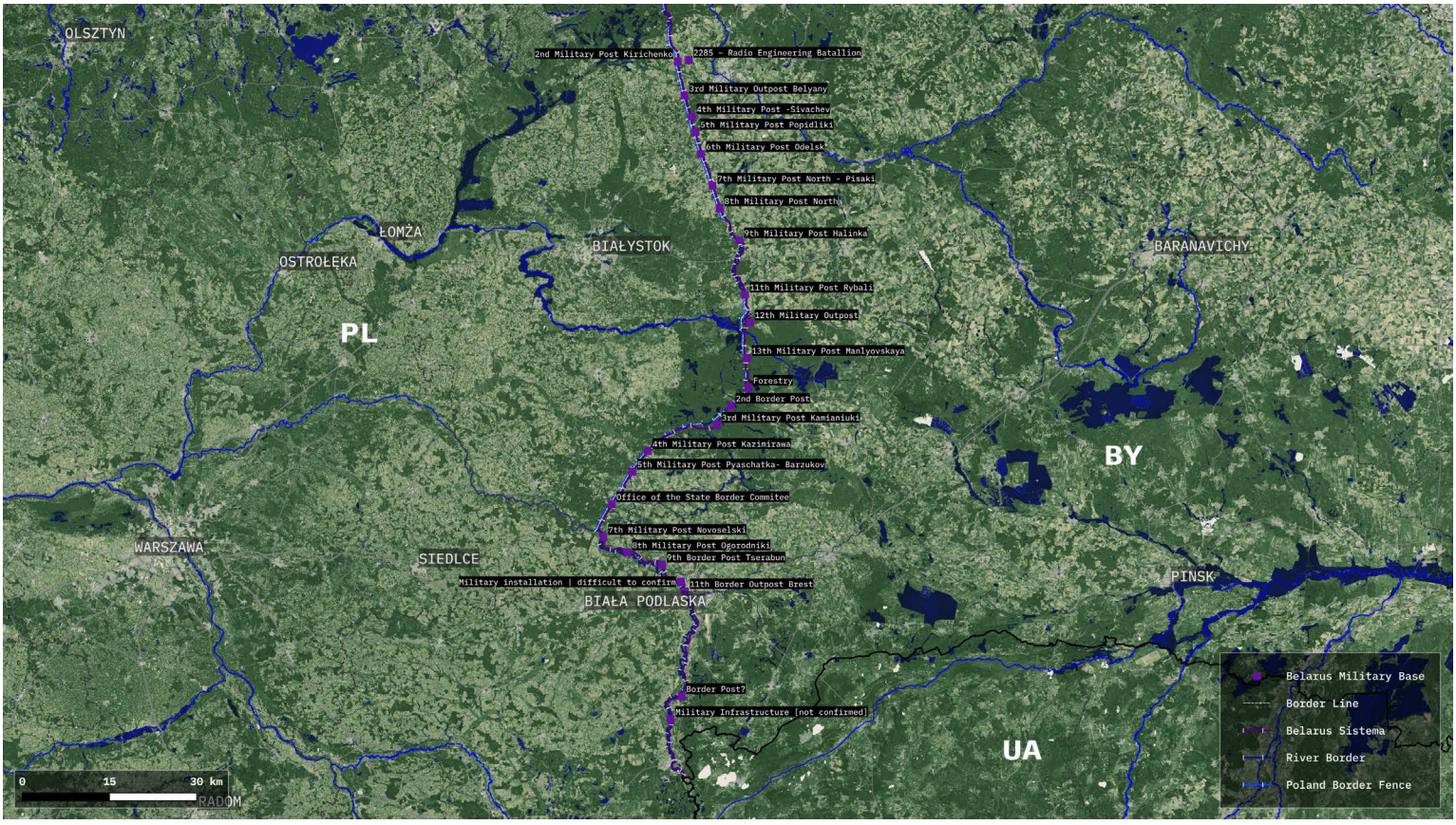




Figure 2.30. Map of the locations of military posts in the Belarusian border zone. Below, left to right: 1st military post (Koviniky); 3rd military post (Kamenyuki); radio battalion. Map by Border Forensics, 2026. Satellite imagery: Google Earth, Maxar Technologies, ©2026.

Polish military infrastructure

In Poland, since 2021, military camps have been erected across agricultural fields or stationed at existing Border Guard stations across the entire border with Belarus, hosting troops, barracks, gyms, canteens, and training grounds for the army (fig. 26, 27, 28). Such military infrastructure hosts army troops whose work serves both defence objectives and provides support to border guards in border enforcement, interception, and capture of migrants. Exemplifying this are temporary and mobile infrastructures that have been retained precisely for their flexibility, capable of rapid expansion or contraction in response to fluctuations in recorded migrant crossings (see fig. 32).[193]

193 Although several of these facilities were initially presented as temporary or mobile installations, some have remained in place for several years, suggesting a gradual process of institutionalisation rather than a purely emergency response.



Figure 2.31. Empty fields at Narewka in 2020, and construction of a military camp on the same site in 2021. Satellite imagery: Google Earth, Maxar Technologies, ©2020/2021.



Figure 2.32. Military installations surrounding the Białowieża Border Guard Station, Białowieża, Poland. Satellite imagery: Google Earth, Maxar Technologies, ©2019/2021/2024.



2019 2021 2024

Figure 2.33. Militarisation of the Kuźnica border crossing. Satellite imagery: Google Earth, Maxar Technologies, ©2019/2021/2024.

Another clear indicator of militarisation has been the marked expansion of patrol road networks, which can be seen in our satellite imagery analysis. This road network serves the logistical purpose of enabling faster deployment of troops and border enforcement officers. These roads, as evidenced by satellite imagery in Figure 35, have proliferated extensively across forest and riverine sections, carving new corridors through previously inaccessible terrain. Their primary operational function has shifted towards providing rapid access to areas identified as active migrant crossing points, embedding a security-first infrastructure logic into the landscape itself.



Figure 2.34. Construction of a patrol road along the riverine section of the Świsłocz (Svisloch) River, Podlaski Border Guard Division. Satellite imagery: Geoportal.gov.pl (Główny Urząd Geodezji i Kartografii), 2020/2022.

Conversely, infrastructure officially framed as migration management measures has been progressively integrated into Poland's and NATO's broader strategic planning. The border wall is the most visible expression of this logic. Such a colossal structure was built in response to the 2021 events, to prevent migrant crossings into Poland, and maintains the same function today, while also being absorbed into a wider spectrum of military objectives. Indeed, in 2024, Poland, in cooperation with NATO[194] and the Baltic states, undertook a large-scale infrastructural project, involving the section of the Poland–Belarus border in the Podlaskie voivodeship, among others. The programme emphasises that the infrastructure is aimed at preventing enemy transit, and not migration, yet the published presentations (see image below) demonstrate how infrastructure aimed at migration deterrence (left to right: steel fence, patrol road,

194 Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Poland, "Q&A," East Shield (Tarcza Wschód), accessed July 13, 2026, https://tarczawschod.wp.mil.pl/en/q-a/.

concertina wire) are further integrated within defence schemes, blurring the boundaries between defence and border enforcement.

195 Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Poland, "About the Programme," Tarcza Wschód, accessed July 13, 2026, https://tarczawschod.wp.mil.pl/en/about-the-programme/.



Figure 2.35. Components of the Eastern Shield programme. Screenshot from a presentation of the Polish Armed Forces..[195]

Poland–Belarus border infrastructure

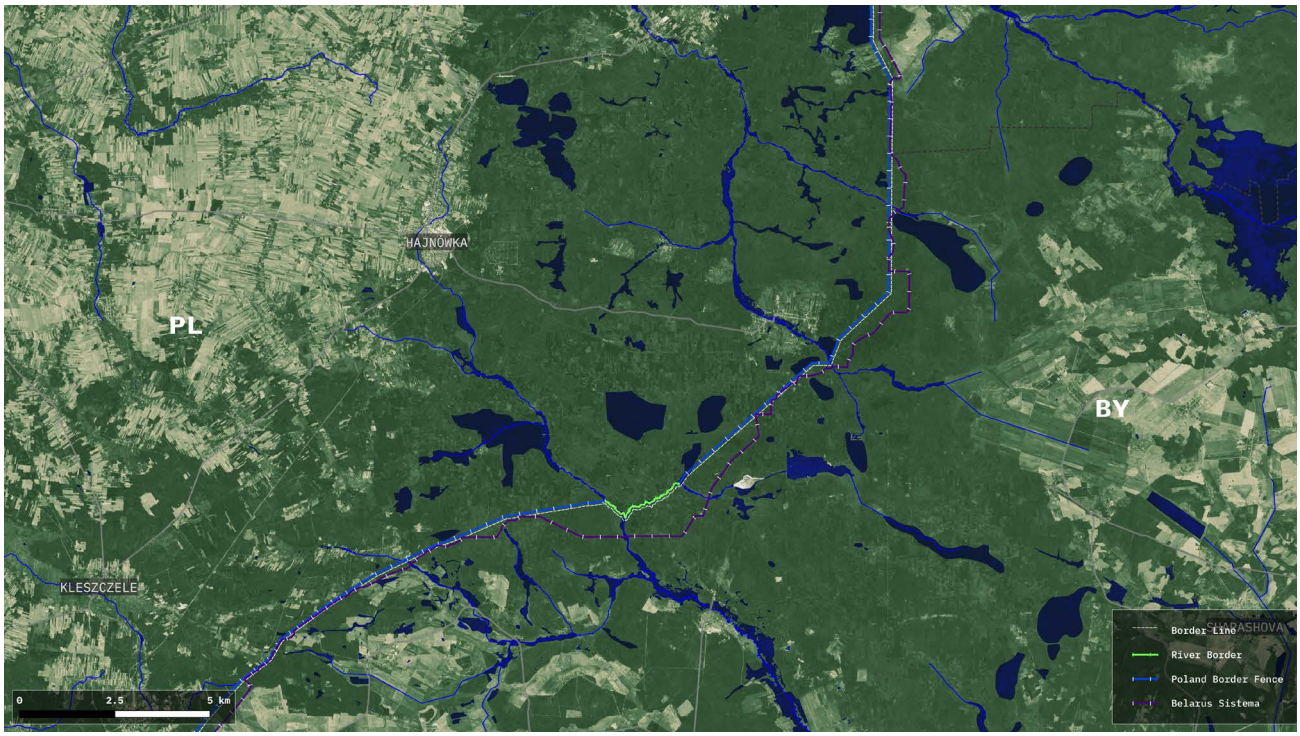


Figure 2.36. The Polish border wall and the Belarusian Sistema fence. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Belarus's border infrastructure

The Belarusian border infrastructure is a layered system of overlapping obstacles and surveillance technologies, including motion sensors and cameras. This Sistema infrastructure runs continuously for over 360 km along the Polish–Belarus border, crossing watercourses and wetlands, with several remotely operated gates controlling access to the border strip. Its installation dates back to the Cold War border regime discussed earlier in this chapter, when Soviet border infrastructure, watchtowers, ploughed tracking strips, barbed wire, and bunkers established an assemblage of border infrastructure that has never been fully dismantled. Since Poland joined the EU, its main function was to prevent and control the movement of people towards the EU-Schengen zone, through a collaborative approach between Polish and Belarusian Border Guards which we discussed in Chapter 1. The crisification of the border in 2021 led to the repurposing of existing infrastructure to control and enable the instrumental movement of migrants towards Poland and the European Union.

Control and tracking strip

Between the border zone and the border strip there is a security strip up to 15 metres wide, also known as the control and tracking strip, контрольно-следовая полоса (КСП). This strip is regularly ploughed, as seen in the image below, to create a surface where movement through the strip leaves detectable traces, such as footprints, functioning as a passive detection measure across the entire length of the border.



Figure 2.37. KS-100 system with a control strip of ploughed sand, Terebun Border Guard station, Belarus. Screengrab from a video by Pogranec.by, 2021.[196]

196 Pogranec.by, "Пограничная застава 'Теребунь' Брестской пограничной группы," YouTube video, June 4, 2021, https://youtu.be/Aj6uZbAHnQg.

Fence infrastructure

The control and tracking strip is fenced off by either a barbed-wire fence or a steel fence. It has been difficult to assess the full technical specifications of the border infrastructure along the full distance of the Belarus–Poland border; however, as far as could be assessed, the system has been subject to successive phases of reinforcement and technological upgrades since its initial construction in 1948.[197] The current system consists of several rows of barbed-wire fencing combined with an electronic signalling component designated C-175 Gardina, installed in 1980 as a replacement for the older C-100 Skala system.[198] This system was subsequently upgraded to the KC-185 Gobi, which integrates an information collection and processing system with a range of linear barriers equipped with sensors capable of detecting physical contact, ground vibration, electrical capacitance, and movement through water passages.[199] In some areas along the border between Poland and Belarus, our satellite imagery analysis indicates a doubling of the layers of fencing over recent years, as shown in the satellite imagery below.

197 See A. Dobrovolskyi, D. Kupriienko, and S. Cherkashyn, "Alarm Systems for the Protection of Long Sections of the State Border: A Retrospective Review of Their Use in Ukraine in the Period of 1955-2000," *Bezpeka Derzhavy* 2, no. 4 (2024): 7, https://doi.org/10.33405/27.

198 Judzińska and Hajdarowicz, "Walking Along the Borderscape."; Jędrzejewska and Jędrzejewski, *Predation in Vertebrate* Communities; NIKIRET, "About NIKIRET," Research and Design Institute of Radio-Electronic Engineering, accessed June 23, 2026, https://www.nikiret.ru/s2/company/.

199 Dobrovolskyi, Kupriienko, and Cherkashyn, "Alarm Systems." https://doi.org/10.33405/27.

200 Janów Podlaski Border Guard Station. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Janów Podlaski, 16 October 2025.



Figure 2.38. Satellite imagery analysis shows an additional metal fence in certain sections of the Belarusian border infrastructure. Its alignment is irregular: in some locations it extends deeper into Belarusian territory. Satellite imagery: Google Earth, Maxar Technologies, ©2019/2021.

The fence infrastructure includes several access gates appearing every several kilometres that are used exclusively by Belarusian border guards. These gates can be opened remotely from a distance. Polish border guards we interviewed stated that they had observed a pattern suggesting that crossings into Poland tend to happen in close proximity to these gates.[200]

Electronic observation system

Alongside the fencing, an electronic surveillance system has been installed in certain sections of the border, though available sources do not confirm which specific sections this infrastructure has been built in, or how far it extends. Surveillance cameras are mounted directly alongside the fence, while elevated camera systems, as seen in the image below, function as long-range observation towers that extend visibility across wider areas.



Figure 2.39. The fence line, with a strip of ploughed sand alongside it, patrolled by military personnel and a dog. A tower with a mounted camera is visible in the background. Screengrab from a video by Pogranec.by, 2021.[201]

Feeds from these cameras are monitored at local border guard stations (as seen in the image below). Prior to the 2021 crisification, the EU had supported the technological development and training of Belarusian border guards.[202] In addition, motion sensors are deployed to detect movement or attempts to cross or tunnel beneath the fence; when triggered, a notification is sent to border guard observation centres, prompting the mobilisation of response units. Whether this system is deployed along the full length of the Belarusian border with Poland could not be confirmed from open-source material.

201 ogranec by. 2021. "Пограничная застава 'Теребунь' Брестской пограничной группы." YouTube video. June 4, 2021.

202 Three initiatives were SURCAP I (2012–2014), SURCAP II (2014–2016), and BorderProtect (2014–2020). The SURCAP projects (Strengthening the Surveillance Capacity on the Green and Blue Border between the Republic of Belarus and Ukraine) were designed to enhance surveillance and operational coordination along the Belarus–Ukraine border. SURCAP I allocated approximately €1.3 million to Belarus, while SURCAP II increased funding to approximately €2.68 million. Together, the projects provided vehicles, boats, surveillance equipment, and training for border personnel, aiming to strengthen border security, improve bilateral cooperation between Belarus and Ukraine, facilitate legal cross-border movement and trade, and promote integrated border management practices. BorderProtect subsequently continued these efforts by supporting cooperation between border guard services and increasing the effectiveness of border checks and external border protection. European Commission, *Action Fiche for Eastern Partnership Integrated Border Management Project – Strengthening Surveillance and Bilateral Coordination Capacities at the Belarusian-Ukrainian State Border*, CRIS No. 2013/024-829, Annex 2 of the Commission Implementing Decision on the ENPI East Regional Action Programme 2013 Part II (Brussels: European Commission, 2013), accessed June 25, 2026, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2017-03/enpi_2013_c2013_8293_rap_east_partii_ibm_surveillance.pdf; Joint Technical Secretariat, "BorderProtect," ENI Cross-Border Cooperation Programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine 2014–2020, accessed June 25, 2026, https://www.pbu2020.eu/en/projects2020/197; S. Bohdan, "Belarus Struggles to Control Its Borders," *Belarus Digest*, November 4, 2016, accessed June 25, 2026, https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-struggles-to-control-its-borders/; International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), "Support to the Development of the Concept of the National Migration Policy in Belarus," accessed June 25, 2026, https://euprojects.by/projects/migration-asylum-and-refugees/support-to-the-development-of-the-concept-of-the-national-migration-policy-in-belarus/.



Figure 2.40. Operational room of the Belarusian border guards showing camera footage; the image in the bottom right shows an alert when a section has been breached or left open. Screengrab from video footage, originally sourced via YouTube.[203]

Poland's border infrastructure

As the analysis above has shown, since the post-Second World War period, the Belarusian side of the border was primarily enforced and controlled by Soviet-era border infrastructure and exclusion zones. The Polish side, on the other contrast, had comparatively little border infrastructure in place, reflecting its position first within the Eastern Bloc and later as an EU member state, and the externalisation of border control to Belarus. The crisification of the border in 2021 triggered a rapid reversal of this asymmetry as the Polish state hardened its side of the border through a series of structural components. Poland partially funded this infrastructure from its national budget, while the EU partly funded the electronic components.[204] As the Polish Border Guard itself has described, this infrastructure is organised around three core components of intervention: a physical barrier, an electronic surveillance system, including long-range observation towers, motion sensors, optical and aerial surveillance, and law enforcement actors such as border guards and the military. [205]

203 Initial material was found on a YouTube account that is no longer available (formerly at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5i-W44V4V20&list=PL_2j_yppvudV1t92aWuA-4jfmUGW_Aq0G-). Similar footage can be found in News.BY, "День на границе. Специальный репортаж," YouTube video, 28:04, May 28, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGe-RXhA4n0&list=PL_2j_yppvud-V1t92aWuA4jfmUGW_Aq0G-&index=2.

204 Some components of the border infrastructure were funded by the EU, while others were financed through Poland's national programmes. Due to specific legislative provisions, not all elements were subject to public tender procedures, making it difficult to systematically determine which sections were financed by EU funds and which by national funds. Throughout the text, we refer to contracts or tender documents where these are available.

205 The Polish Border Guard has been a key player in the development of high-tech border infrastructures, which has reportedly been visited by several delegations, including Frontex, illustrating the agency's role not merely as a border enforcement agent but as an "innovator" for other border authorities. The Polish border guards has also been involved in four EU-funded Horizon 2020 projects, including the highly criticised iBorderCtrl project, while FOLDOUT and TRESSPASS were also the subject of considerable controversy. See M. Akkerman, *Border Labs: How Universities Power Europe's Border Regime*, Border Wars Series (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute and Stop Wapenhandel, March 2026), 80, https://www.tni.org/files/2026-04/BorderLabs-Report-TNI-March2026-web.pdf; European Commission, "Horizon Dashboard," Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, accessed July 13, 2026, https://dashboard.tech.ec.europa.eu/qs_digit_dashboard_mt/public/sense/app/dc5f6f40-c9de-4c40-8648-015d6ff21342/sheet/a07b6be8-41c3-4adc-be08-d0c6740bb6d9/state/analysis; Podlaski, Border Guard Commander 1. Interview by Research Team, Bialystok, 10, March 2025; Białowieża Border Guard Station. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Białowieża, 9 March 2025.

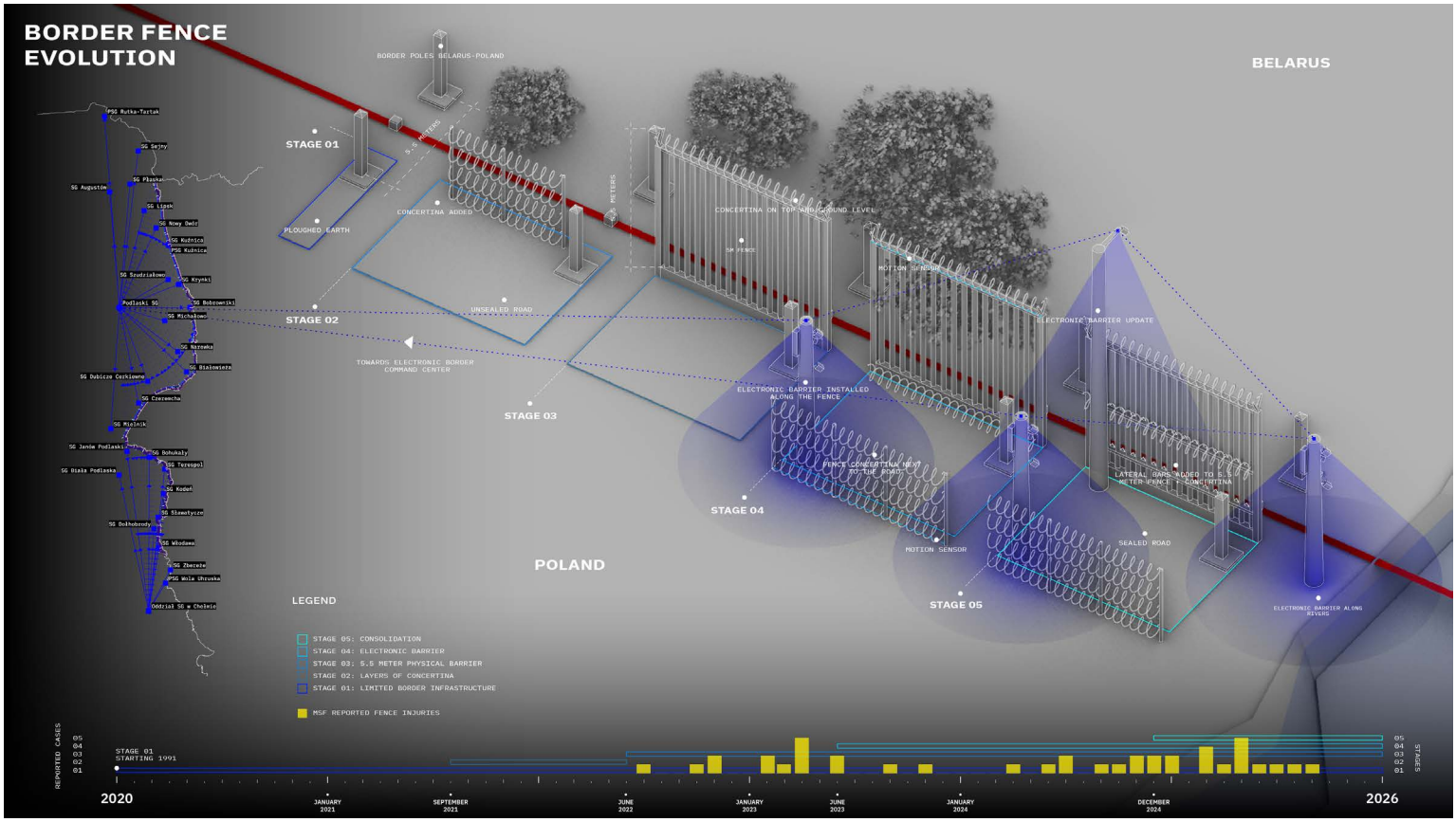


Figure 2.41. This diagram traces the phased construction of Poland's border barrier: from the initial razor-wire fence erected in 2021, to the 5.5-metre steel wall completed in June 2022, to the electronic surveillance components added in 2023, and subsequent layers of reinforcement. Below, the phased construction of the border infrastructure is mapped against fence-related injuries reported by humanitarian and medical organisations. Diagram by Border Forensics, 2026.

The new border infrastructure does not simply overlay the natural landscape but, as we will demonstrate, actively reorganises, reconfigures, and recruits it.[206] The topography of the borderland: its rivers, dense forests and wetlands, shapes where and how each layer of infrastructure is deployed and how it functions. Seasonal features, such as vegetation, and topography shape how these different components function within the architecture of enmity. For example, border guards shared with us that aerial surveillance is less active when the canopy closes, or that vegetation blocks the view of the cameras.[207] In collaboration with Rosanna Padelleti, we traced the evolution of the border infrastructure by combining OSINT methods (construction contracts, press releases, tender documents, and visual material from news agencies, journalists, vloggers, and state authorities), FOIA requests, and interviews with activists, local residences, and border guards that we corroborated with high resolution satellite imagery.[208]

The infrastructural components were built on existing technologies, such as cameras and long-range observation towers that were already in place in 2017 and funded by the EU's ISF Fund.[209] Since 2021, the infrastructural design has been expanded substantially. In this process, each component of the infrastructure has responded to migrants' movements, with expansions justified by the crossings that preceded them.

206 P. Teunissen, "Infrastructures, Riverscapes, and the Governance of Mobility: The Evros/Meriç River and the Infrastructuring of Nature," *Antipode* 57, no. 2 (2025): 691-713.

207 Białowieża Border Guard Station. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Białowieża, 9 March 2025.
Janów Podlaski Border Guard Station. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Janów Podlaski, 16 October 2025.

208 Satellite imagery was analysed with a focus on changes in border infrastructure (e.g., including fences, walls, patrol tracks, cleared vegetation, watchtowers) identified through visual interpretation and digitized as shapefiles. Annual change detection was carried out by overlaying digitized vector layers onto subsequent imagery to track new construction, extensions, and reinforcement.

209 Internal Security Fund 2016-2020 (Poland), Program Krajowy, PDF, https://copemswia.gov.pl/files/FBW/Program_Krajowy_PL.pdf.

These interventions have altered the borderlands, transforming a forest frontier that had long been defined by its ecological continuity into a zone increasingly striated with walls, sensors, towers, and surveillance infrastructure. In the following section, we analyse the installation and construction of these different infrastructural components and how this has altered the landscape.

From concertina wire to a permanent steel barrier

Concertina razor wire

The fortification of the border that began in August 2021 started with the rapid deployment of the army to install the first layers of concertina to prevent migrants' movement across the border.[210] Concertina is a form of razor wire engineered to slice into flesh, and has been a crucial and recurrent component of Poland's border infrastructure. These lines of concertina were soon doubled, and even tripled, with the construction of a 2.5-metre-high concertina fence that was modelled on the Hungarian fence bordering Serbia.[211] Concertina was used to continuously thicken the fortification of the border, its installation can be seen as a response to tactics of migrant crossings, such as climbing over the fence or moving to riverine sections where, at times, no fence had been installed.



Figure 2.42. Polish soldiers install a concertina razor-wire barrier along the border with Belarus. Before this fence went up, the border in this heavily forested area was marked only by a cleared strip of land, also seen in the image, that was patrolled but with limited physical barrier. Screengrab from a video by Radio Białystok.[212]

210 Researchers Natalia Judizinska and Inga Hajdarowicz noted that In July 2021, the Polish Army's 3rd Regional Logistic Base in Kraków launched a public procurement process for razor wire intended to fortify the country's state border. The contract was awarded to GC Metal Sp. z o.o., which committed to delivering 12,000 packages of wire, each measuring roughly 10 to 15 meters in length. By the close of 2021, the Polish military had spent over PLN 130.5 million on the procurement, followed by a further PLN 104.4 million in 2022. Suppliers involved in these contracts included Internet Fence, Metalzbyt Hurt, Partner Systems, Nordic Production Group, and Metal Market. The steel used to manufacture the wire was sourced from several countries, among them the United Kingdom, India, Ukraine, and Russia. See Judzińska and Hajdarowicz, "Walking Along the Borderscape."On 19 August, Mariusz Błaszczak, who was the Minister of National Defence from 2018–2023, published on his social media account that the military had installed 100 kilometres of razor wire along the border line. Mariusz Błaszczak (@mblaszczak), post on X, August 19, 2021, https://x.com/mblaszczak/status/1428342521294430217.

211 B. Ejsmont, "Granica polsko-białoruska. Liny, haki, drut kolczasty i ostrzowy. Aktywiści usunęli część zasieków," *Gazeta Wyborcza (Białystok), August* 29, 2021, accessed July 13, 2026, https://bialystok.wyborcza.pl/bialystok/7,35241,27500108,granica-polsko-bialoruska-liny-haki-drut-kolczasty-i-ostrzowy.html.

212 Radio Białystok, "Płot na granicy polsko-białoruskiej już powstaje – buduje go wojsko," YouTube video, accessed August 28, 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kR_T4aOv3Z4.

Permanent barrier

On 14 October 2021, the Sejm passed a bill to construct a physical steel barrier along Poland's eastern border. The state of emergency introduced in September 2021 laid the groundwork for the construction process, which exempted the border wall's construction from standard environmental, procedural, and public information requirements. Despite criticism from scientists, environmental organisations, the Polish Ombudsman, legal experts, local authorities, and local communities, the bill was rapidly adopted.[213] The construction of the fence began in January 2022, with the preparation of the landscape: clearing vegetation and building access roads to allow the construction process to move quickly along the border line.[214] The construction work, for which a PLN 644 million contract was awarded,[215] was carried out by Budimex and a consortium of Unibep and its subsidiary Budrex simultaneously on four sections along the border (see construction division in Figure 45). The steel spans were manufactured by a consortium of three companies: Polimex-Mostostal, Mostostal Siedlce, and Węglokoks, which were awarded a PLN 589 million contract.[216]



Figure 2.43. Screengrab from a PowerPoint presentation showing which construction company is responsible for each section of the border. Republished in e-Grajewo.pl.[217]

On 30 June 2022, the government announced that construction of the physical barrier had been finalised.[218] The structure consists of 4.5-metre steel panels topped with concertina razor wire, bringing the total height to 5.5 metres, and extends across 186 kilometres of the border. Approximately twenty-four wildlife doors, measuring 5 metres wide and

213 The concerns raised went beyond environmental protection alone, extending to the rule of law, the suspension of legal safeguards, access to public information, and the long-term social and political consequences of constructing the barrier. See C. Błaszczyk, E. B. Kempers, and L. Burgers, "Fenced Europe: A More-Than-Human Perspective to Border Control. The Case of Białowieża," *European Law Open* 3, no. 1 (2024): 90-110, https://doi.org/10.1017/elo.2024.6. Straż Graniczna, "Ruszyła budowa bariery na granicy polsko-białoruskiej," Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej, January 26, 2022, accessed July 13, 2026, https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/9752,Ruszyla-budowa-bariery-na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej.html.

214 Straż Graniczna. "Ruszyła budowa bariery na granicy polsko-białoruskiej." *Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej*, January 26, 2022. Accessed July 13, 2026. https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/9752,Ruszyla-budowa-bariery-na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej.html

215 Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji, "Ochrona granicy – umowy," Portal Gov.pl, accessed July 13, 2026, https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/ochrona-granicy-umowy.

216 Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji. "Ochrona granicy – umowy." *Portal Gov.pl*. Accessed July 13, 2026. https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/ochrona-granicy-umowy

217 Redakcja e-Grajewo.pl. "Budimex rozpoczął prace przy budowie zapory." e-Grajewo.pl, January 29, 2022. https://e-grajewo.pl/wiadomosc,budimex-rozpoczal-prace-przy-budowie-zapory,48208.html.

218 Ministry of the Interior and Administration (Poland), "Completion of the Physical Part of the Barrier on the Polish-Belarusian Border – An Event with the Participation of the Leadership of the Ministry of the Interior and Administration," Gov.pl, June 30, 2022, accessed June 26, 2026, https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia-en/completion-of-the-physical-part-of-the-barrier-on-the-polish-belarusian-border---an-event-with-the-participation-of-the-leadership-of-the-ministry-of-the-interior-and-administration.

4.5 metres high were installed to allow animals to pass through, and are opened, according to border guards, when there is no "pressure at the border."[219] In addition, around one hundred "service doors," installed approximately every 2 kilometres, are officially designated for maintenance purposes, but also serve to facilitate pushbacks to Belarus, which will be discussed later. The fence was built between Polish and Belarusian border poles, approximately 1.25 metres from the actual border line,[220] meaning that by the time a migrant reaches the fence, they have already entered Polish national territory. The total cost of construction to June 2022 was PLN 1.6 billion (EUR 352 million), funded by the Ministry of Interior and Administration. [221]

219 Of those 24 wildlife doors, 9 are in the Bialowieza Forest. See Nowak, K., Fenchuk, V., Niedziałkowska, M., Stachowicz, I., Kuberski, Ł., Samojlik, T., ... & Selva, N. (2026). Supporting wildlife movement amid the rise of border infrastructure.

220 Podlaskie Regional Border Guard Unit. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Białystok, 8 March 2025.

221 Ministry of the Interior and Administration, *Ochrona granicy – umowy*, Gov.pl, last accessed June 26, 2026, https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/ochrona-granicy-umowy. https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/ochrona-granicy-umowy. Ministry of the Interior and Administration. "Completion of the Physical Part of the Barrier on the Polish-Belarusian Border – An Event with the Participation of the Leadership of the Ministry of the Interior and Administration." *Gov.pl*, June 30, 2022. Last accessed June 26, 2026. https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia-en/completion-of-the-physical-part-of-the-barrier-on-the-polish-belarusian-border---an-event-with-the-participation-of-the-leadership-of-the-ministry-of-the-interior-and-administration.

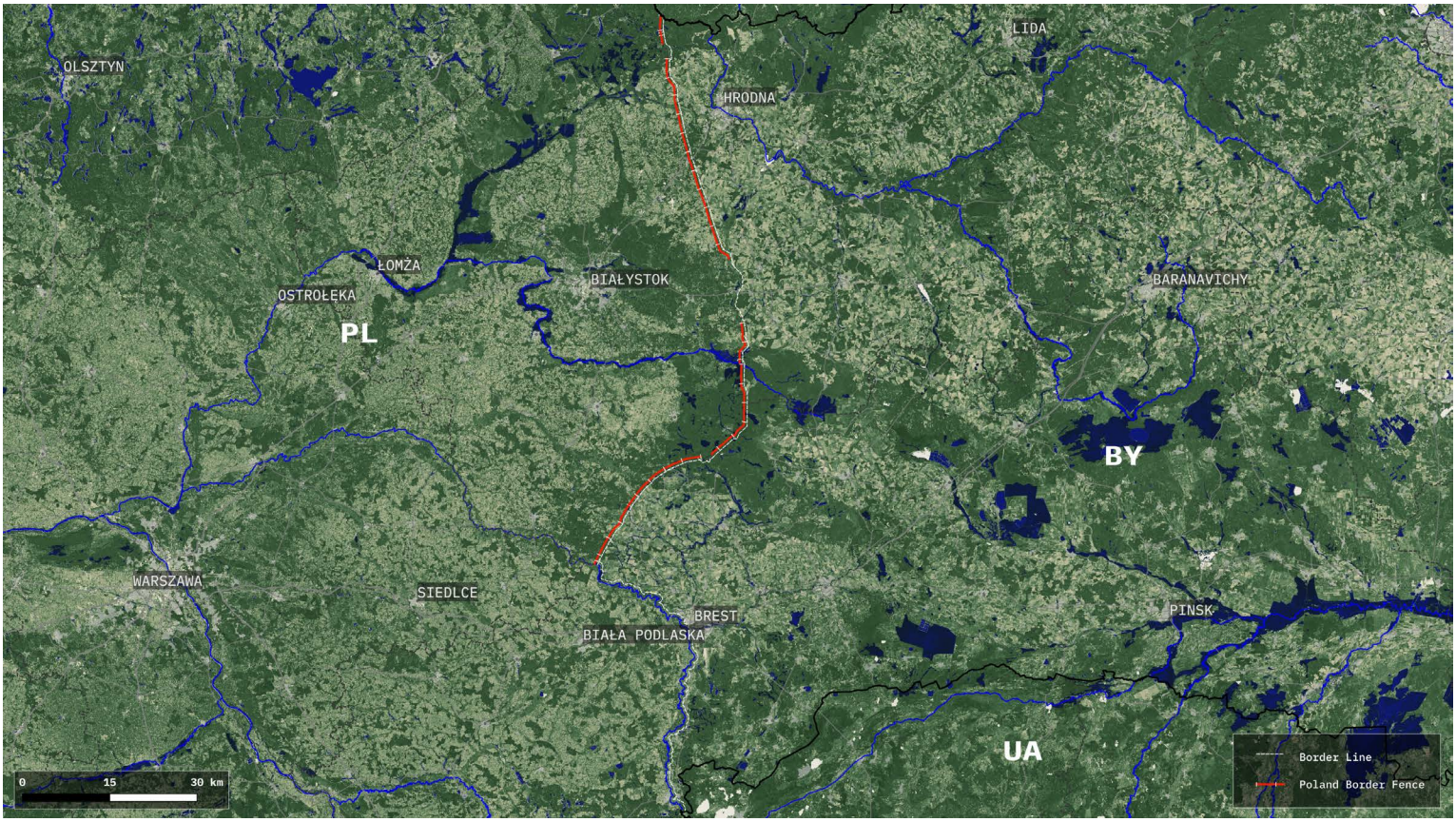


Figure 2.44. Map showing the trajectory of the 5.5-metre-high border barrier (red line). As shown, the barrier does not fence off waterbodies and rivers along its route. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Since the installation of the 5.5-metre barrier, migrants have continued to cross by climbing over, tunnelling under, or forcing open the steel panels. In response, the physical barrier has been repeatedly reinforced and upgraded to counter these methods. First, additional concertina was installed on the bottom of the fence and on the other side of the patrol road as seen in the image below.



Figure 2.45. Photograph of the border infrastructure with soldiers patrolling along the fence. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, March 2025.

In July 2024, Polimex Mostostal S.A. concluded an agreement with the State Treasury – Commander-in-Chief of the Border Guard for the reinforcement of the barrier, adding two beams running along its entire length and located at a height of 1.1 m and 1.8 m, measured from the ground, which will eliminate the possibility of bending, but not cutting.[222] In 2025, plans surfaced that a 4-metre-high barrier topped with concertina wire would be built by the military, along with another 2-metre-high fence to prevent animals from approaching the barrier.[223] We could not verify the state of the construction of this second fence within the scope of this investigation.

Patrol road

What initially served as a construction road to transport materials and heavy machinery for the fence became, as envisioned from the outset, a patrol road once the physical barrier was finalised. Later in 2025, sections of this patrol road were asphalted (see Figure 49) to increase the speed of border guard responses, but also to prevent tunnelling.

Electronic barrier

Following the completion of the physical barrier, Polish authorities started the construction of an electronic surveillance system, incorporating night-vision cameras, thermal cameras, and seismic sensors (see figs. 49 and 50). This electronic system was referred to by border guards as the "electronic barrier" which was wired into the existing network of border guard posts and observation towers. This surveillance system, also known as AMSTA, was developed by MindMade, part of WB Group, and integrates seismic and optical surveillance components.[224] This surveillance system operates across three dimensions: monitoring activity below ground, at surface level, and in the air, creating a layered detection network that aims to cover the full depth of the border landscape.[225] According to Border Guard officials, this system was initial developed on Poland's border with Ukraine.[226] It initially ran along the physical barrier and was later expanded along the riverine sections of the Świsłocz, in the Podlaskie Border Guard Division, and along the Bug River as part of the Nadbużański Border Guard Divisio, funded partly by the EU.[227]

Long-range towers

Poland's Border Guard has been building a network of long-range observation towers along its eastern border since 2017, partly funded by the

222 Polimex Mostostal S.A., "Polimex Mostostal wykona modernizację zabezpieczenia granicy państwowej na odcinku lądowej granicy z Republiką Białorusi," July 10, 2024, accessed July 13, 2026, https://www.polimex-mostostal.pl/news/polimex-mostostal-wykona-modernizacje-zabezpieczenia-granicy-panstwowej-na-odcinku-ladowej; Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji. "Ochrona granicy – umowy." *Portal Gov.pl*. Accessed July 13, 2026. https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/ochrona-granicy-umowy

223 InfoSecurity24, "Na polsko-białoruskiej granicy powstanie kolejna 'zapora,'" *November* 13, 2025, https://infosecurity24.pl/sluzby-mundurowe/straz-graniczna/na-polsko-bialoruskiej-granicy-powstanie-kolejna-zapora.

224 The AMSTA system is advertised as including AI-based image analysis, fibre-optic communication, command-and-control functions, the capacity to integrate radar systems, and integration with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), including the FlyEye. It is not clear to what extent this full range of functions has actually been implemented along this particular stretch of the borderland. AMSTA is therefore not simply a sensor network, but an integrated surveillance and operational management system that has also been exported to other EU borders; Representative of WB Group, conversation with Alessandro Mangione at the BEDEX 2026 Brussels European Defence Exhibition, Brussels, March 12 2026; Tenders Electronic Daily (TED), "441781-2024," accessed June 29, 2026, https://ted.europa.eu/en/notice/-/detail/441781-2024; WB Group, "AMSTA System," accessed June 29, 2026, https://www.wbgroup.pl/en/produkt/amsta-system.

225 WB GROUP, *AMSTA System*, accessed June 29, 2026, https://www.wbgroup.pl/en/produkt/amsta-system

226 Podlaskie Regional Border Guard Unit. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Białystok, 8 March 2025.

227 TED (Tenders Electronic Daily). "441781-2024." Accessed June 29, 2026. https://ted.europa.eu/en/notice/-/detail/441781-2024; TED (Tenders Electronic Daily). "78020-2024." Accessed June 29, 2026. https://ted.europa.eu/en/notice/-/detail/78020-2024.

EU Internal Security Fund.[228] The towers vary in height and each covers approximately a 13-kilometre range, combining high-resolution daylight cameras with advanced thermal imaging capable of detecting objects at distances exceeding 13 kilometres.[229] The network, which had twenty-five operational towers by 2018, was planned to grow to forty-eight; and in 2025 an additional five towers were announced for the Podlaskie division's riverine border section, with a range of 20 kilometres, also financed by the European Union.[230] The 2025 towers were installed to create pre-frontier surveillance to speed up the Border Guard's response time in the riverine sections, as construction of an asphalted patrol road was deemed too costly.

228 Straż Graniczna. "Nowe Systemy Optoelektroniczne na Wieżach Obserwacyjnych." *Aktualności*. November 18, 2022. https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/11304,Nowe-systemy-optoelektroniczne-na-wiezach-obserwacyjnych.html.

229 Defence24. "Priorytety Straży Granicznej: Wieże obserwacyjne, statki powietrzne i broń." February 22, 2017. Accessed July 13, 2026. https://defence24.pl/priorytety-straz-y-granicznej-wieze-obserwacyjne-statki-powietrzne-i-bron; Straż Graniczna. "Nowe systemy optoelektroniczne na wieżach obserwacyjnych." *Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej*. February 7, 2023. Accessed July 13, 2026. https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/11304,Nowe-systemy-optoelektroniczne-na-wiezach-obserwacyjnych.html; InfoSecurity24. "Wieże obserwacyjne Straży Granicznej do modernizacji." November 8, 2024. Accessed July 13, 2026. https://infosecurity24.pl/sluzby-mundurowe/straz-graniczna/wieze-obserwacyjne-strazy-granicznej-do-modernizacji.

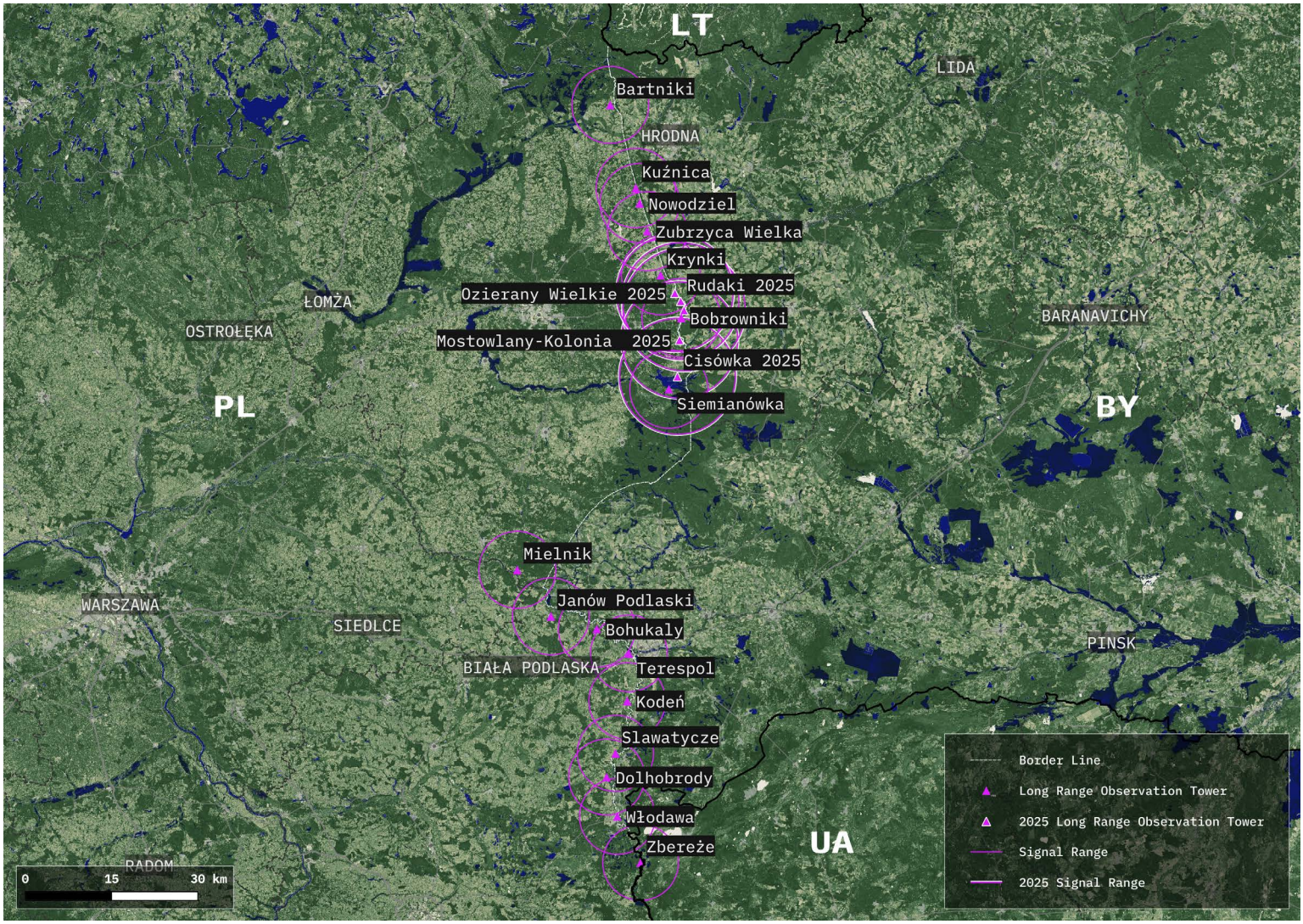


Figure 2.46. Map showing the estimated locations of the long-range observation towers and their range, as published on the Border Guard's website. This range is likely affected by seasonal changes. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Integrating the electronic barrier with the physical barrier

With the finalisation of the physical barrier in 2022, construction of the electronic surveillance system began, which was wired into the existing network of border guard posts and observation towers. This system, incorporating night-vision cameras, thermal cameras, and seismic sensors, was referred to by border guards as the "electronic barrier" (see figs. 49 and 50). Construction of the land section began in 2022, running mostly alongside the physical barrier, under a contract awarded to Elektrotim S.A. for PLN 332,107,211.75, covering approximately 202 km under the Podlaskie Border Guard Unit.[231] This electronic system integrates several layers of detection equipment along 206 kilometres of the land border with Belarus. Seismic sensor cables are installed both on top of the fence and at a depth of 80 to 90 centimetres underground, to detect both tunnelling and movement. Around 2,100 5.5-metre-high poles, as seen in the image on the right, were installed, fitted with around 3,000 thermal and day cameras such as a Honeywell 70-bullet AI camera (green) and the Flir Elara cameras (blue) – paired with infrared illuminators (yellow) and some poles fitted with lighting and signal enhancers (orange).

231 Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji, "Straż Graniczna podpisała umowę na budowę perymetrii na granicy z Białorusią," Gov.pl, March 24, 2022, Contract No. 28/BF/BTiZ/22, https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/straz-graniczna-podpisala-umowe-na-budowe-perymetrii-na-granicy-z-bialorusia.

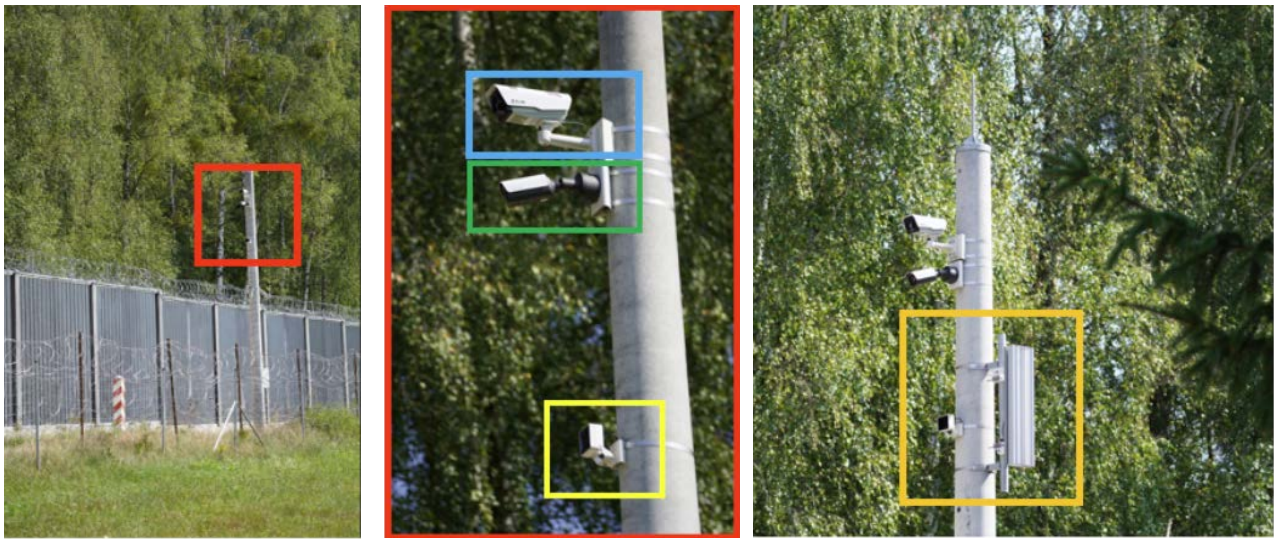


Figure 2.47. Close-up of the cameras installed along the electronic barrier. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, 2024.

Additional cameras were directed at locations requiring special supervision, such as access roads. This optical surveillance system predominantly monitored the patrol road on the western side of the fence. In 2024, the Border Guard announced the installation of additional cameras, lamps to illuminate the area, and the implementation of a system for automatic alarm verification.[232] Part of this update involved the installation of additional cameras on 10-metre-high poles to monitor the exterior of the fence, as well

232 Contract No. 91/BF/SG/24, signed on July 5, 2024, by the Polish Border Guard (Straż Graniczna), covers the strengthening of the existing electronic security of the state border on the land section of the border with the Republic of Belarus. The scope includes designing and installing additional cameras, area illumination lamps, and implementing an automatic alarm verification system. The contract was awarded to Telbud S.A. for a total value of PLN 125,260,000 (approx. €29 million). See Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej, "Podpisano umowę na modernizację bariery elektronicznej" [Electronic Barrier Modernisation Contract Signed], July 5, 2024, accessed June 25, 2026, https://strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/13468,Podpisano-umowe-na-modernizacje-bariery-elektronicznej.html.

as additional lights. This update has been partly funded by the EU.

The electronic barrier along the riverine border

Despite successive reinforcements, migrants continued to cross the border, adapting their routes in response to each new layer of border infrastructure. Data on intervention calls from humanitarian organisations indicates that, from 2023 onwards, intervention shifted increasingly northward towards the riverine sections of the border, a pattern corroborated by border guards themselves, and discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. In response, on 26 February 2024, Poland's Border Guard announced the signing of two contracts for the construction of electronic security systems along its border with Belarus, covering the Bug River and the Świsłocz and Istoczanka rivers that had previously remained outside the system's reach.[233] The Bug River contract, under the jurisdiction of Nadbużański division, valued at over PLN 279 million, was awarded to a consortium of Elektrotim S.A. and Ostoya-DataSystem Sp. z o.o., while the Świsłocz and Istoczanka rivers contract, under the Podlaskie division and valued at over PLN 85 million, went to Sprint S.A. A press release from the Border Guard stated that both were co-financed by the European Union, through the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy under the Integrated Border Management Fund for 2021–27.[234]



Figure 2.48. Electronic barrier along the riverine sections of the Świsłocz River. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, 2025.

233 Straz Graniczia. "Zapora elektroniczna na rzekach granicznych z Białorusią" ["Electronic Barrier on Border Rivers with Belarus"]. February 26, 2024. Last accessed June 25, 2026, https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/12997,Zapora-elektroniczna-na-rzekach-granicznych-z-Bialorusia.html.

234 A press release from the Polish Border Guard states that both river-barrier systems have been funded by the EU. However, the EU's Tender Electronic Daily (TED) portal shows EU funding only for the Bug section, under the Integrated Border Management Fund (IBMF/BMVI) 2021–2027, Specific Action BMVI/2021/SA/1.5.8 – not for the Świsłocz and Istoczanka river sections. Konrad Szwed, "Zapora elektroniczna na rzekach granicznych z Białorusią," Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej, February 26, 2024, accessed July 23, 2026, https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/12997,Zapora-elektroniczna-na-rzekach-granicznych-z-Bialorusia.html; European Union, Tender Electronic Daily, notice 120147-2024, accessed July 23, 2026, https://ted.europa.eu/en/notice/-/detail/120147-2024; European Union, Tender Electronic Daily, notice 78020-2024, accessed July 23, 2026, https://ted.europa.eu/en/notice/-/detail/78020-2024.

As with the initial construction of the physical barrier, this expansion required preparatory work on the landscape itself: vegetation was cleared along the riverbanks, both to facilitate construction and to establish an unobstructed line of sight for the surveillance infrastructure as seen in the satellite imagery below.[235] The border landscape was, once again, materially reshaped in response to the movement of migrants through it.

235 Białowieża Border Guard Station. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Białowieża, 9 March 2025; Janów Podlaski Border Guard Station. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Janów Podlaski, 16 October 2025.



Figure 2.49. Satellite imagery analysis of a section along the Bug River showing the removal of vegetation and the installation of concertina razor wire along the riverbank. Satellite imagery: Geoportal.gov.pl (Główny Urząd Geodezji i Kartografii), 2022/2024/2025.

In 2025, the research team visited the Bug region with guards from the Podlaskie Border Guard unit. As seen in the picture above, on the left, there is no physical barrier, only concrete poles, cameras, and lights mounted high above. When we asked the commander about the absence of a barrier, the officer replied: “We don’t need it, the river does the work of the fence.” The trajectory of the material barrier, does not run continuously along the political line. Instead, it aligns with topography. Here, the rivers,are incorporated into the defensive system. Border infrastructure, therefore, is not simply placed within a landscape: it reorganises the landscape, recruits it into a militarised border regime.

Data circulation, analysis, and coordination

Images from these cameras and sensors are transmitted in real time to Central Surveillance Centres in Border Guard facilities in Białystok and Chełm, where officers monitor feeds around the clock and use a digital mapping application to direct ground patrols, drones, or helicopters to detected crossings. When movement or a potential breach is detected – whether through electronic barriers, seismic sensors, or aerial surveillance – a signal is generated and verified at the Central Surveillance Centres. If classified as a threat, local border guard stations are immediately informed, and an operational response is activated, mobilising local stations and military teams to intercept migrants. This operational sequence is illustrated in Figure 51, based on materials provided by the Border Guard command (source). The exclusion zones support surveillance, as they clear the ground of legal presence, allowing anyone found within the zone to be swiftly categorised as a suspect and exposed to scrutiny.

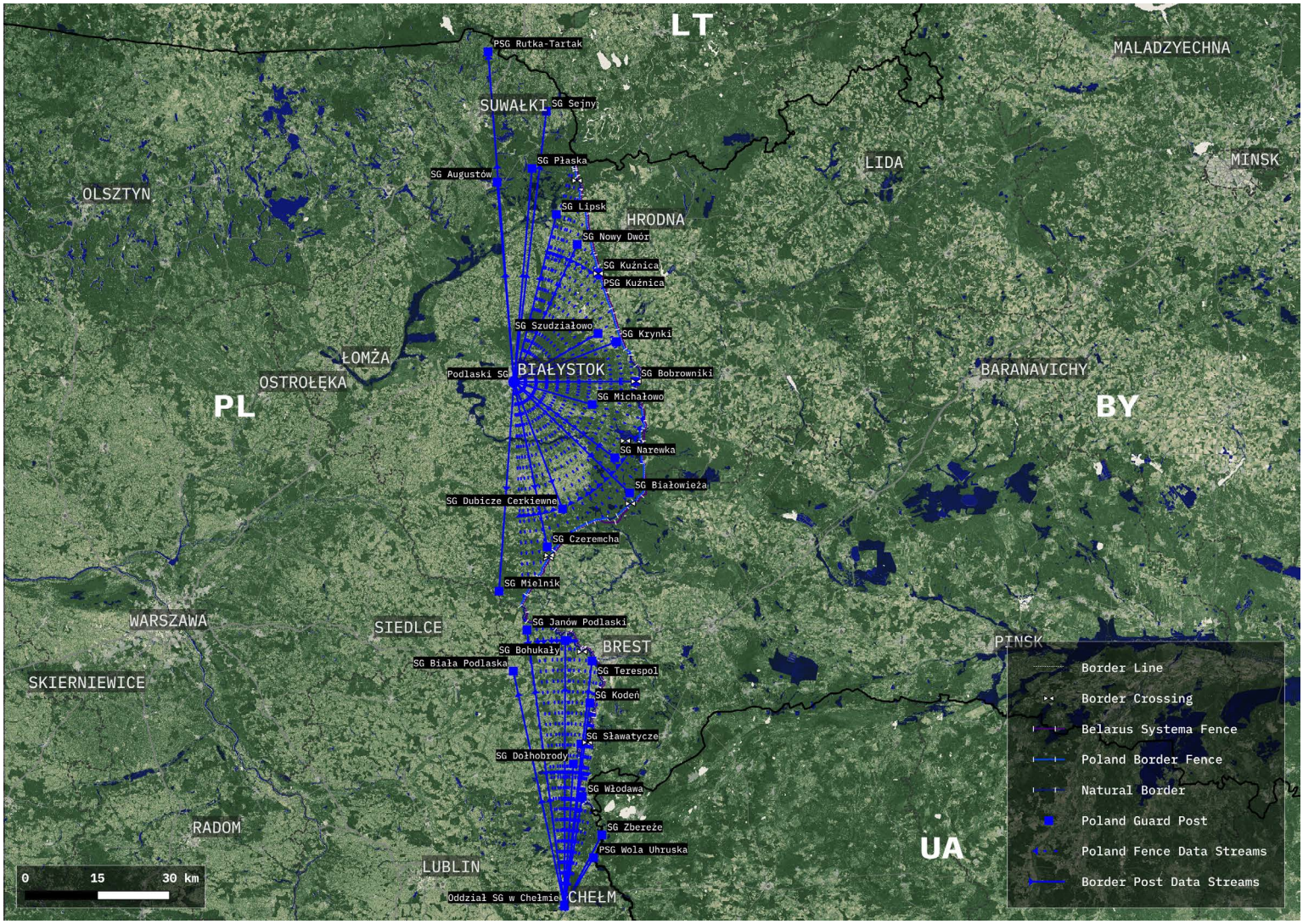


Figure 2.50. Map illustrating the location of the electronic barrier at the Poland–Belarus border. Signals are transmitted to Regional Operational Centres in either Chełm or Białystok, which forward verified alerts to local border guard stations. The map shows that the electronic barrier does not run strictly along the borderline itself, but extends into Polish territory through data transmission. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Unequal positions and dispositions within the architecture of enmity

In the previous chapter, we described the entangled logics of enmity that frame migrants' movements across the Polish-Belarusian borderlands. We further analysed how these logics have been encoded into law, producing a hierarchy of subject positions in which migrants and those who support them are stripped of rights, while law enforcement agents are granted exceptional powers. In this chapter, we have analysed the way these logics of enmity, and the inequality they have instituted, have come to materialise in distinct ways across the borderlands, forming what we have termed an architecture of enmity. In examining its pillars and components, which are partly built on and repurposed from pre-existing structures, we demonstrated how exclusion zones, law enforcement agents, and militarised border infrastructures have fundamentally

reorganised the landscape. We demonstrated that the post-2021 transformation was characterised by increasing institutional integration: military units, the Border Guard, the police, surveillance technologies, digital infrastructure, and logistical systems became progressively interconnected within a single operational architecture, diffusing responsibility. Natural, human, infrastructural, and digital components mutually expand and reinforce one another across multiple vertical and horizontal registers.

Together, the pillars and components of the architecture of enmity materialise and shape the unequal subject positions that have already been encoded into law. Law enforcement agents on the Polish side, Belarusian border guards, migrants, residents, solidarity actors, and NGOs: each occupies a distinct position within this architecture, producing material inequality among them. Each position in turn carries with it a set of dispositions: it generates differential possibilities, potentials, and futures, while foreclosing them from others.

What is true of the different actors operating in this space is equally true of its non-human entities, particularly the forest. As we have shown above, the forest plays an essential yet ambivalent role in the borderland. The architecture of enmity generates new potentials for relationships and new dispositions between the environment over which it is erected and those who navigate it. In doing so, it strips the environment of the protective qualities of refuge, shelter, and concealment that forest areas naturally afford, while turning its natural elements towards a coercive disposition, recasting them as hazardous obstacles or strategic instruments of detection and exposure. The same space is thus navigated in profoundly different ways, depending on the actor and its dis/position within the architecture of enmity. Some positions generate the capacity and disposition to pursue, to contain, to hunt down. Others generate exposure to the elements, hunger, violence, and death.



Figure 2.51. Migrants and humanitarian actors find shelter under trees, the cover offering protection both from being seen and from the wind. Photograph by Malgorzata Klemens, 2024.

Migrants attempt to navigate the border zone undetected, outside the reach of surveillance infrastructure and the actors that enforce them. Hiding in forests, digging underneath fences, climbing over them, learning and moving against the rhythms of patrol rotations, exploiting gaps and loopholes. Migrants' positions carry a disposition to endure the space and its environment, shaped through prolonged exposure to a hostile environment that demands constant concealment and forced movement. For migrants, the experience of being hunted, of extensive time spent hiding, of a body worn down by cold, exhaustion, and fear, generates a disposition of radical vulnerability. State authorities circulate the same space strategically, with institutional authority, vehicles, equipment, and structures, disposed towards control, containment, and the forced circulation of migrants through mechanisms of pushbacks and pushforwards (see Chapter Three).

As our opening vignette clearly illustrated, one of the most consequential expressions of this differential disposition concerns speed. Within the architecture of enmity, speed operates as a key organising logic of power and the hierarchy of positions it creates is simultaneously a hierarchy of temporal capacities.[236] The architecture is designed to compress time and space in favour of border enforcement authorities: surveillance technology accelerates detection, rapid-response protocols reduce the interval between alert and interception, and the entire infrastructural apparatus is oriented towards slowing down migrants' movement while accelerating response times. To be positioned at the top of this hierarchy is to command speed, to close distance, to act before the other can react. To be positioned at the bottom is to be disposed towards slowness and the deprivation of the temporal resources that would allow one to circulate, decide, and act on one's own terms.

236 P. Virilio, *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology*, trans. M. Polizzotti (New York: Semiotext(e), 1986), originally published as *Vitesse et politique* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1977).

The architecture also configures a distinct regime of in/visibility, which in turn contributes to shape the dispositions of actors: it renders some subjects legible, actionable, and detectable by state authority, while keeping others invisible, disappearable, and outside the reach of legal humanitarian protection and solidarity efforts. However, this regime of in/visibility is contested and ambivalent. Migrants move through the borderlands attempting to remain unseen, navigating through forest and darkness, trying to become imperceptible. The different components of the architecture of enmity are instead designed precisely to make migrants visible and governable for law enforcement agents. Thermal cameras scan the darkness, sensors register movement, exclusion zones transform the mere presence of some subjects into an anomaly, a trigger. Such classifications shape disposition, orienting law enforcement towards a threat that requires a response, and orienting migrants towards a mode of existence defined by invisibility and the management of exposure. Not only migrants, but also solidarity actors, volunteers, journalists, and humanitarian workers who enter these spaces find themselves caught within the same surveillant apparatus, made equally visible, equally suspect. At the same time, the forest itself, and the different zones of exclusion that bound it, have turned the border zone into a space in which extreme forms of violence can be performed out of sight, which in turn contributes to impunity for such practices.

Yet the architecture of enmity is not a static or immutable entity. It is continuously reshaped by the very attempts to contest it, and contestation itself generates new dispositions. Migrants finding alternative crossings, volunteers maintaining informal presence, locals offering shelter, NGOs establishing aid warehouses, outreach networks: each of these practices exerts pressure on the architecture of enmity, orienting those who engage in them towards a disposition of care and defiance, while forcing the architecture to adapt, to close gaps, to extend its reach. A key example of this is the evolution of the Polish border fence, which has partly evolved in response to migrants, smugglers, and Belarusian forces for overcoming it. Beyond contesting and transforming the architecture of enmity, migrants and those who support them have built, from the bottom up, a counter-architecture of contestation and solidarity, itself generative of new positions and dispositions: alarm phones and distress-call networks, bases and aid warehouses, medical and humanitarian support in the forest, legal aid, and human rights monitoring. It actively reshapes the space and, with it, the field of possible dispositions, carving out, however precariously, zones of care and positions of resistance within a terrain designed for exclusion.

The architecture of enmity and the particular positions and dispositions it generates create the structural conditions for the infliction of different forms of violence by law enforcement agents, border infrastructures, and the environment – the forms of violence to which we now turn.

CHAPTER 3. MECHANISMS OF VIOLENCE

In April 2023, Bashir fled Syria through Russia and Belarus to reach Poland, and the EU. Together with his fellow travellers, he found himself navigating through the Polish–Belarusian borderlands. After walking for twelve hours through forests and swamps in the Belarus border zone, he reached the Belarusian infrastructure along the border strip. He dug under the fence to be able to cross it, then continued walking, using the forest canopy as cover to avoid being detected, until he and his travel companions found a place to rest, and they fell asleep.

They were suddenly woken up by beatings inflicted by masked officers and the aggressive barking of dogs. After being loaded into a car, they were transported to a military camp and, from there, pushed towards Poland. What followed was a relentless cycle of pushforwards, crossing attempts, pushbacks, and repeated apprehension by Belarusian law enforcement agents, and the return to the Belarusian "military camp."

For five days, this pattern repeated: a deliberate push-and-pull orchestrated by Belarusian services, designed to channel them towards the Polish border. On the fifth day, Bashir and his fellow travellers crossed Poland's physical barrier, started running, but as they ran on the other side, they were caught by Polish law enforcement agents, who started beating them, crammed them into a vehicle, and transported them back to the border.

They were driven back to a gate where an officer sprayed pepper spray into Bashir's eyes and shoved him through to the other side. It was raining. He could not see. He dropped to his knees in the mud, having moved through forests, fences, and borders for days, only to end up back where he had started, blind and on the ground.

Summary of a testimony collected by We are Monitoring, June 2023

Bashir's experience, documented by We Are Monitoring,[237] and to which we will return in more detail later in this chapter, illustrates the violence migrants attempting to cross the Poland–Belarus border are subjected to. During successive cycles of forced entry into Poland followed by pushbacks, migrants are physically and psychologically exhausted, which may lead to migrant disappearances and deaths, as the next chapter will detail. Border-related injuries accumulate through repeated encounters with physical infrastructure, law enforcement agents, and exposure to the environment. Each of these injuries is inflicted in a different way, and mutually reinforce each other in migrants' experiences of violence. These different but combined and cumulative forms of violence are the focus of this chapter.[238] In the previous chapter we demonstrated how the entangled logics of enmity, encoded into law and policy, materialise in an architecture of enmity. The pillars and components of this architecture include exclusion zones, law enforcement agents, and militarised border infrastructure. In turn, the architecture shapes the positions of human actors within it and enlists the landscape within its operations of control. While the previous chapter analysed these pillars and components of the architecture of enmity separately, in this chapter we analyse how they are woven together into a dense field of interactions, which repeatedly leads to the infliction of different but cumulative forms of violence onto migrants. As these interactions generate recurring violent outcomes, we describe them as *mechanisms of violence.*[239]

This chapter therefore asks: *What are the key mechanisms of violence generated by the interactions between law enforcement agents, border infrastructure, and the environment at the Poland–Belarus border? How do they combine in shaping migrants' experiences during their attempted crossings?*

The field of interaction from within which mechanisms of violence emerge forms a multidirectional web of relations. In our analysis, we account for the way law enforcement agents, border infrastructure, and the environment generate violence in ways that are both *direct* and *indirect*. For example, as we will see further on, law enforcement agents routinely beat the migrants they intercept – a form of direct violence linking a perpetrator and a victim. In turn, the fear of being intercepted leads migrants to cross the border in more remote areas of the forest where they face greater risks – an indirect, harmful effect of direct violence, which operates by shaping the *spatiality* of migrants' trajectories. Likewise, fence infrastructure frequently results in deep lacerations and orthopaedic injuries, such as fractured limbs and spinal injuries, for those who attempt

237 We Are Monitoring, We Have Only One War: Annual Report 2024 (Warsaw: We Are Monitoring, 2024), 202–222.

238 We adopt a broad and encompassing understanding of border violence, developed by academics and activists over the years. Border violence, understood as the infliction of different forms of harm onto migrants during their trajectories as a result of the existence and management of borders, has been shown to operate along a continuum ranging across the spectrums of direct/indirect, slow/fast, lethal/sub-lethal violence, often combining different modalities, temporalities and spatialities. Our understanding builds on a vast literature, which includes: A. Brambilla and R. Jones, "Rethinking Borders, Violence, and Conflict: From Sovereign Power to Borderscapes as Sites of Struggles," Society and Space, 2019, 1-19; T. Davies, A. Isakjee, and S. Dhesi, "Violent Inaction: The Necropolitical Experience of Refugees in Europe," *Antipode* 49, no. 5 (2017): 1263-84. E. Iliadou, "'Violence Continuum': Border Crossings, Deaths and Time in the Island of Lesvos," in *Stealing Time: Migration, Temporalities and State Violence*, ed. M. Bhatia and V. Canning (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 197-221.

239 Our understanding of mechanisms builds on a vast literature in the social sciences, including S. G. B. Johnson and W. Ahn, "Causal Mechanisms," in *The Oxford Handbook of Causal Reasoning*, ed. M. R. Waldmann (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 363-85. C. Tilly, "Mechanisms in Political Processes," *Annual Review of Political Science* 4, no. 1 (2001): 21-41.

to climb over fences – a form of direct violence. But the infrastructure also slows migrants' crossings, particularly for those who are less physically strong, resulting in longer times spent in the borderland, which increases migrants' exposure to environmental conditions – an indirect harmful effect of the border infrastructure that operates by shaping the *temporality* of migrants' trajectories.



Figure 3.1. A man displays bruises sustained in Belarus, showing them to the Polish side through the border fence as he seeks medical assistance; his passage remains blocked and his wounds go untreated. Photograph by Maciej Moskwa, 2022.

Thus, in addition to the more direct forms of harm they lead to, practices of law enforcement agents and border infrastructure play an important role in shaping the direction of migrants' movement and the duration of their journey. These *spatial* and *temporal* effects play an essential role in modulating the danger of the environments migrants cross – for example, in relation to exposure to the cold. Extremely low temperatures, humidity, rivers, dense forest, darkness, and uneven terrain shaped by seasonal changes, do not become lethal in isolation from the border regime but, as this chapter will demonstrate, become dangerous through border enforcement practices, infrastructures, exclusion zones, and the obstruction of assistance. Entangled together, they prolong the time migrants spend in the borderland and redirect and expose them to more hazardous landscapes. Every beating, every cut from the fence, every pushback, every rerouting, every hour spent in the forest is experienced cumulatively, adding to exposure, exhaustion, and risk, which culminates in numerous cases of death and disappearance, which we discuss in the next chapter. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to analyse the way violence is inflicted not

as isolated incidents but in a way that is systematic and widespread.

The chapter is thus structured into dedicated sections relating to the different ways in which law enforcement agents, infrastructures, and environments shape the violent interactions with migrants through distinct causal chains. Before analysing these separately, we return in more detail to Bashir's trajectory, through which we analyse the multiple phases in which different forms of harm combine and accumulate in migrants' experiences.

The analysis in this chapter draws on a collection of 151 testimonies gathered by We Are Monitoring (WAM) between July 2022 and December 2025. WAM collects online testimonies from people who experienced pushbacks[240] Following a methodology combining hard data, such as border pole numbers, dates, and time, but also qualitative elements relating to the experiences of migrants.[241] We further used aggregated medical data from 226 patients and field observation collected by Doctors Without Borders (MSF), between 2023 and 2025, during their medical consultations. Lastly, we received twenty-seven testimonies from an anonymous humanitarian organisation active in Belarus, which gave us an insight into the violence inflicted by Belarusian authorities.[242] We coded the testimonies using both qualitative and quantitative methods, enabling us to develop a more holistic understanding of the patterns and mechanisms of violence at the border. We complemented these data sources with quantitative data on pushbacks and border-crossing attempts that we obtained from the Border Guard through Freedom of Information Requests or that we received following our delegation visit in March 2025.

Because no civil society organisation or government agency collected data consistently and continuously over our period of interest – August 2021 to December 2025 – we brought together multiple datasets and treated each as a complementary source in our analysis to demonstrate different trends over a different period. The aim has been to address the scattered and incomplete data on border crossings, border violence, and injuries from August 2021 to December 2025. Despite the more holistic understanding we have generated in the process, our data are more fragmentary concerning the 2021–22 period, when systematic documentation and data collection were gradually established by local actors, and methodologies were further refined after 2022. The gendered dimensions of border violence have also proven difficult to account for. Women, minors, and LGBTQI+ people are underrepresented in the available testimonies,

240 We Are Monitoring, "Methodology," accessed June 30, 2026, https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/en/methodology/.

241 This methodology draws on the methodology developed by the Border Violence Monitoring Network ("Our Methodology," accessed June 30, 2026, https://www.borderviolence.eu/our-methodology), that have been collecting testimonies of border violence at several EU borders.

242 The organization has requested to remain anonymous, citing concerns over surveillance, legal reprisals, and restrictions targeting humanitarian organizations in Belarus; Anonymous Humanitarian Actor active in Belarus. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2023.

not only because they represent a smaller group of those attempting the crossing, but also because trauma, fear of repercussions, and the need for anonymity often limited their ability to participate in interviews.

Furthermore, from these qualitative accounts of border crossings and their coding, we extracted a temporal sequence relating to how much time migrants spend, on average, at the border, and how this changed on a quarterly basis. This informed our analysis concerning how the interactions between law enforcement agents, infrastructure, and the environment led to the infliction of cumulative forms of violence. This geospatial analysis combined geocoded humanitarian intervention points[243] with data on construction of border infrastructure at a given time and location, river and wetland data, forest-cover data, and meteorological data. For each geocoded alert or intervention, we calculated its distance to the Poland–Belarus border. This allowed us to examine how the location of distress calls changed over time. We used the data analysis technique of "clustering analysis" to identify recurring concentrations of distress calls, and a "standard deviational ellipsis" to describe yearly changes in these clusters, in order to estimate how prolonged exposure to the environment mediated forms of harm. [244]

243 We understand these distress calls as documented points where distress became visible to humanitarian actors.

244 A Standard Deviational Ellipse (also known as a directional distribution) is spatial statistic tool used to measure the trend, central tendency, dispersion, and directional orientation of a set of geographic features. We discuss this method in more detail further on.

A trajectory of violence

We now revisit Bashir's testimony, with which we began this chapter, to analyse in greater depth the various forms of harm he and his companions were subjected to. Our focus will be on understanding how these harms unfolded, interconnected, and built upon one another over time.

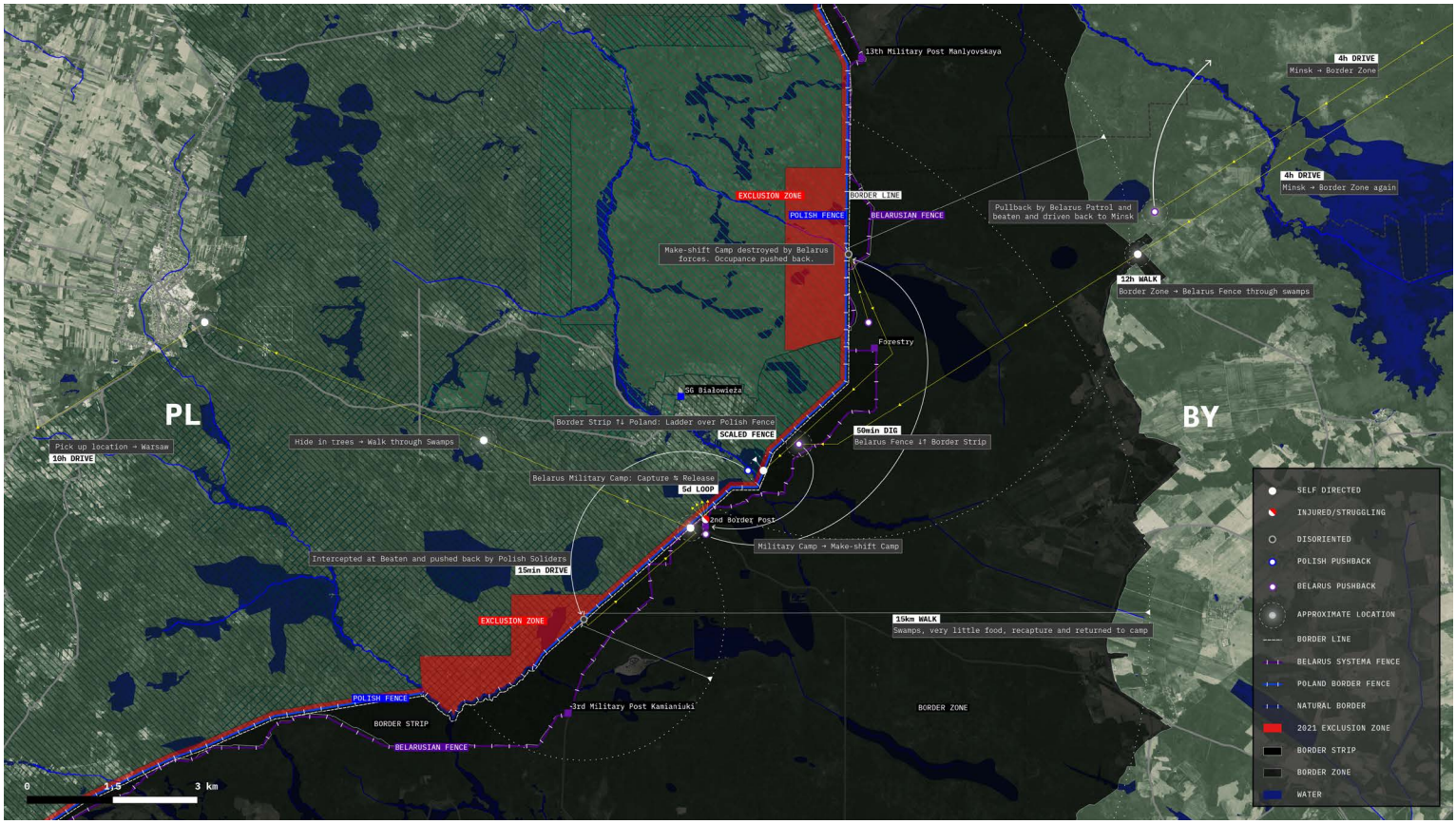


Figure 3.2. Bashir's trajectory through the Architecture of Enmity. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

In the absence of safe and direct pathways for applying for asylum in the EU, in April 2023, Bashir left Syria for Russia and eventually entered Belarus to reach the borders of the EU and seek protection. In Minsk, he arranged a "driver" who drove him near the Polish–Belarusian border zone. At one point, they arrived at a location with some rural houses, where he saw a sign in English: "Approaching forbidden." Belarusian authorities then arrived, shouting "Stop! Stop!" They took the men out of the car and began questioning them. In Bashir's words:

> *"Where are you from?" We told them: "Syria, we're from Syria." "What are you doing here?" We said: "Go to Poland." "No Poland! No*

Poland!" They started cursing, and telling us: "Go back to Minsk, go back to Minsk."

The driver eventually searched for another crossing point. Bashir continued:

We arrived at a point about 4 to 5 km before the border. The driver asked us to get out of the car. We said: "Why? Bring us to some point closer to the border, why should we walk? The forest here isn't thick, we cannot walk. If there are cars passing by, when they see us, they will call the police."

The driver continued until they were 500 metres from the border. Bashir recalled how a Belarusian car arrived:

Two soldiers came out, and they started beating us. They had batons, these black sticks. They started to beat us, hit, hit. He asked me why we came here. I said: "Go to Poland […]." He started yelling and stepped on our toes with his military boots, trampling on them for 5 to 6 minutes, stepping back and pressing hard on them again. One of them pulled his gun and pointed it at my neck. He said: "Go to Minsk, no return here!" "Go back to Minsk," he [one of the soldiers] said, "never come back here – if you come back here, I will kill you."

The group went back to Minsk, where they prepared for another attempt. They changed drivers and left at dawn. The new driver dropped them 5 kilometres before the border, roughly corresponding with the border zone, and the group exited the car within the forest and walked for about twelve hours through forest and swamps, before reaching the Belarusian border fence, around 21:00.

Bashir described the fence as a two-metre-high barrier fitted with sensors, with a patrol road running alongside it. They began digging, retreating whenever Belarusian patrols passed, and repeated the process for about fifty minutes before finally slipping under the fence.

After crossing, they entered a forested area Bashir later referred to as "muharrama" – the forbidden zone. Exhausted, they rested briefly, only to be startled awake by a large, black dog that began biting him. A masked man shone a flashlight on them and started beating them, shouting,

“Fast, fast!” The group was then taken to what he described as a “military camp,” where they were detained until Belarusian state actors instructed him to continue towards Poland, providing ladders and tools for the journey.

Bashir described being loaded into a military vehicle and driven to a point near the Polish border. There, the Belarusian state officials told them that the Polish border patrols would be asleep at 05:00. The terrain was difficult: tangled branches, swamps, marshlands, and uneven ground slowed their movement. They decided to rest and slept almost until dawn.

At first light they set out again and began constructing a wooden ladder. Suddenly, a Belarusian dog appeared, accompanied by two soldiers, who forced them back to the military camp. The camp was crowded, sometimes holding fifty, sometimes up to one hundred people of various nationalities: Bangladeshi, Afghan, Syrian, Indian, and others. The group remained in this situation for five days: detained and brought to the border repeatedly, their movement neither permitted nor fully stopped, suspended in a kind of forced im/mobility.

Then, on the fifth day, the group of six used a ladder to climb the Polish fence, which they had bought from an Algerian individual for 200 dollars per person – 1,200 dollars in total. Once they crossed over, they ran. Bashir described how, after 500 metres, two Polish soldiers surprised them. The man at the front of the group was beaten first. In Bashir’s words:

> *They started to beat him, they hit him in his hands, they hit him in his cheeks and in his eyes, so they became blue, they hit him in his lips and he started bleeding. They beat him in a terrifying way. They also beat him a lot in the stomach, they beat him in a frightening way, very harshly.*

Bashir described how batons were used and how their phones were destroyed. The authorities then loaded the group into a Polish army vehicle. He continued:

> *[…] The space was very small, so we were crammed one on top of another. We drove, we drove, we drove for about 10 to 15 minutes. They took us out of the car, they took me first and he sprayed pepper spray, you know, it’s banned internationally. He sprayed pepper spray in my*

eyes and on my neck. And then he pushed me through the gate. There are small doors. There is something like a lock, yes, small doors… He opened it with a key and we passed through. I went there, not feeling anything, because of the problems with the pepper spray. I wasn't able to see anything at all, like a blind person. It was raining, it was raining heavily. I opened my eyes just on the length of the eyelashes, I couldn't… A lot of pain, it was difficult. I felt something you cannot describe, when a person suddenly loses sight. I sat on my knees and that's it. I was tired. "I'm tired" […] I spent 4 hours not being able to see anything at all.

Two days after being pushed back to Belarusian territory, Bashir and his group tried again, this time with more success. As a result of the conditions he had faced and the multiple and repeated forms of violence he was subjected to during this journey, Bashir was exhausted. He described his wet rubber boots and his swollen feet which looked horrible. He reached a humanitarian organisation, which brought him food and dry shoes, allowing him to continue his journey. Altogether, he spent one month in the border zone.

Bashir reported his pushback to We Are Monitoring, and on 31 July 2023, he filed a complaint against the Border Guard authority regarding the pushback, with support from the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights. On 18 January 2024, the court found Bashir's claims credible and ruled that the Polish Border Guard had violated Polish constitutional law, EU law, and international refugee law by pushing him back to Belarus.[245] In the Consolidation chapter, we will discuss the limits of the formal accountability delivered by Polish courts.

Bashir's trajectory across the Polish–Belarusian borderlands is not unique, but paradigmatic of the different but combined and cumulative forms of violence migrants are subjected to by law enforcement agents, border infrastructure, and environments. While these forms of violence recur in non-linear ways through migrants' experiences of multiple pushbacks and pushforwards across the borderlands – which we will refer to as *forced im/mobility* – for the purpose of our analysis, we examine separately the specific mechanisms of violence related to law enforcement agents, border infrastructure, and environments before returning to how they are intertwined.

245 Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, "Rozporządzenie MSWiA jako podstawa pushbacków jest prawnie nieskuteczne," January 2024, accessed June 23, 2026, https://hfhr.pl/aktualnosci/rozporzadzenie-mswia-jako-podstawa-pushbackow-jest-prawnie-nieskuteczne; Wojewódzki Sąd Administracyjny w Białymstoku, Wyrok z 18 stycznia 2024 r., sygn. II SA/Bk 664/23 wraz z uzasadnieniem, January 18, 2024, PDF, accessed June 23, 2026, https://hfhr.pl/upload/2024/02/odpis-wyroku-z-18_01_2024-r_-z-uzasadnieniem-ii-sa-bk-664.pdf.

The violence of law enforcement agents

At the Poland–Belarus border, state authorities seek to govern migrants' lives and movements according to two distinct and competing logics: pushforwards by Belarusian agents and pushbacks by Polish agents. "Pushforward" describes the practice of forcefully transporting migrants, or forcing them to cross the border line, in the perceived direction they want to move. "Pushback" refers to the practice of removing migrants from one territory and forcefully transporting, or forcing them, back across the border while obstructing their access to applicable legal and procedural frameworks, in particular asylum procedures. Although pushforwards and pushbacks move migrants in opposite directions, both are driven by the entangled geopolitical and racial logics of enmity we discussed in Chapter One, and which reduce migrants to instruments mobilised by the state to exercise political pressure. What Bashir and thousands of others experienced[246] was not simply harm in motion – the repeated crossing, pushforward, pushback, and re-crossing of a line – but the violence of containment in a strip of land from which there is no easy exit.[247] A "ping-pong dynamic," which, in effect, contains, entraps, and im-mobilises migrants in the borderland for extensive periods of time. Within this dynamic, practices of direct violence such as beatings not only injure migrants, but also carry psychological consequences that push migrants deeper into the forest, prolonging both the duration of their journeys and their exposure to the environment. In this section, we will first discuss how cycles of pushforward and pushback alternatively and repeatedly *im/mobilise* migrants. We then turn to the direct forms of violence inflicted upon them, before examining how humanitarian aid is prevented and blocked, and, finally, how this together pushes migrants deeper into the forest.

246 We Are Monitoring, "Interactive Dashboards," accessed June 23, 2026, https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/en/statistics/interactive-dashboards/; We Are Monitoring, *They Did Not Let Us Speak: The "Temporary" Suspension of Human Rights at the Poland-Belarus Border* (Warsaw: We Are Monitoring, 2025), accessed June 23, 2026, https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/en/report/.

247 We Are Monitoring, *We Have Only One War, Which Is Immigration, Which Is You* (Warsaw: We Are Monitoring, 2024), accessed May 23, 2026, https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/en/report/page/2/.

Pushforwards

Bashir's account illustrates how he and his travel companions were beaten within the Belarusian border zone but were still able to return to Minsk. During his second attempt, when he entered the border strip – often referred to by those who have been there as "the forbidden zone" – he passed a threshold beyond which return was no longer possible. Belarusian authorities transported him along the border and instructed him to cross into Poland. The forbidden zone functions as the spatial infrastructure of pushforward and containment: migrants are transported to military camps and bases, held, and then forced to attempt the crossing into Poland. Migrants thus become objects of a form of forced im/

mobility, and circulated between Belarusian military infrastructures and the Poland–Belarus border. In other cases, particularly during the first months of the border crisis, migrants were brought directly to "the forbidden zone" by Belarusian authorities.[248] While for some, entering "the forbidden zone" is an orchestrated journey, for others, like Bashir, it is a covert undertaking, where migrants attempt to avoid being detected and assaulted by Belarusian authorities.

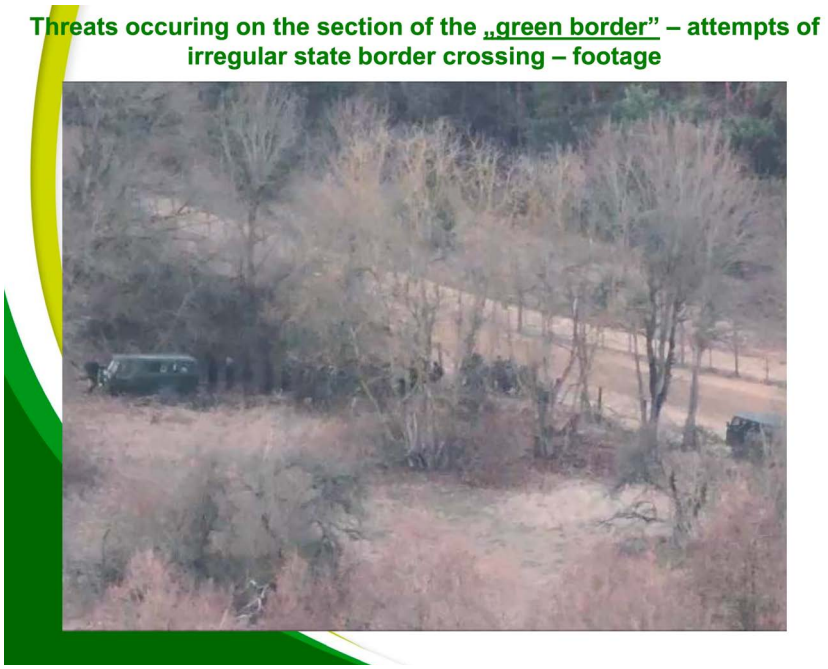


Figure 3.3. A still from drone footage viewed by the research team at the Polish Border Guard Regional Station in Chełm, November 2025 (the full footage was requested but not made accessible for use). The footage shows a group of people being transported from the fence to an area closer to the border with Poland. Screenshot of the Presentation by the Nadbużański border guard division in Chełm, viewed October 2025.[249]

Inside the "forbidden zone," Belarusian guards frequently refuse to let migrants return to Minsk, telling them they must "go to Poland" or else die in the forest. Belarusian border guards frequently used physical violence and threats of lethal violence to prevent migrants from returning to Minsk, effectively eliminating any alternative to attempting the Polish crossing and trapping them in the border zone until they had done so. According to one account – collected by a humanitarian NGO – a young Iranian girl, a minor, reported that guards photographed her passport before warning her they would kill her if she returned.[250] A Syrian man described being beaten and then forcibly removed from a border camp along with approximately 150 others, taken into the forest, and told to cross into Poland or face death.[251] In several accounts, families and siblings were deliberately separated before being assigned to different

248 Border Emergency Collective. Zone of Hidden Violence. Visual report, 2022. Vimeo video. https://vimeo.com/738396988.

249 Nadbużański Regional Border Guard Unit. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Chełm, 17 October 2025.

250 Anonymous Humanitarian Actor active in Belarus. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2023.

251 Anonymous Humanitarian Actor active in Belarus. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2023.

groups and forced to cross at different points, a practice that caused significant psychological harm.[252] This practice of family separation has contributed to instances of disappearances which will be examined in greater depth in Chapter Four.

Pushbacks

While Belarusian authorities push migrants forward, or migrants cross the border with other actors, Polish authorities aim to intercept and push them back to Belarus. Migrants experience multiple pushbacks that are executed through complementary formal and informal practices, involving physical, psychological, and administrative forms of abuse. Pushbacks at the Poland–Belarus border can be distinguished along a spectrum of administrative traceability, ranging from returns partially visible in official bureaucratic paper trails and official data, to cases documented solely by civil society, to entirely off-the-books cases that leave no record.[253] The reach and regularity of this practice have been documented by civil society organisations,[254] and, although using different terminology, confirmed by border guard officials themselves in their official data and during our interviews.[255] There is no reliable data on the exact number of pushbacks, because most pushbacks are not formally documented or made public by state authorities.[256] According to the Polish state, 129,271 "illegal border crossings" were prevented between August 2021 and July 2025.

252 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025. Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, "Report on the anti-repression activities of Grupa Granica"; Anonymous Humanitarian Actor active in Belarus. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2023.

253 K. Czarnota, J. Jagura, and A. Kula, *Kryminalizacja solidarności: Raport z działań antyrepresyjnych* [Criminalizing Solidarity: Report on Anti-Repression Activities] (Warsaw: Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, in cooperation with Kolektyw Szpila, in partnership with Medico International, 2025); Human Rights Watch, "To Really Help Migrants, Poland Should Stop Pushbacks at the Belarus Border," March 13, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/03/13/really-help-migrants-poland-should-stop-pushbacks-belarus-border.

254 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.; Anonymous Humanitarian Actor active in Belarus. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2023.

255 Podlaskie Regional Border Guard Unit. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Białystok, 8 March 2025.

256 The methodology used by state authorities to register pushbacks and crossing attempts have changed over time. As investigated by researchers affiliated with WAM, there are no consistent definitions of what constitutes the prevention of an attempted border crossing. For example, the prevention through pushback/or prevention understood as discussion with the people who are in BY side of the wall/river/ the river pushback can be also named as "prevention." Furthermore, as mentioned by border guard officials, their methodology also changed after the electronic fence became operational in 2023, as this allowed the agency to monitor and register crossings attempts from distance almost along the whole border. See We Are Monitoring, Pepper Spray in a Bottle of Water (August 2024), https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Pepper-spray-in-a-bottle-of-water-2023.pdf; N. Ciastoń and N. Judzińska, "Liczby, kategorie i ich znaczenie. Krytyczna lektura danych straży granicznej dotyczących granicy polsko-białoruskiej z lat 2021-2025" (2027).

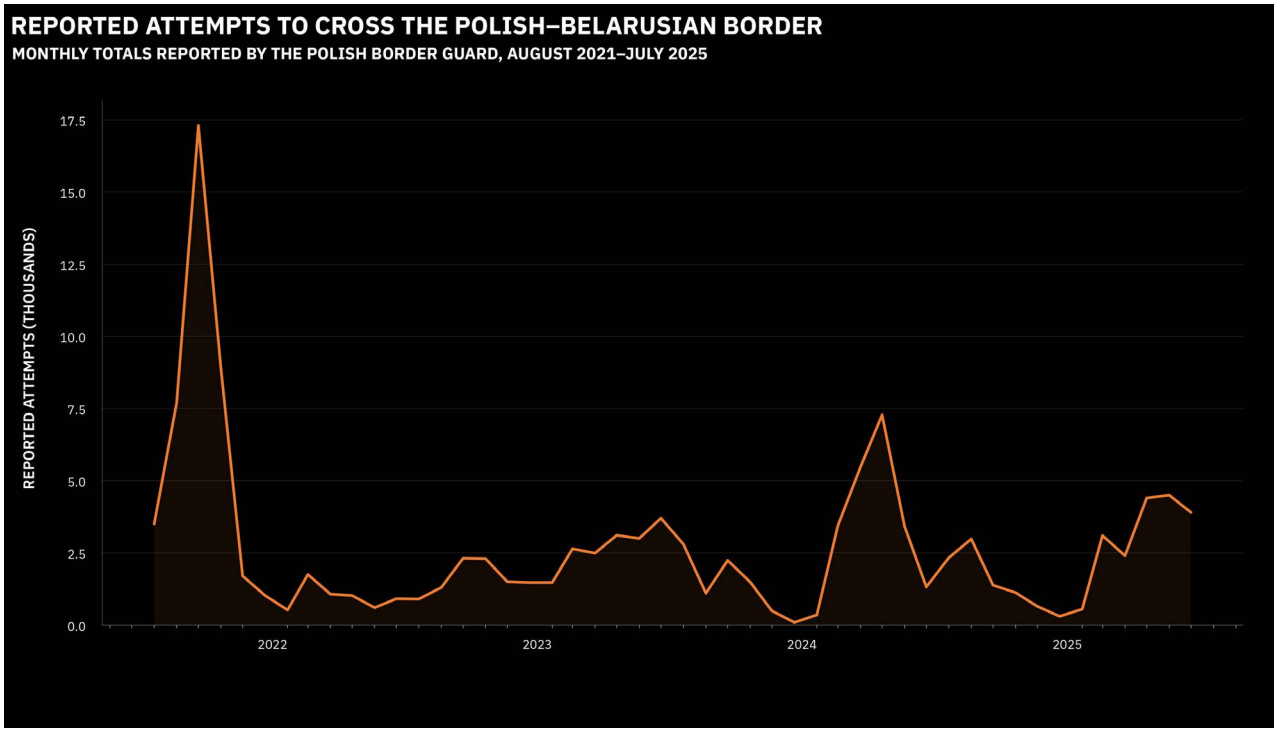


Figure 3.4. Reported attempts to irregularly cross the Polish–Belarusian border, based on Polish Border Guard public communications, August 2021–July 2025. The figure reports monthly attempts to cross as publicly communicated by the Border Guard. It should not be read as the number of pushbacks / zawrócenia, nor as the number of unique people crossing. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

This figure should be read as an indicator of perceived and publicly reported "border pressure," rather than as a measure of pushbacks. It is based on monthly counts of "attempts" to cross the border, as communicated by the Polish Border Guard, including through public X/Twitter posts, and recalculated by Statista. The category of "attempts" is broader and more unstable than administrative data on *zawrócenia*: it may refer to situations detected by the Border Guard, including repeated attempts by the same persons and, therefore, does not indicate either the number of unique people crossing or the number of people pushed back. The figure is therefore used here to contextualise the changing intensity of publicly reported border pressure, against which pushbacks and other forms of obstruction to asylum access unfolded.

We Are Monitoring, an organisation that has been monitoring the Poland–Belarus border since 2021, has documented over 12,900 pushbacks up to September 2025. These pushbacks violate migrants' right to seek protection, the principle of non-refoulement, and the prohibition of collective expulsion, which constitute a harmful practice in its own right.

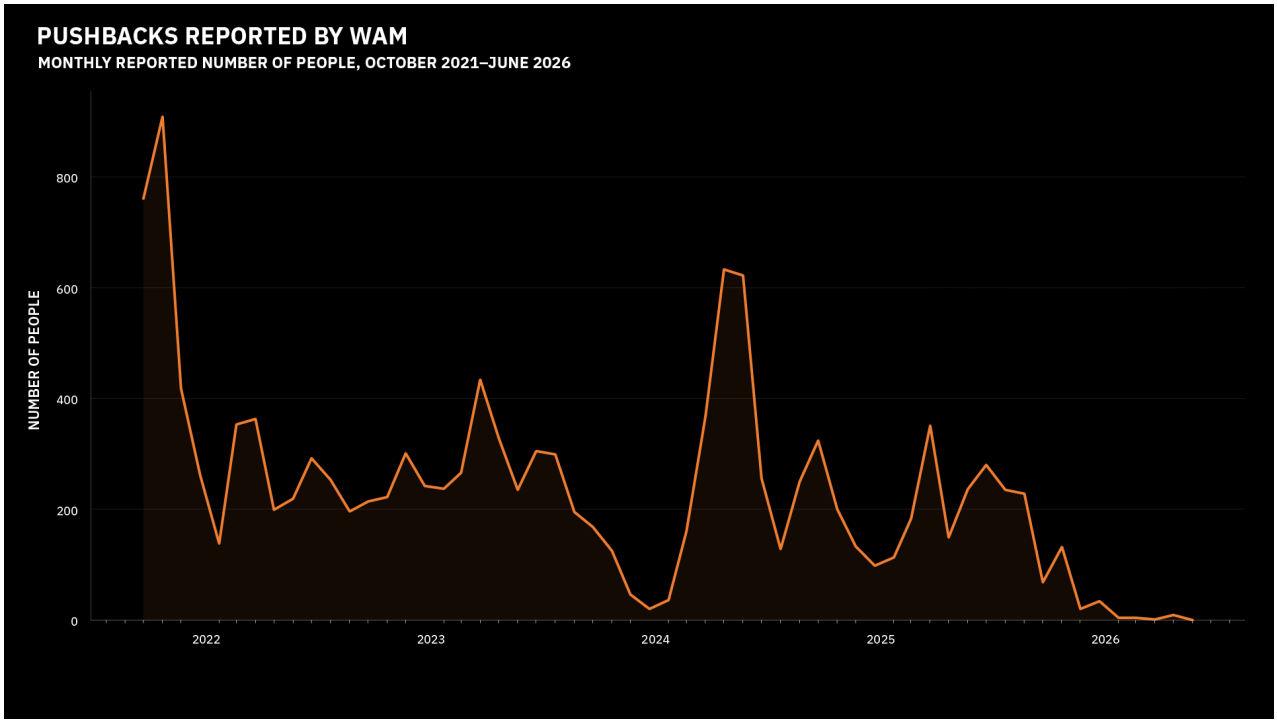


Figure 3.5. Monthly number of people reported to We Are Monitoring (WAM) as having experienced pushbacks from Poland to Belarus, October 2021–June 2026. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

In practice, migrants are intercepted in the Polish territory and expelled through so-called service doors along the border fence, into Belarus, or otherwise forced to cross the river section of the border. Apprehension and pushbacks are often executed using force, beatings, and pepper spray.[257] The images below show footage publicly available from the official account of the State Border Committee of Belarus, which depicts pushbacks at the hands of the Polish Border Guard – with a military truck visible – through the service doors scattered along the fence, and into a wet area (fig. 3.6).



Figure 3.6. Still from extended footage posted on 11 April 2023 to an official Belarusian government Telegram account. Text translated into English: "On April 4th Belarusian Border Guards recorded two cases of forced return of refugees at the border with Poland." Screengrab from an official Belarusian government Telegram account, 11 April 2023.[258]

Pushbacks have a distinct spatiality, beyond the simple return of people intercepted across the border line. In fact, pushbacks often occur in a different geographical location along the border than the one chosen to initially cross into Poland. Since 2021, according to data provided by WAM, at least 289 groups of migrants made more than one distinct call or request for assistance, with their first outreach call recorded in Poland – which might indicate they had been transported to another location along the border before being pushed back through a different location, without maps or the capacity for orientation. This practice was also conveyed to us by a commander in one of the Polish Border Guard stations along the Bug, who explained that it is difficult to "return migrants back through the river," so, in this case, migrants are transported and pushed back via the closest land border.[259]

Moreover, the practice of pushbacks extends spatially far beyond the fence line, into forests, villages, Border Guard stations, and even hospitals in nearby cities where people are intercepted or transported. Interviews, media, and civil society reports indicate that migrants arriving as patients to the hospital or medical facilities in nearby towns, have been pushed back to Belarus.[260] In 2023, a man from Yemen, in an account shared with a humanitarian NGO in Belarus, recounted his experience in a Polish hospital: "I told the doctor, I want to stay here, I am seeking asylum, but he said to me: 'honestly, I don't know what is going to happen to you,' and the border guards came to the hospital, and they put me in a prison for three hours, and after that, I get back to the border." This was further corroborated by a high-ranking Border Guard official during an interview.[261] Reflecting on the difficulty of balancing national security against human rights, he gave the following example: an activist had alerted border authorities to a migrant in urgent need of medical assistance. The border guards coordinated with an ambulance; the person was taken to the hospital. Once at the hospital, the person became agitated, and the border guards handcuffed the migrant to the bed. As described by the commander, border guards had to navigate between national security and human rights; in this assessment, national security was considered more important. Here, the person in need of care had become, in the commander's account, a threat – which legitimises the withdrawal of care and subsequent pushback to Belarus. This demonstrates that pushbacks do not just happen directly at the border; the threat of violence and pushback extends into the Polish interior, within medical institutions, where migrants are placed under the supervision of armed Border Guard officers or other state actors, and where access by family members, lawyers, and humanitarian organisations may be restricted

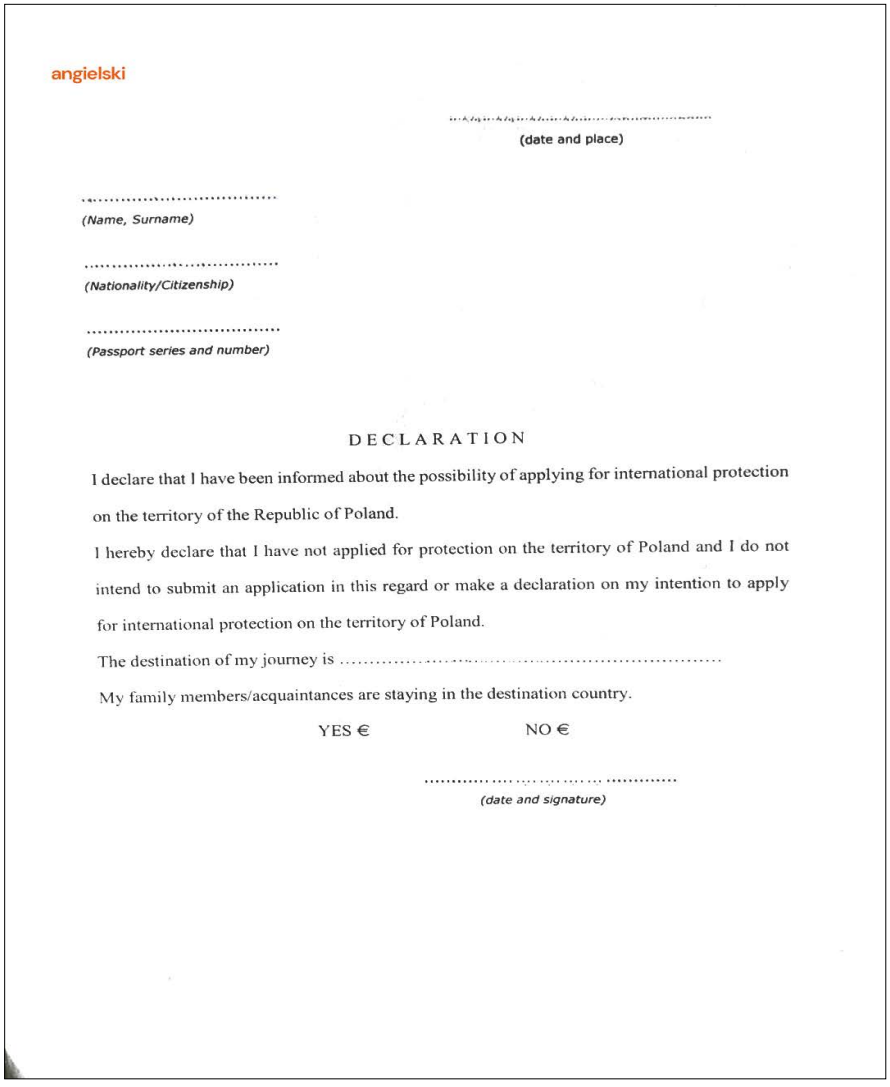
260 Hospital Volunteers. Interview by Research Team. Hajnowka, March 2025.

261 Podlaski, Border Guard Commander 1. Interview by Research Team, Bialystok, 10, March 2025.

259 Janów Podlaski, Border Guard Station. Delegation Visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Janów Podlaski, 16 October 2025.

While, in the majority of reports analysed, pushbacks are carried out without any administrative trace, at certain periods, civil society actors observed the use of "ad-hoc declaration form" (see fig. below). In signing such a declaration form, migrants were pressured into formally expressing, in writing, their lack of intention to apply for asylum in the country, and their intended destination, before being pushed back to Belarus. Local support organisations that provide legal support to migrants at the Poland–Belarus border, and who have observed the development of pushback practices over time, stated that the declaration form was introduced by the newly elected Tusk government in early 2024.[262]

262 Teramiski School. "Mapping Crisification 3." Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025; Lawyer, local resident, and activists. "Mapping Crisification 2." Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025; Activist Base 2. "Mapping Crisification 1." Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025; Activist Base 3. "Mapping Crisification 4." Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025.



angielski

(date and place)

(Name, Surname)

(Nationality/Citizenship)

(Passport series and number)

DECLARATION

I declare that I have been informed about the possibility of applying for international protection on the territory of the Republic of Poland.

I hereby declare that I have not applied for protection on the territory of Poland and I do not intend to submit an application in this regard or make a declaration on my intention to apply for international protection on the territory of Poland.

The destination of my journey is .....

My family members/acquaintances are staying in the destination country.

YES € NO €

(date and signature)

Figure 3.7. Example of a declaration form in which migrants state, by signing, that they do not wish to apply for international protection in Poland.

In our interviews and conversations with Polish border guards during the delegation visits, they described migrants voluntarily signing these documents when told that they will be returned to Belarus if they remain in Poland. According to state narratives, migrants voluntarily sign such a declaration form, when told that leaving their fingerprints will compromise their asylum claims in other European countries.[263] In contrast, the reports by civil society actors indicate instead that intercepted migrants are often forced into signing the declaration form under conditions of strain, threats, and pressure, often lacking awareness of the situation. Language issues play an important role. The declaration forms were translated into most of the languages used by migrants (Tigrinya, Amharic, Arabic, Somali, French, etc.), but many reported being unable to understand its complex wording, or being pushed to sign without being allowed to read the full text.[264] Additionally, the lack of oral translation on site and stressful signing conditions would not allow people to ask for clarifications, leading many to misinterpret its content, or misunderstand the process as a step towards lodging their asylum claim. Walid, for example, was forced into signing such a statement before being pushed back:

> *"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 Poland.'"*[265]

Pushbacks prevent migrants from lodging asylum claims, while their expressed intention to seek asylum – and, in some cases, applications already initiated – is ignored or obstructed. In spring 2024, CSOs observed that migrants increasingly requested support to enter the asylum procedure, to apply for international protection.[266] Thus, to prevent people from being pushed back, volunteers and NGOs escorted migrants during their first encounters with authorities and the initial steps in lodging their asylum claims. However, reports from local organisations highlight that, in mid-2024, Polish authorities continued the pushback of migrants, even in cases in which asylum requests were facilitated by civil society, in support of migrants.[267]

263 Podlaskie Regional Border Guard Unit. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Białystok, 8 March 2025; Krynki Border Guard Station. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Krynki, 8 March 2025; Bobrowniki Border Guard Station. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Bobrowniki, 9 March 2025.

264 Activist Base. Personal communication with Peter Teunissen. Podlaskie, August 2024; Teramiski School. "Mapping Crisification 3." Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025.

265 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

266 Teramiski School. "Mapping Crisification 3." Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025.

267 We Are Monitoring, "*I Said 'I Want to Stay in Poland' but They Pushed Me Back*": 12 Months of the New Government on the Polish-Belarusian Border (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie We Are Monitoring, 2024), PDF, accessed June 23, 2026, https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/WAM-12-months-of-the-new-government.pdf.



Figure 3.8. A humanitarian and legal aid provider from the Egala Association assists migrants in a forest in Poland while preparing a power of attorney. After receiving food and water, the migrants complete powers of attorney, enabling their legal representatives to access information about, and follow, any subsequent procedures concerning them. Photograph by Małgorzata Klemens, April 2024.

In 2025, the Polish government further restricted legal access to asylum procedures by introducing a legal provision allowing for the temporary suspension of the right to seek asylum.[268] This measure, which we will discuss further in Chapter Five, was initially framed as exceptional, temporary, and geographically limited. However, it effectively blocked access to the asylum procedure in the Polish territory and has since been repeatedly extended.[269] Poland's suspension of the right to apply for international protection has been assessed by experts to be both ineffective and constitutionally indefensible: border data show no real drop in irregular crossings after the policy took effect,[270] meaning the measure fails to serve its stated security purpose, while, at the same time, it strips asylum seekers of the core guarantee of Article 56(2) – namely the chance to have their case safely and objectively assessed.

Finally, Poland's escalating legal and bureaucratic measures to prevent access to legal protection, and the heavy reliance on pushbacks as a practice, leave many migrants in situations of isolation, vulnerability, and in lack of essential support. Humanitarian organisations face increasing difficulties in reaching individuals in need of assistance, while fellow travellers within migrant groups may be separated from one another. Families are often left in distressing uncertainty, unable to determine the whereabouts or fate of their loved ones, who may have disappeared, as Chapter Four's analysis of causes and patterns of disappearances will further detail.

268 We Are Monitoring. They Did Not Let Us Speak: The "Temporary" Suspension of Human Rights at the Poland–Belarus Border. Warsaw: We Are Monitoring, 2025. Last accessed June 23, 2026. https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/en/report/.

269 European Parliament, Question for Written Answer E-002972/2025: Situation at the Poland-Belarus Border (Brussels: European Parliament, 2025), accessed June 23, 2026, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2025-002972_EN.html.

270 Presentations Podlaskie Regional Border Guard Unit. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Białystok, 8 March 2025; Nadbużański Regional Border Guard Unit. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Chełm, 17 October 2025. See N. Ciastoń and N. Judzińska, "Liczby, kategorie i ich znaczenie. Krytyczna lektura danych straży granicznej dotyczących granicy polsko-białoruskiej z lat 2021-2025" (2027).

271 We Are Monitoring, "Interactive Dashboards," https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/en/statistics/interactive-dashboards/.

272 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

273 We will discuss inaction, referring to the practices of state officials, and inaction, were state officials do not respond such as initiating SAR response or allowing people to enter Poland throughout this chapter.

Containment and forced im/mobility

Pushed forward by Belarusian authorities and pushed back by Polish forces, Bashir and thousands of others[271] were not expelled from the border zone but trapped within it. Pushbacks and pushforwards are not just practices that remove migrants from the territory, but that contain them within it, often suspending them in a strip of land between the Belarusian and Polish border infrastructure. This cyclical dynamic is also reflected in the WAM testimony database: among completed, coded records, around three-quarters refer to multiple pushback incidents, with a median of three pushbacks, and some testimonies describing more than ten or even twenty.[272] A continued practice of crossing, pushback, and containment thus manifests as a continuous cycle of forced circular movement and immobility. This recurrent cycle of *forced im/mobility* connects state action, such as violent pushbacks or pushforwards, and inaction, such as failing to respond to migrants' humanitarian requests.[273] The only ways out of this cycle for migrants are either finally succeeding, not only in crossing

but also in remaining on Polish territory, or, after a pushback or detention by Belarusian authorities, going back to Minsk.

As we have shown above, the cycles of forced im/mobility have important spatial and temporal implications for migrants. Law enforcement agents redistribute migrants across the territory of the borderland. WAM testimonies describe how migrants are transported over service roads or forest tracks, brought to military camps or Border Guard stations, where they have been forced to cross the border through gates in the infrastructure, through river sections, or at other crossing points, sometimes at night.[274] This, together with being separated from their travel groups, or with their phones confiscated or destroyed, contributes to disorientation. Migrants find themselves pushed deeper into forest, wetlands, and riverbanks located far from settlements or roads.[275] It is through this repeated displacement that the borderland becomes a space of unevenly distributed danger.

274 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

275 In the section on environmental violence of this chapter we will discuss in more detail how border practices, such as the construction of border infrastructure and violent bordering practices seems to have pushed migrants deeper into the forest.



Figure 3.9. A group of people is seen boarding a military-style truck, the type of vehicle often used in pushback operations. Maciej Moskwa, described this as a pushback of an Iraqi Kurdish family. Photograph by Maciej Moskwa, 2021.

Cycles of forced im/mobility also have important temporal implications for migrants. Indeed, the temporal effect of law enforcement practices is not limited to the duration of a single encounter. Pushforwards, pushbacks, apprehensions, forced transfers, detention in camps or vehicles, and repeated removals produce cumulative delays in migrants' capacity to cross and extend the time that they are forced to spend in the borderland. This imposed duration matters because every additional hour spent in the forest, in wet clothes, without food, water, medical care, or reliable communication, increases exhaustion and exposure to environmental danger. In this sense, law enforcement acts not only through direct force, but also through the production of prolonged exposure to other forms of harm. The broader geostatistical analysis of these spatial and temporal effects is developed in the environmental violence section of this chapter, where they are analysed together with the effects of infrastructure and terrain.

During the extensive periods during which migrants remain trapped at the border in repeated cycles of im/mobility, they are subjected to multiple other forms of physical and psychological violence inflicted by law enforcement agents, to which we now turn.

Physical and psychological violence

Bashir described how he was beaten by both Belarusian and Polish authorities. This is common across testimonies collected by WAM, which often describe how pushbacks and pushforwards are paired with different forms of direct violence. This has also been documented by many other civil society organisations.[276] These reports describe beatings, and the use of various objects such as batons, pepper spray, and dogs by Polish and Belarusian border guards and the army. These violent practices can be located along a spectrum of different degrees of instrumentality. On one hand, we see practices in which the infliction of harm is embedded in the governance of mobility across the border, and which appears *instrumental* to an operational goal, such as pushforward or pushback. On the other hand, practices of violence recurrently exhibit a high degree of *cruelty* – in that the infliction of violence is evidently in excess of any operational aim and appears to become an end in its own right.[277] Most of the practices we analysed fall in a zone of indeterminacy between these two.

276 Across reports and testimonies collected by We Are Monitoring, reports from international NGOs such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and MSF, and by local civil society actors such as Grupa Granica, the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, POPH, Ocalenie Foundation, and journalists like Piotr Czaban similarly describe a range of physical violent practices during pushbacks and pushforwards.

277 The differentiation of forms of violence across the instrumental – cruelty spectrum has been reflected upon by a range of authors, see in particular É. Balibar, Violence and Civility: On the Limits of Political Philosophy, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).



Figure 3.10. A migrant, in the forest near Bohoniki village, partially conceals his face to protect his identity, while revealing a bleeding head wound. Photograph by Maciej Moskwa, October 2021.

The practices of violence that have been observed are not identical across both sides of the border, as they are perpetrated by different law enforcement actors each of which has its specific logics as we've discussed in Chapter One, and at the beginning of this chapter – in particular the competing aims of pushing migrants forward for Belarussian forces, and pushing them back for Polish forces. Furthermore, their practices have evolved over time. The data we have analysed, as well as existing reports by civil society actors, allow to identify broad trends concerning the similar and differing practices of violence employed by Polish and Belarusian border guards and the army.[278]

278 We Are Monitoring, *Testimony Database*, unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025; MSF, *Medical Intervention*, unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025; Anonymous Humanitarian Actor active in Belarus, unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2023. For reports, see Amnesty International, *Cruelty Not Compassion*; Human Rights Watch, "Die Here or Go to Poland"; MSF, *Trapped Between Borders*; We Are Monitoring, *Pepper Spray in a Bottle of Water*, https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Pepper-spray-in-a-bottle-of-water-2023.pdf; We Are Monitoring, *A Summary of the Year 2024*, https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/WAM-summary-2024.pdf; We Are Monitoring, "I Said 'I Want to Stay in Poland,'" https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/WAM-Report-12-months-of-the-new-government.pdf; We Are Monitoring, *Children at the Border*, https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Children-at-the-border-January-September-2025-1.pdf; We Are Monitoring, *They Did Not Let Us Speak*, https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/They-did-not-let-us-speak-WAM.pdf.

Form of violence	Belarusian agents	Polish agents
Physical beatings	Beating with hands, batons, and other weapons; kicking.	Beatings with hands, batons, and other weapons; kicking.
Pepperspray	Rarely reported.	Routine use of pepper spray during apprehension, transport, and pushback, including spraying into eyes and even into drinking water given to migrants.
Restraints	Open-air “collection sites”/underground “forest prisons” without shelter, military camps or basis.	Handcuffs and plastic zip-ties.
Dogs	Setting dogs on migrants.	Rarely reported.
Firearms	Threats with guns; firing weapons in the air/into crowds at the border fence.	Rubber bullets; firing weapons in the air and pointing guns at people crossing.
Sexual violence	Testimonies reported sexual violence.	Testimonies reported sexual violence; forced undressing.
Humiliation	Migrants forced to film videos while crying and accusing the Polish counterpart of violence	
Destruction/theft of belongings	Confiscating phones and money; destroying items; demanding bribes to leave border strip.	Breaking phones and power banks; destroying essential items.
Family separation	Group separation during forced crossings and detentions.	Group separation during pushbacks, detection, or hospitalisation.
Coerced border crossings	Forcing migrants into dangerous crossings (e.g., rivers, and swamps) under threat; transporting migrants across the border zone	Pushing migrants back through fences, into swamps or through rivers; transporting migrants across the border zone
Forcing violence between group members	Coercing people, under threat of beating, to commit violence including severe cases of sexual assault, fellow migrants.	Not reported.
Coerced signing of documents	Not reported	Forcing people to sign forms to return to Belarus or waived an asylum claim.

Table 3.1. Violence reported by migrants in reports and testimonies.

While there are differences in the violent practices that have been documented for Belarussian and Polish law enforcement agents, most of the practices described above are shared by both. Furthermore, in the WAM testimonies that are central to the analysis put forward in this chapter it is not always possible to differentiate clearly the actors inflicting the violence, and WAM testimony collection has had a stronger emphasis on the practices of Polish authorities. Below we analyse in more detail a selection of violent practices, and differentiate between Belarussian and Polish law enforcement agents when possible.

279 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

Beatings and use of weapons

Border enforcement actors frequently use hands, heavy boots, and specialized tools such as black metal batons, pepper spray, rifle butts, and electric sticks or tasers. Witnesses and people who experienced violence at the hands of law enforcement authorities recount being kicked "like a ball" and subjected to officers "stomping over their stomach" or walking across their bodies while they were forced to lie on the ground. [279] A recurrent practice of deliberate violence directed at existing injuries was identified, particularly at broken limbs. Indeed, multiple testimonies from WAM describe officers kicking or hitting legs that were already fractured at the border fence.

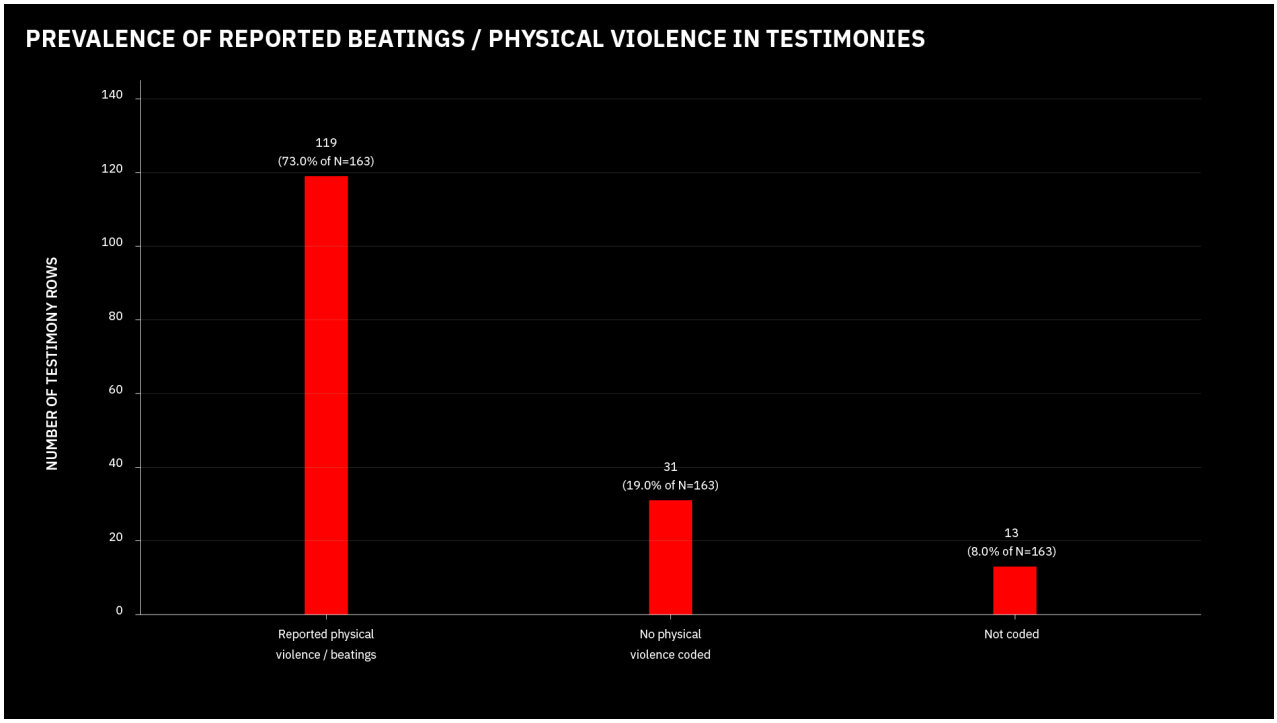


Figure 3.11. Graph compiled from data extracted from WAM testimonies, showing that physical beatings were among the abuses most frequently reported by survivors. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

The most frequently mentioned weapon is the baton, or "stick," described variously as being made of metal, plastic, or wood. These are used to inflict blunt-force trauma on the legs, backs, and chests of migrants, often while they are restrained on the ground. One respondent noted the severity of these assaults, stating: "They don't beat you with hands, they beat you with batons, so your body enlarges, swells, so no one is able to try and cross again."[280] Others described "iron sticks" that expand when used, applied with enough force to cause significant injury.

The analysis of testimonies further reveals the use of chemicals and electrical devices to incapacitate individuals. Pepper spray is frequently described as a primary tool, often sprayed directly into the eyes or chest, before or during a beating. Tasers or electroshock weapons are also mentioned, used both for intimidation and to force people away from border gates. Additional reported weaponry includes knives used for threats, stun grenades, and the use of heavy military footwear to kick individuals while they are lying down.[281]

280 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.
281 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

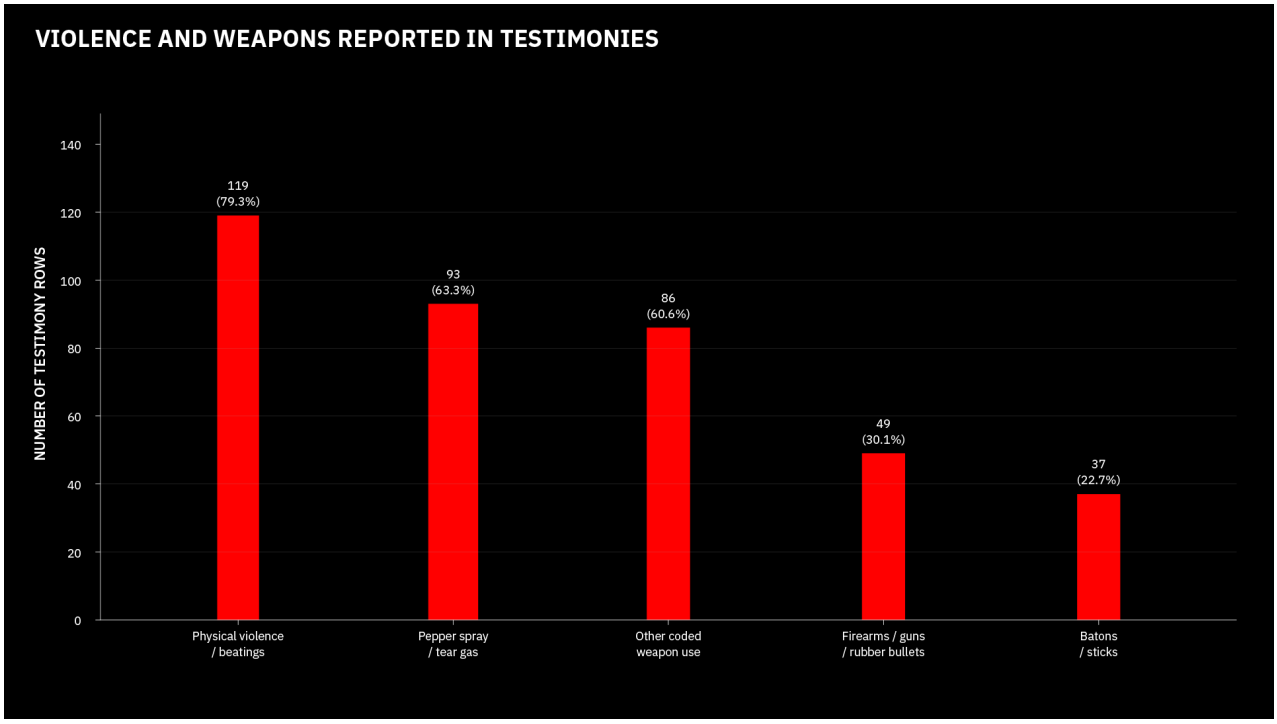


Figure 3.12. Reported beatings or other physical violence in We Are Monitoring (WAM) testimonies. WAM collects testimonies from people who have experienced at least one pushback, through semi-structured online interviews conducted with interpreters where necessary and using a questionnaire developed by the Border Violence Monitoring Network.46 Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

Firearms are reported both as instruments of coercion and as means of direct violence. The testimonies indicate a change in the reported forms in which firearms were used by Polish authorities. Earlier accounts more often describe firearms being displayed as threats, used as blunt objects, or discharged as warning shots. In the sample of testimonies concerning incidents after the 2024 legal amendment,[282] reports include more explicit accounts of rubber or plastic projectiles striking people, and live ammunition being fired towards groups. This suggests a diversification and possible hardening of the documented coercive repertoire.

282 Ustawa z dnia 26 lipca 2024 r. o zmianie niektórych ustaw w celu usprawnienia działań Sił Zbrojnych Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, Policji oraz Straży Granicznej na wypadek zagrożenia bezpieczeństwa państwa, Dziennik Ustaw 2024, item 1248, https://dziennikustaw.gov.pl/DU/2024/1248.

283 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025; MSF. Medical Intervention. Unpublished datase, restricted access,

284 We Are Monitoring, Report from the Polish-Belarusian Border: November 2023 (Warsaw: We Are Monitoring, 2023), 4, https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2311-ST-CM-November-2023-ENG-GG.pdf.

Reported forms of firearm use before and after 2024 legal amendment

	Before August 2024	After August 2024
Use of firearm as blunt object	Testimonies describe firearms and rifle butts being used to strike people on the head, back, neck, and other parts of the body. Some respondents reported lasting injuries or scars.	Reports of more targeted, severe trauma, such as being struck in the eye with the end of a gun. Continued use of gun backsides for strikes to the waist.
Weapon discharge and projectiles	Reports include warning shots, shots fired during pursuits, and the use of plastic projectiles.	Reports include rubber or plastic projectiles directed at migrants, projectiles striking people in the back, live ammunition reportedly fired towards a group, and projectiles fired close to people's heads.

Table 3.2. Table 3.2. Reported forms of firearm use at the Polish-Belarusian border before and after the July 2024 legal amendment, based on interviews and incident reports documented in WAM monitoring materials.[283]

These accounts indicate a more explicit form of projectile violence within the post-amendment sample, including direct bodily impacts and reports of live ammunition being fired towards migrants, which might have been more frequent overall. One particularly severe case, which predates the amendment, illustrates the potentially life-threatening consequences of firearm use at the border. On 3 November 2023, a Syrian national was shot in the back after crossing into Polish territory.[284] According to his account, the group he was travelling with fled upon encountering Polish law enforcement authorities, at which point he was struck by a bullet. Medical documentation from the University Clinical Hospital in Białystok indicated that the bullet narrowly missed his spine, exposing him to a risk of paralysis. He reported hearing multiple gunshots before losing consciousness.

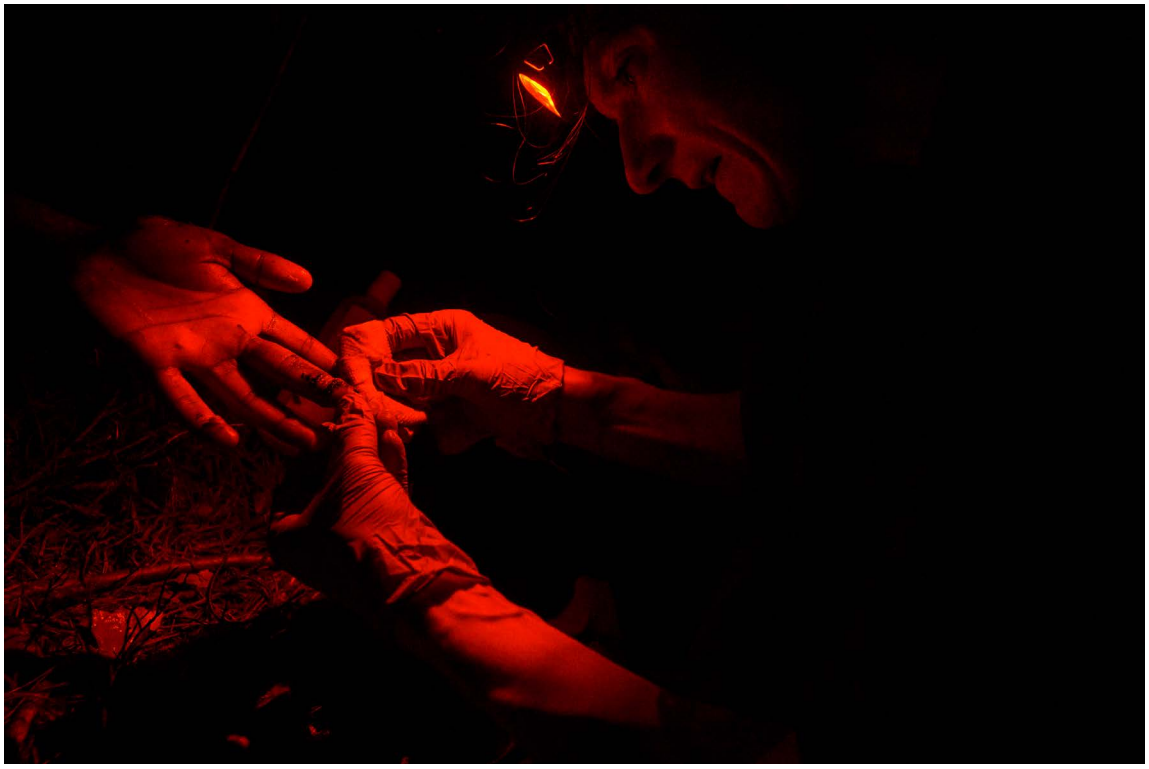


Figure 3.13. Civil society medics provide emergency medical care to migrants in the borderland forest. Calling an ambulance does not always result in medical evacuation and, in some cases, may be followed by a pushback. In response, humanitarian workers established their own medical teams, working alongside people providing legal and human rights protection to migrants. Photograph by Małgorzata Klemens, 2021.

285 Médecins Sans Frontières. «Trapped Between Borders: Life-Threatening Consequences of Increased Militarisation on the Poland-Belarus Border.»

Medical organisations have denounced and reported on injuries and trauma connected to the violence inflicted on migrants by law enforcement authorities in Poland and Belarus. The graph below presents data compiled by MSF between January 2024 and June 2025, within the scope of their medical interventions in the forest at the Poland–Belarus border. MSF medical teams have documented injuries among treated patients and classified trauma injuries as intentional, meaning injuries consistent with deliberate acts of violence rather than accidental harm. The data offer a quantified glimpse into the physical violence endured by migrants along this route, during the period of MSF activity in the border zone.[285] The types of injuries recorded, attesting to the use of blunt force, and consistent with accounts of beatings described by migrants in the testimonies collected by solidarity groups and NGOs more broadly, include lacerations and fractures.

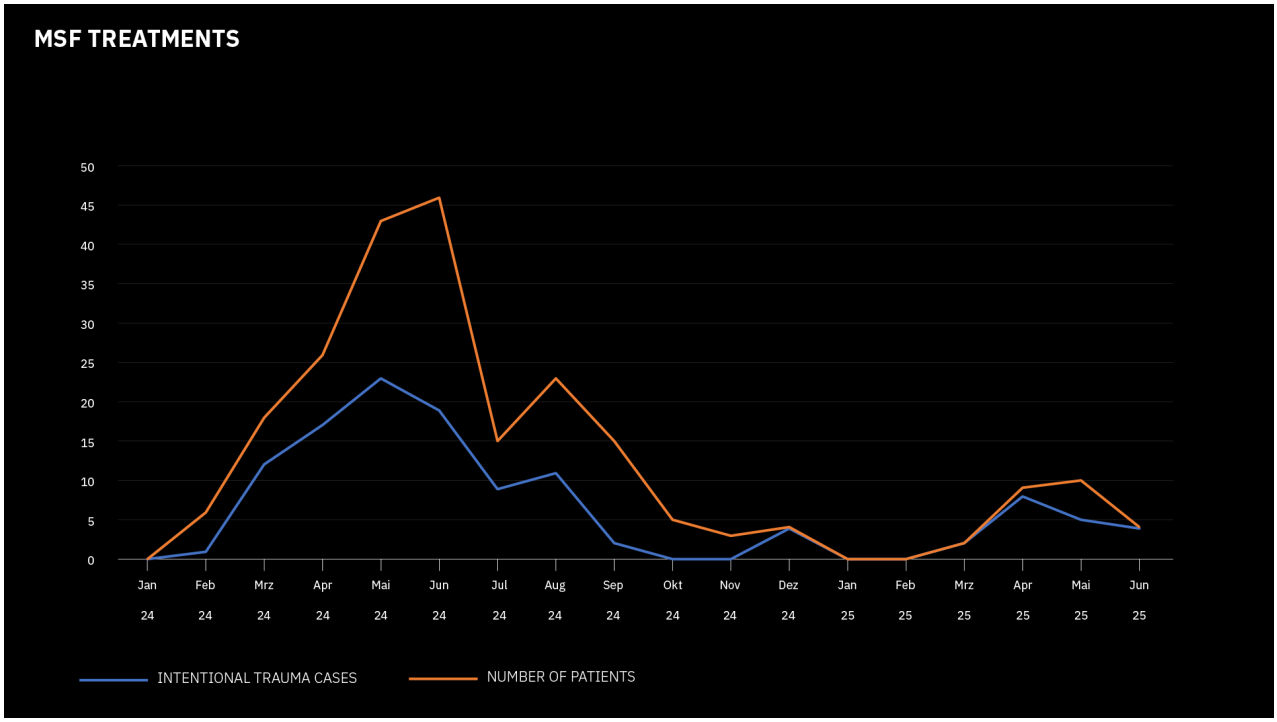


Figure 3.14. Monthly number of patients treated by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in the Polish–Belarusian border region, and patients treated for intentional trauma, January 2024–June 2025. The orange line represents all patients treated by MSF each month; the blue line represents the subset treated for injuries classified as intentional trauma, including injuries associated with beatings, dog attacks and rubber bullets. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

Destruction of personal belongings

In addition to physical harm and humiliation, another form of violence performed by law enforcement agents on both sides of the border, one that has been regularly reported and documented, is the destruction of mobile phones and the theft of money. Mobile phones were confiscated and deliberately destroyed, smashed, bent, or thrown into rivers, making them unusable (as seen in the image above). Testimony data from WAM, and testimonies collected by an anonymous partner in Belarus, show that phones are mostly destroyed by Polish law enforcement agents, Belarusian authorities are more often described as confiscating mobile phones.

In 2023, a person described the moment in which the Polish guards "took him 20 kilometres from where we entered so we lost our way. And they broke our phones, so we don't get the GPS."[286] Amadou, recalled how "The Polish officers tortured us, beat us, destroyed our belongings – our phones, everything – and sent us back again."[287] The recurrence of this tactic by Polish authorities is well documented and also led to an investigation by the Public Prosecutor's Office in Bialystok.[288] On the Belarusian side, the destruction of phones is also described in a number of testimonies. "[..] the Belarusian side they took my iPhone too and didn't give it back."[289] Reports, however, also documented an additional and more calculated pattern where migrants and their phones were instrumentalised. In the forbidden zone, people were forced to participate in videos,

286 Anonymous Humanitarian Actor active in Belarus. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2023.

287 Amadou, "Testimony," in We Are Monitoring, They Did Not Let Us Speak: The "Temporary" Suspension of Human Rights at the Poland-Belarus Border, 48-50 (Warsaw: We Are Monitoring, March 2026).

288 TVN24, "Dubicze Cerkiewne. W beczce na terenie placówki Straży Granicznej znaleziono nadpalone paszporty i telefony," TVN24 Białystok, [date not given], https://tvn24.pl/bialystok/dubicze-cerkiewne-w-beczce-na-terenie-placowki-strazy-granicznej-znaleziono-nadpalone-paszporty-i-telefony-st7803418; Gazeta Wyborcza (Białystok), "Prokuratura potwierdza: w beczce na terenie placówki SG były...,"https://bialystok.wyborcza.pl/bialystok/7,35241,30760523,prokuratura-potwierdza-w-beczce-na-terenie-placowki-sg-byly.html.

289 Qasim (Yemen), "Testimony," in We Are Monitoring, We Have Only One War, 94 (Warsaw: We Are Monitoring, 2024).

filmed by Belarusian border guards, in which they accuse Polish border guards of abuse, and/or were compelled to provide footage of Polish border guards inflicting violence or pushbacks, in order to be allowed to leave the military bases in which they were detained before trying to cross again. Such reports, account for the use of phones to extract footage that can be amplified as propaganda against the EU and Poland internationally, exchanged for exit from the border zone back to Minsk. [290]

290 Ebrahim (Ethiopia). "Testimony." In *Pepper Spray in a Bottle of Water*, 66–67, 2023.

291 Hussein (Iraq), "Testimony," in We Are Monitoring, We Have Only One War, 157 (Warsaw: We Are Monitoring, 2024).

292 The destruction of migrants' phones has been documented across the borders of Europe by the Border Violence Monitoring Network, showing that this is not incidental to Poland, but, like pushbacks, a part of a wider EU border practice.



Figure 3.15. Destroyed mobile phones found in the forest near Wygon in 2024. According to information provided by activists during field research, the phones were left behind or confiscated during migrant pushbacks at the site. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, March 2025.

As one Hussein, from Iraq, recalled "[..] If they take your phone, that's it, you're finished. I swear to God, you're finished."[291] Indeed, this practice is particularly significant, given that phones are crucial for migrants to navigate and leave the borderlands, maintain contact with family, document abuses, and seek help in case of emergencies. The testimonies analysed for this report, show that the destruction and confiscation of mobile phones are not isolated incidents, but instead a systematic pattern that is integral to the violence experienced by migrants. While the destruction of phones constitutes a form of direct violence in its own right, it further contributes to migrants' disorientation and exhaustion, and severs them from networks of support.[292]

Humiliation and cruel rituals

As should already be clear from the above, many of the violent practices reported at the border defy any attempt at rational explanation in terms of operational purpose, and instead reveal the infliction of harm as an end in its own right. Multiple accounts of people who experienced encounters with border enforcement actors describe forms of humiliation, degradation, and dehumanisation that exceed any identifiable operational goal, such as coercing, deterring, or punishing. Harm appears to be inflicted simply for the sake of harming. These accounts demand a different analytical vocabulary, focused on cruelty and humiliation.

The different forms of physical violence discussed above are often paired with humiliating treatment that migrants must endure at the hands of border enforcement authorities. Survivors reported sometimes being forced to undress completely and remain naked for hours, or to walk significant distances without clothes or shoes, following an encounter with either Belarusian or Polish authorities.[293] WAM testimonies recorded reports of instances in which people were forced to eat cigarettes, or to eat dirty food from the ground, at the hands of the Polish or Belarusian border enforcement authorities.[294] One account collected by WAM in 2025 describes extreme acts of violence experienced by a group within the forbidden zone, at the hands of Belarusian border enforcement authorities. The report depicts a sadistic act of violence, in which the person was raped by people in uniform, whom he identified as members of the Wagner Group, [295] before being forced to commit the same act against another member of the group who was crossing the border with him.[296]

In multiple conversations with local activists and residents in the forest, it emerged that members of the Polish military construct wooden structures as seen in the figures below, which locals and activists have come to call "totems."[297] These wooden props are often fitted with additional clothes found in the forest, such as the bra in the picture, possibly belonging to migrants. On these wooden props, faces are drawn, or fake directional signs in English added, to disorient, deceive, and mock those who encounter them.

293 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

294 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

295 In six testimonies from WAM, individuals reported the presence of Wagner Group personnel at the Belarus-Poland border. We are unable to independently confirm the presence of Wagner operatives in the area. No additional information was provided by the individuals concerned that would allow for verification. It should nonetheless be noted that Polish border guards interviewed during our fieldwork made reference to Wagner's presence in Belarus, and several public media outlets have similarly reported on Wagner Group activity within Belarusian territory in the context of the border crisis. see DW, "What Are Wagner Group Mercenaries Still Doing in Belarus?" [January 24, 2024], https://www.dw.com/en/what-are-wagner-group-mercenaries-still-doing-in-belarus/a-68077456.

296 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

297 Local residents and activists. Forest walk and personal communication. Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025



Figure 3.16. Photograph of a temporary military post in the forest near Wygon, within the Strictly Protected Area of Białowieża Forest. The site bore traces of prolonged military presence, including a makeshift fire pit, despite fires being prohibited in the protected area. Soldiers had constructed an anthropomorphic female figure from a piece of wood and dressed it in items of women's clothing, possibly taken from belongings left behind by migrants. Through the use of women's underwear and other personal belongings of people crossing the border, the figure also points to the gendered dimension of how migrant women's bodies and possessions are objectified within a militarized space. Photograph by Małgorzata Klemens, May 2024.



Figure 3.17. Polish border area, in a forest near the border. The photograph was taken in winter 2022, near a temporary checkpoint where Polish military personnel were stationed. A sign pointing towards Belarus reads "Germany." Fear, disorientation, and distress associated with becoming lost in the forest were common experiences among migrants on the Polish side of the border. In this context, the placement of a misleading sign may have functioned as a means of further disorientation. Photograph by Anka Kolberg, Winter 2022.

One incident that was documented in October 2022 is representative of practices of humiliation and degradation. A person who attempted to cross the border barrier became trapped upside down on razor wire on the Polish side of the fence. Instead of intervening and assisting him, Polish officers present at the scene illuminated him with flashlights and made mocking comments, including posting the image online with the description "the Podlaskie bat," which was reposted by some media. When the man eventually fell to the ground, the officers laughed and continued to record and photograph him. The incident reflects the humiliation of the individual, disregard for his suffering, and the use of exposure, ridicule, and non-assistance in a life-threatening situation–reflecting the forms of organised abandonment we discuss further on.[298] The fact that it was not only filmed but shared on social media indicates that the production and circulation of the images were an intrinsic part of the infliction of humiliation.[299] The unashamed display of this practice by its perpetrators is telling of the degree to which these practices have come to be normalised, which we will discuss in the Consolidation chapter.

What emerges from the above are not isolated or random incidents in which violence is inflicted by border enforcement agents, but recurrent practices of violence, which take on collective and scripted forms and which we may think of as "violent rituals."[300] Specific in their instantiations at this border, these rituals nonetheless resemble practices observed at other European land borders, where the infliction of injury functions as a deliberate and recurring practice of violence through which law enforcement agents both seek to enforce control and erode resistance, through the maiming and debilitation of racialised groups.[301] While violence may have a function – enforcing pushbacks, or disorienting or deterring migrants, for example – the practices we have described exhibit a high degree of *cruelty*, in that the infliction of violence is evidently disproportionate to any operational aim, and appears to become an end in itself. Whether instrumental or cruel, the performance of violence is a central means in the production of the unequal positions of subjects within the architecture of enmity we discussed in the previous chapter, through which the domination of state actors over migrants is imposed.

The cumulative outcomes of these practices are severe and enduring for migrants. The repeated, sudden, and unpredictable interception and violence by law enforcement agents, the physical injuries sustained, and the psychological trauma together create a sense of constant surveillance and threat, resulting in fear, anxiety, and despair. The gap between the experience of harm and the constant threat of potential

298 Piotr Czaban (@CzabanPiotr), post on X, October 6, 2022, https://x.com/CzabanPiotr/status/1578076351453601792/photo/1; Onet Białystok, "Szokujące nagranie z polskiej granicy. Nie wiem co napisać [wideo]," [date of publication not given], https://www.onet.pl/informacje/onetbialystok/szokujace-nagranie-z-polskiej-granicy-nie-wiem-co-napisac-wideo/3v7zeqw,79cfc278.

299 For important discussions of the role of visibility and mediation in the infliction of violence, see J. Butler, Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable? (London: Verso, 2009); , Thomas. 2004. 'Mobilizing Shame', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2–3: 435–49.

300 C. Tilly, "Violent Rituals," in The Politics of Collective Violence, Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 81-101.

301 T. Davies, A. Isakjee, and J. Obradovic-Wochnik, "The Politics of Injury: Debilitation and the Right to Maim at the EU Border," Geopolitics 31, no. 2 (2026): 531-559, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2024.2339894.

harm still yet to come – which may come at any moment – is filled by a sense of dread. This dread becomes a form of power, shaping behaviour, enforcing compliance, and bending relationships without a single act of force. This constant threat of interception and violence, which migrants seek to avoid, contributes to migrants moving deeper into the forest, as mentioned above and discussed further in this chapter. The direct harm inflicted by law enforcement agents therefore also generates indirect harmful effects, inflicted through their effects on the temporality and spatiality of migrants' crossings.

302 B. Bhandar, "Organised State Abandonment: The Meaning of Grenfell," Critical Legal Thinking, 2018, 21; R. W. Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* (London: Verso Books, 2022).

303 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

304 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

Organised abandonment: State inaction and blocking humanitarian assistance

As people are circulated and trapped within the borderlands, what accumulates is the time spent in the forest, and the prolonged exposure to risk. This is intensified by state actors actively denying or obstructing assistance, reinforcing life-threatening conditions, by failing to meet their state responsibility to ensure safety, medical care, and humanitarian aid – what we refer to as *organised abandonment* .[302] In our analysis of interview transcripts with humanitarian actors and border guards, testimonies from migrants, and reports and news articles, we identified two modalities through which organised abandonment operates as a mechanism of harm.

First, the immediate denial of assistance within encounters between border enforcement actors and migrants: WAM testimonies reveal a pattern where border guards and officials actively ignore or minimise life-threatening injuries and basic human needs.[303] Testimonies describe individuals with visible, severe injuries, such as displaced bones, swollen toes, and broken legs. Other reports mention that migrants have been told that they are faking their symptoms to avoid deportation. In some instances, when migrants showed wounds to officers, the response was to mock them, hit the injured area with metal sticks, or apply handcuffs directly over the injury; in several cases, they were pushed back without receiving medical aid.[304] The testimonies analysed for this report demonstrates that authorities frequently refuse necessities, including food and water, even when people have been without them for days. Beyond physical sustenance, life-critical medications, such as insulin for diabetes, have been confiscated, and requests for simple painkillers are routinely denied. Rather than providing aid, state officials have been accused of further harming the vulnerable by spraying pepper spray on people already screaming in pain, or spraying it into the bottles of

drinking water provided to them: “there was a woman, a soldier, and she gave us a bottle of water and while we drink it, we wish we do not drink that [...] after that we realised that she put pepper spray inside the water.”[305] Second, aid actors such as local volunteer groups and international medical organisations face systematic obstruction and harassment through checkpoints, exclusion zones, and border fences.[306] Professional medical teams and volunteers are repeatedly delayed or prevented from reaching those in need, due to checkpoint and bureaucratic procedures.

305 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

306 See Médecins Sans Frontières, “MSF Leaves Polish Border After Being Blocked from Assisting Migrants and Refugees,” press release, January 6, 2022, https://www.msf.org/msf-leaves-polish-border-after-being-blocked-assisting-migrants-and-refugees.



Figure 3.18. A volunteer, in the forest near Topilo village, moves along the border barrier, unable to reach a migrant on the other side. Photograph by Maciej Moskwa, 2021.

This is particularly true for people who send distress signals directly from the forbidden zone between the Polish and Belarus border infrastructure, where no humanitarian actor is allowed to operate. Many of the calls that reach helplines come from the forbidden zone, or, at times, from further inside Belarus, where people remain stranded and unattended, because the forbidden zone is fully out of reach for humanitarian groups. Through organised abandonment, migrants’ exposure to different forms of risk and harm is not only prolonged but actively deepened, and the absence or prevention of life-saving action becomes a modality through which harm is actively inflicted.

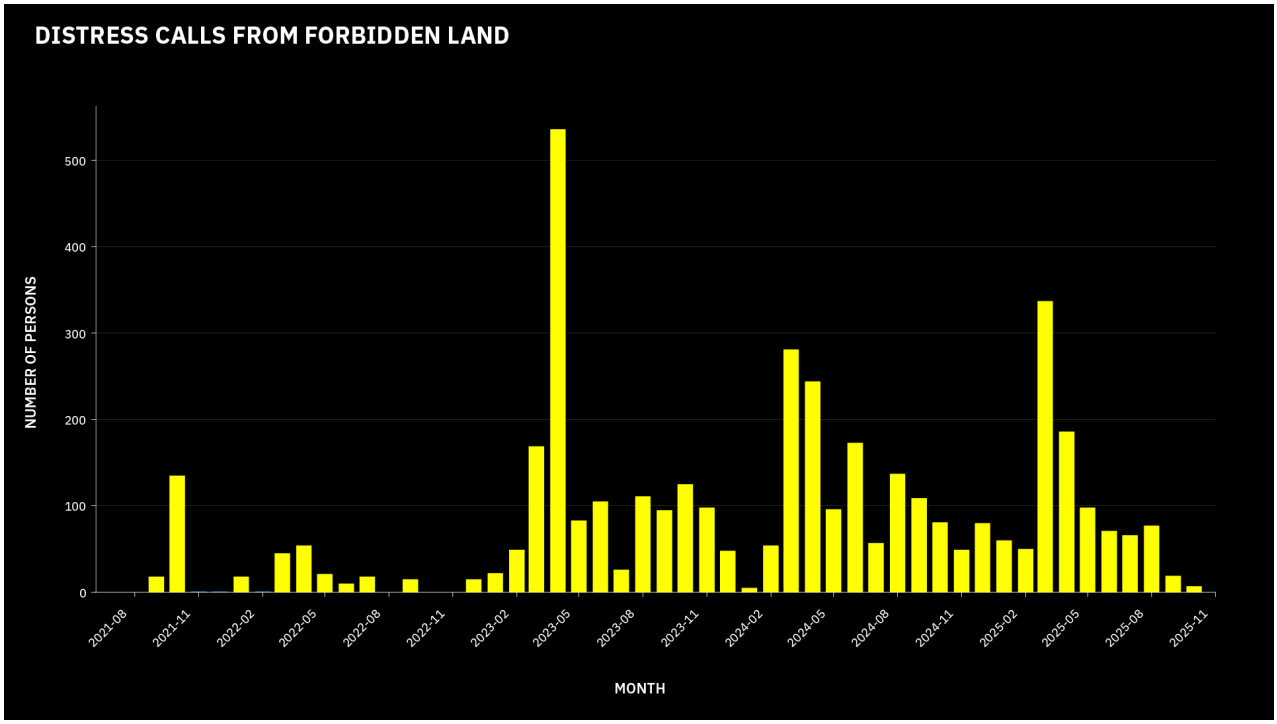


Figure 3.19. Monthly number of people included in requests for assistance received from the forbidden land and recorded by We Are Monitoring (WAM), October 2021–November 2025. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

Furthermore, humanitarian actors described to us how medical evacuations are systematically delayed by border guards and dispatchers. Humanitarian actors have been asked for the patient's skin colour, or if they are "ours" by dispatchers. When a patient is a migrant, the Border Guard must arrive first to "confirm" the medical emergency before the ambulance is allowed to proceed, regardless of the severity of the injury as assessed by migrants themselves or by humanitarian actors. This requirement can turn a simple evacuation, in the case of a fracture, into a four-hour ordeal of waiting and walking.[307]

During our visits to Border Guard posts, the agency was keen to demonstrate their first-responder emergency kits and mentioned the designated search-and-rescue teams. These teams, as stated by the border guards, had received specialised training in SAR operations, and were equipped with specialised emergency kits. Requests for information on how often these SAR units had been mobilised have gone unanswered, and reports from civil society actors and witness testimonies rarely document the use of Border Guard SAR teams. As one humanitarian worker described: "We don't know how these teams operate. It doesn't look like search and rescue, but rather like providing just enough assistance to keep someone alive, and then pushing them back to the other side."[308] These SAR unites were criticised by Civil Society Organisations for the absence of adequate medical training beyond basic first aid, combined with a lack of essential equipment such as stretchers. This undermined any credible search-and-rescue capacity and made their mandate more performative than genuine in the eyes of non-state actors involved in supporting people in

307 M. Górczyńska and K. Czarnota, "Kryzys humanitarny na granicy. Polska zabrania udzielania pomocy umierającym," Krytyka Polityczna, September 24, 2021, https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/uchodzcy-kryzys-humanitarny-apel/.

308 Interview, Humanitarian worker, resident of Podlaskie. Interview by Katarzyna Czarnota, September 2024.

distress at the border. Taken together with their documented oppressive conduct and the broader political context in which they were introduced, these SAR units appear to have served principally as a public-relations instrument, aimed at improving the Border Guard's image while simultaneously weakening the legitimacy and operational space of civil society organisations active in the area.

These practices constitute not simply a failure of care, but a deliberate form of *uncaring*,[309] which inflicts harm by weaponising the physical vulnerability of individuals and withholding the very resources necessary to sustain their basic needs. When water, food, and urgent medical intervention are denied, blocked, or prevented, this creates conditions of hazard in which manageable injuries could escalate into more serious or life-threatening situations, which has repeatedly led to deaths, as we address in the next chapter. What emerges from the testimonies is not negligence in the passive sense, but something closer to active contempt. The suffering of the injured is routinely met with mockery, further physical abuse, or hollow promises that help is on the way, after which individuals are pushed back into the same dangerous conditions that injured them.[310] Finally, these practices of organised abandonment further extend the time migrants remain trapped in the borderland – a crucial factor intensified by the infrastructure we will discuss next, which has shaped the intensity of the environmental violence we've alluded to above and will return to in the following section.

309 N. Leshem, Edges of Care: Living and Dying in No Man's Land (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2025).

310 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

Infrastructural violence

As discussed in the previous chapter, the architecture of the Poland–Belarus border combines "hard" physical infrastructure, such as roads, concertina wire, and fences, with "soft" digital infrastructure, including optical surveillance systems and seismic sensors. This infrastructural setup has harmed migrants in ways that are direct – causing orthopaedic injuries or lacerations, for example – but also indirect. Indeed, the border infrastructure generates spatial and temporal effects on migrants' trajectories, in particular the splintering of their routes and the slowing or im/mobilisation of their movement. These effects have contributed to pushing migrants into more dangerous areas and prolonged their exposure to the environment. Thus, the configuration of infrastructural components in space, and the way they are mobilised within operations by law enforcement agents, shapes *infrastructural violence* in different

but cumulative ways, which we discuss in turn.[311]

311 For the notion of infrastructural violence we draw inspiration from D. Rodgers and Bruce O'Neill, "Infrastructural Violence: Introduction to the Special Issue," Ethnography 13, no. 4 (2012): 401-12, https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138111435738.Rable

312 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

Direct bodily harm

Concertina razor wire and the fences installed in Polish territory have directly injured migrants attempting to cross the border. Testimonies collected by WAM detail physical harm inflicted by these infrastructures as migrants fell or jumped from the 5.5-metre-high fence or became entangled in the concertina wire.[312] One respondent recalled: "All I remember is finding myself caught on the other side, holding the fence with my hand. It felt like razors; it was cutting my hand. My jacket was also caught, leaving me stuck." Another described falling from the fence: "It was like early morning... I couldn't stick to that metal. So I fell down, and my group fled, leaving me." In another instance, a migrant recounted struggling with the fence: "[...] I climbed the fence, but my jacket got stuck. [...] I tried to pull it out, but it was caught fast. As I pulled with my left hand, it went numb, and when the jacket finally came free, I had to let go and fell from above. It was cold, and maybe that's why my bones broke [...]" A further account described a particularly severe injury: "[...] when the lady broke her leg, her bones came out through her skin. They called an ambulance right there."

WAM testimonies consistently describe injuries resulting from falls or jumps, whether from the 5.5-metre-high or 2-metre-high fences, and the dangers posed by concertina wire, which entangles individuals and causes cuts, slowing down their journey. These accounts are not isolated incidents, as several cases of injuries inflicted through encounters with such structures have been documented by civil society actors. In the testimonies collected by We Are Monitoring, we can observe a peak in injuries from the fence, including fractures, cuts, and sprained ankles, in the 2023, June 2024, and early months of 2025.

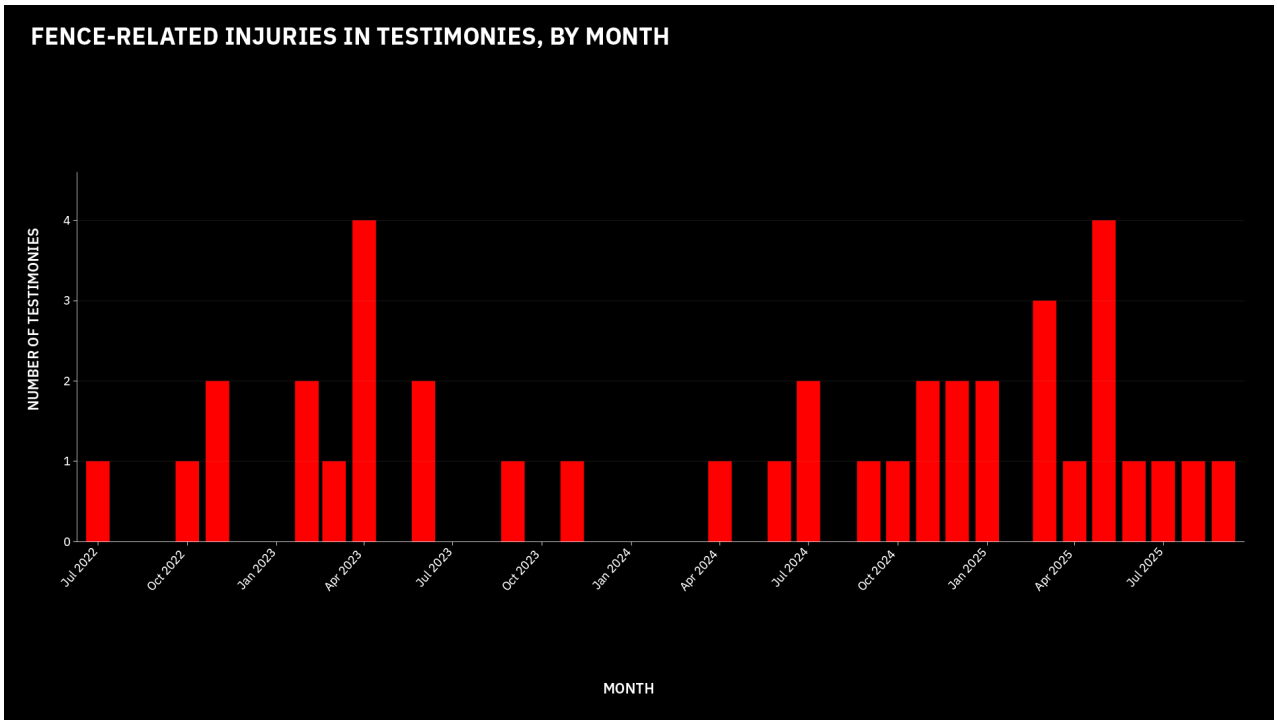


Figure 3.20. Number of testimonies mentioning fence-related injuries, based on the We Are Monitoring Testimony Database. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.[313]

The medical NGO Doctors Without Borders (MSF) documented that, between 2022 and 2024, one-third of the patients it treated sustained injuries from climbing or falling off the border fence, including cases of fractures or deep cuts.[314] In total, nearly half of its hospital referrals were for wounds and orthopaedic injuries incurred because of the fence, which required inpatient care or surgery.

The recurrence of fence-related injuries – but also their peaks at particular moments in time – can be related to particular material components of the fence, and how these has evolved over time. In particular, we saw in Chapter Two of this investigation, concertina razor wire has been a recurring component of the infrastructure, installed on top of the 5.5-metre-high barrier, at times along riverine sections of the border, or at the bottom of the fence on the Polish side, or in the middle of the fence, or as an additional barrier next to the patrol road. Concertina wire is designed to cause harm and deter migrant movement, functioning as both a physical barrier and an additional component of fortification. Yet the repeated crossing of this razor-sharp wire results in injuries to both migrants and wildlife,[315] and its continued use as a recurring component of border infrastructure reveals a disturbing acceptance of these harms as an inevitable outcome. The continued placement of concertina, inflicting pain and injury on individuals and impacting ecosystems, suggests that authorities have, implicitly, or even explicitly, normalised these consequences as an inherent part of its use, raising serious ethical and humanitarian concerns.

313 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

314 Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Trapped Between Borders; MSF. Medical Intervention. Unpublished dataset, restricted access.

315 In 2024, Fundacja Niech Żyją! Published a report on the impact of wildlife of the concertina. It documents the impact of razor-wire (concertina) border barriers on wildlife along the Polish–Belarusian and Polish–Russian borders, based on monitoring conducted from November 2023 to January 2024 plus public-information requests to ministries, the Border Guard, State Forests, and hunting clubs covering September 2021 onward. The report describes how entangled animals suffer prolonged, often fatal injury as razor blades dig deeper into the body with each struggle to escape; the report's authors note this same mechanism of injury extends to migrants attempting to cross the barrier. Fundacja Niech Żyją!, *Concertina zabija: Raport 2023–2024* [Concertina Kills: Report 2023–2024], prepared in cooperation with Sieć Obywatelska Watchdog Polska (Citizens' Network Watchdog Poland), Fundacja Lex Nova, Stowarzyszenie Dzika Inicjatywa, Fundacja Albatros, and Stowarzyszenie Nasz Bóbr (Poland, January 20, 2024), https://niechzyja.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Concertina_raport.pdf.

Containment

While pushbacks, pushforwards, and the violence through which they are enforced contain and immobilise people in a strip of land, the completion of the 5.5-metre-high border fence intensified the scope, scale, and the temporality of that containment. The fence, concertina wire, patrol roads, surveillance systems, and controlled gates slow, interrupt, and sometimes block migrants' crossings. People may spend hours trying to climb, cut, dig under, bypass, or wait for an opportunity to pass the barrier. Those who cannot cross remain stranded between Belarus's Sistema infrastructure and Poland's border infrastructure, sometimes after already having spent days in the borderland.



Figure 3.21. A group of migrants remains stranded behind a border fence near the village of Topilo, as a Polish law enforcement actor stands guard. Photograph by Maciej Moskwa, 2024.

Between 2023 and 2025, MSF received 64 medical alerts concerning people stranded directly in the eastern side of the fence (reportedly on Polish territory), representing a total of at least 123 individuals. The request for help included individuals reporting complications related to pregnancy, asthma, diabetes, and trauma cases such as suspected fractures and head injuries. Despite evidence of migrants' medical conditions, NGOs and medical volunteers have systematically been

blocked from delivering assistance to those stranded on the east side of the Polish fence. MSF reported numerous obstacles imposed by authorities in delivering assistance to people in distress on the eastern side of the Polish border fence. MSF medical personnel were often precluded from accessing patients, and were instead compelled to forms of indirect care, such as advocating "to border authorities for them to assist and ensure that individuals reach safety, as per their mandate. Despite this, only a quarter of requests to state authorities led to hospital transfers (a total of thirty-one people)."[316]

316 MSF, Trapped Between Borders.https://www.msf.org/trapped-between-borders-life-threatening-consequences-increased-militarisation-poland-belarus.

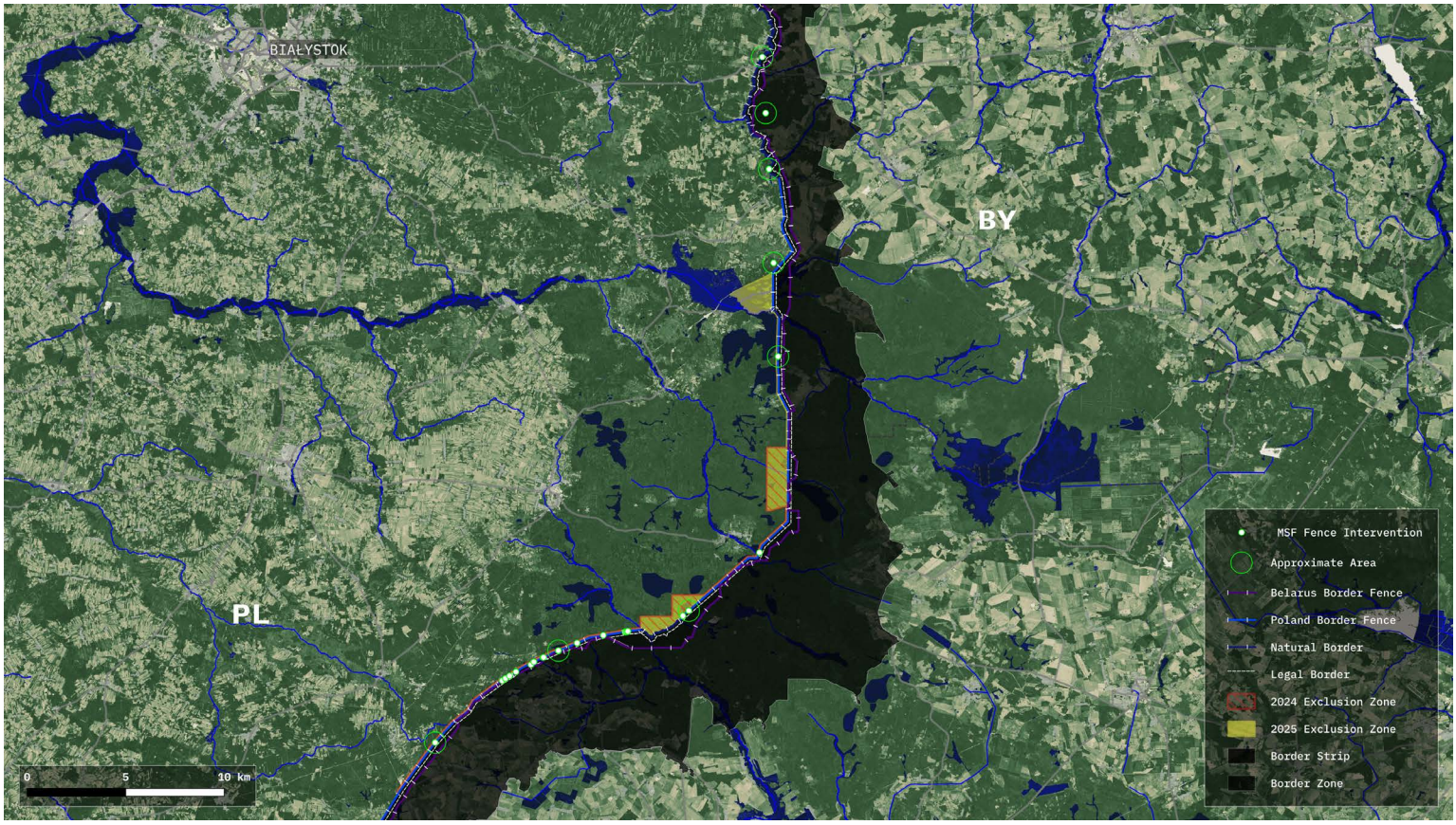


Figure 3.22. Fence-related medical distress calls recorded by MSF, March 2024–March 2025. Points indicate the reported location of each intervention: exact coordinates or border-pole locations are used where available; when the source records only a Border Guard operational area, the call is placed at a representative point on the fence within that area and should not be interpreted as an exact incident location. Because MSF's permission to access the fence was intermittent, restrictive and subject to bureaucratic obstruction, its medical teams reached the patient in only two interventions. In all remaining cases, MSF did not obtain direct access to the patient and the serious medical call was handled remotely, primarily through telephone and email communications with the Border Guard and other authorities. The figure represents calls and interventions, not necessarily unique patients. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

The filtering effect, who is left behind?

These forms of harm inflicted by border infrastructure affect migrants differently, according to demographic characteristics, including gender, age,

and (in)capacity for mobility. Images from 2021, at the beginning of the border crisis, showed large groups of families, including young children. In subsequent years, civil society actors and border guards observed changes in the composition of those attempting to cross, including a greater presence of unaccompanied adolescents and fewer families with small children.[317] During our fieldwork, one Border Guard officer stated that women and children were more likely to remain on the eastern side of the fence. MSF similarly reported that women and children accounted for 60 per cent of the people included in its medical alerts concerning those stranded on the eastern side of the barrier. These alerts included cases involving pregnancy complications, asthma, diabetes, suspected fractures, and head injuries. This figure should, however, be read with caution, since interventions were more often organised for women and small children, as they were perceived as particularly vulnerable and having a greater chance of being evacuated. In this sense, the border infrastructure operates as a filtering mechanism shaped by gender, age, and mobility. Migrants who remain stranded on the Belarusian side of the fence may then be exposed for prolonged periods to environmental conditions, as well as to violence from Belarusian authorities and smuggling networks. In this sense, the Polish infrastructure functions as a gendered mechanism of exclusion.

The border infrastructure therefore produces harm not only through the injuries it directly causes, but also through the time it adds to the crossing and how it obstructs access to urgent assistance. This imposed duration increases exhaustion and prolongs exposure to cold, wet clothing, hunger, dehydration, untreated injuries, and the absence of medical care.

The channelling and splintering of migrants' routes

The fence and electronic barrier do not simply limit and prevent movement; these infrastructural configurations reorganise where and when movement takes place. In autumn 2025, the research team visited one of the Border Guard stations along the Bug River, during which the officers noted that the number of attempted crossings had increased noticeably as the border fence drew closer to their sector. According to them, the shifting infrastructure had pushed migrants towards the river, transforming it into an increasingly dangerous passage. This is reflected in the number of recorded migrant deaths – to which we will return to in the next chapter – when eleven documented deaths along the Bug were recorded in 2025 alone, while only one migrant has been recorded to have drowned in previous years.[318]

317 We Are Monitoring, *Children and Unaccompanied Children at the Polish-Belarusian Border, January–May 2025* (Warsaw: We Are Monitoring, 2025), https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/WAM-report-children-and-unaccompanied-children.pdf.

318 In the next chapter we will discuss in more detail death and disappearances at the border. See also Border Death Monitoring Group (BDMG), List of Border Deaths, Stowarzyszenie We Are Monitoring, last updated June 4, 2026, accessed June 23, 2026, https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/en/list-of-the-deceased/.

The evolving border surveillance infrastructure, including a 5.5-metre-high physical barrier, finalised in June 2022, with its different layers of fortification; an electronic barrier along the fence completed in summer 2023; and riverine surveillance systems, implemented in 2025, which we discussed in detail in the previous chapter, has splintered migrants' trajectories across the Poland–Belarus border. Relatedly, since summer 2023, when the electronic barrier became operational, the strategies of both migrants and state authorities shifted significantly. The barrier gave authorities precise knowledge of where and how many migrants had crossed, enabling a more targeted and coordinated response. Humanitarian actors told us that they observed smaller groups, or that travel groups mentioned having lost people along the way.[319] These actors told us that migrants began dispersing immediately after crossing, breaking into smaller groups to reduce visibility and improve their chances of continuing the journey – a trend consistent with WAM data, in which the median recorded group size fell from three people in 2023 to one in 2025.[320] Yet this dispersal carries its own risks. Smaller groups and individuals moving alone are more likely to lack phones, water, food, or the basic resources needed to navigate or call for help. The consequence is a forest scattered with people who are isolated, disoriented, and increasingly beyond the reach of any solidarity network – lost, with limited means to signal distress and diminishing chances of assistance when it is most needed.

319 Teramiski School. "Mapping Crisification 3." Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025.

320 We Are Monitoring. Unpublished dataset, restricted access.

The redistribution of distress towards riverine border sectors

To examine how this spatial redistribution unfolded over time, and to assess the extent to which it can be attributed to the evolution of the fence, we focus here on two riverine sectors where the border infrastructure and the terrain intersect in particularly dangerous ways: the Bug River sector and the Świsłocz River sector. These two locations were selected for our analysis, first, because a commander of the Border Guard reported an increase in observed border crossings along the Bug River since the finalisation of border infrastructure along the green border in 2022, and the electronic barrier in 2025. Second, the Świsłocz River was selected due to its riverine section within the Podlaskie Border Guard division that was not fenced off by the 5.5-metre-high fence, and which has witnessed an increase in humanitarian interventions since 2024. The construction of the electronic barrier along this section in 2025 further supports its relevance to our analysis.

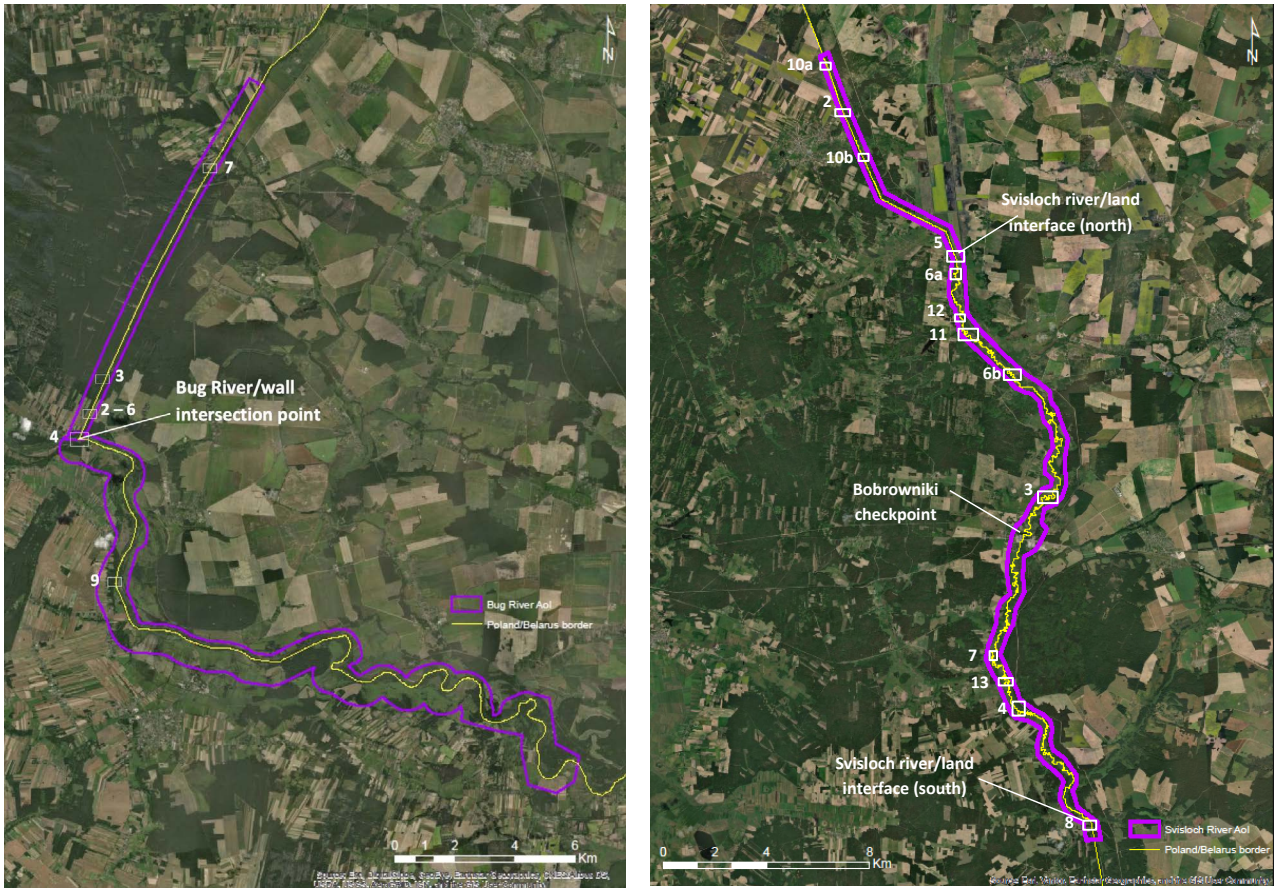


Figure 3.23. Satellite imagery of the river sections where the spatio-temporal analysis of infrastructure was conducted, in collaboration with Rosanna Padeletti. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

For each selected area, we first employed different methods to analyse the material evolution of border infrastructure. We then analysed geocoded intervention points between 2021 and 2025 along the two river zones. For each zone, we calculated the shortest distance between intervention points and the border. We also examined the yearly clustering of points using DBSCAN and standard deviational ellipses. This allowed us to ask not only whether more calls occurred in riverine sectors, but also whether distress became more concentrated, more dispersed, or more fragmented over time. This analysis demonstrates that border infrastructure and enforcement practices redirect migrants towards narrower, more fragmented, and often more hazardous passage points, which we will discuss in the following section. This environment–infrastructure interface is an important factor in the evolution of the spatial and temporal dimensions of border violence.

The Bug River physical barrier interface

To track the construction of border infrastructure near the Bug River, we analysed construction contracts, press releases, and publicly available visual material shared by news agencies, journalists, vloggers, or state authorities, to determine the fence's construction timeline. We then corroborated our understanding of the evolution of the fence with an

analysis of satellite images between 2020 and 2025.[321] The Bug River sector shows a distinct but complementary evolution over the period analysed. To trace this evolution spatially, we examined geocoded humanitarian intervention points recorded between 2021 and 2025 within the Bug River sector. The number of distress calls in this area slowly increased from 2021 to 2023, before decreasing slightly in 2024 and became significant again in 2025. This indicates that the Bug sector was already a significant zone of distress in 2023 and became significant again in 2025.

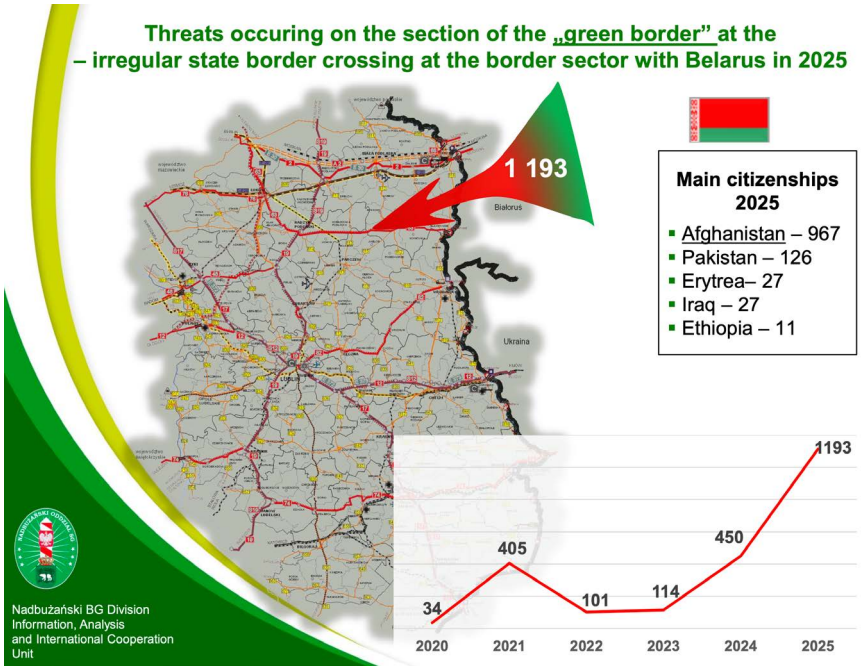
322 Border guards that the research team interviewed explained that "threats" is the category they refer to describe migrants approaching the borderline, even in cases, when there was no attempted crossings of the Polish-Belarus border.



Figure 3.24. Photograph of the electronic barrier along the Bug River. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, March 2025.

321 Construction began at the intersection with the Bug River. By March 1, 2022, 109 meters of the wall were completed, with 2.5 km still under construction. By April 14, 2022, 5 km of the wall had been completed, and 1.8 km were still being built. By August 2, 2022, the wall was fully completed in this area (13 km). During the construction, the previous border infrastructure, including the three-layered fence and sheds, was demolished, while the new structure was erected.

Data from the Nadbużański Border Guard Unit, shown below, provides useful context for this pattern. It shows peaks in state-recorded "threats"[322] in 2021 and again in 2025. This data does not measure the same phenomenon as distress calls: Border Guard data records attempted crossings or detections at the sector level, while distress-call data compiled by WAM records moments in which people reached out to civil society actors in situations of distress. The two datasets should therefore be read together rather than treated as equivalent. The Border Guard data establishes the sector-level relevance of the Bug as a site of attempted crossings, while the WAM data shows how this movement translated into humanitarian distress on the ground.



323 Nadbużański Regional Border Guard Unit. Delegation visit, presentation, and interview by Research Team. Chełm, 17 October 2025.

Figure 3.25. Screenshot of the PowerPoint presentation from the Nadbużański Border Guard division, October 2025..[323]

The distance analysis shows a gradual contraction of documented distress towards the border until 2024. The median distance fell from approximately 5.0 kilometres in 2021 to 4.5 kilometres in 2022, 2.5 kilometres in 2023 and 1.8 kilometres in 2024. In 2025, the median increased again to approximately 3.9 kilometres. The Bug sector therefore does not follow a simple linear movement towards the border, but instead shows contraction followed by renewed spatial dispersion.

This is confirmed by the clustering analysis seen in figure 3.23. In 2023, despite the high number of intervention points, these points were organised into one dominant cluster, suggesting a relatively concentrated zone of distress. In 2024, the number of points decreased, but the number of clusters increased. This indicates fragmentation: distress was not concentrated in one single location but distributed across several smaller clusters. In 2025, the number of points increased again, while the number of clusters remained multiple, suggesting continued route splintering around the river/barrier interface. Read together, the Border Guard data and the humanitarian intervention data show different dimensions of activity in the Bug sector.

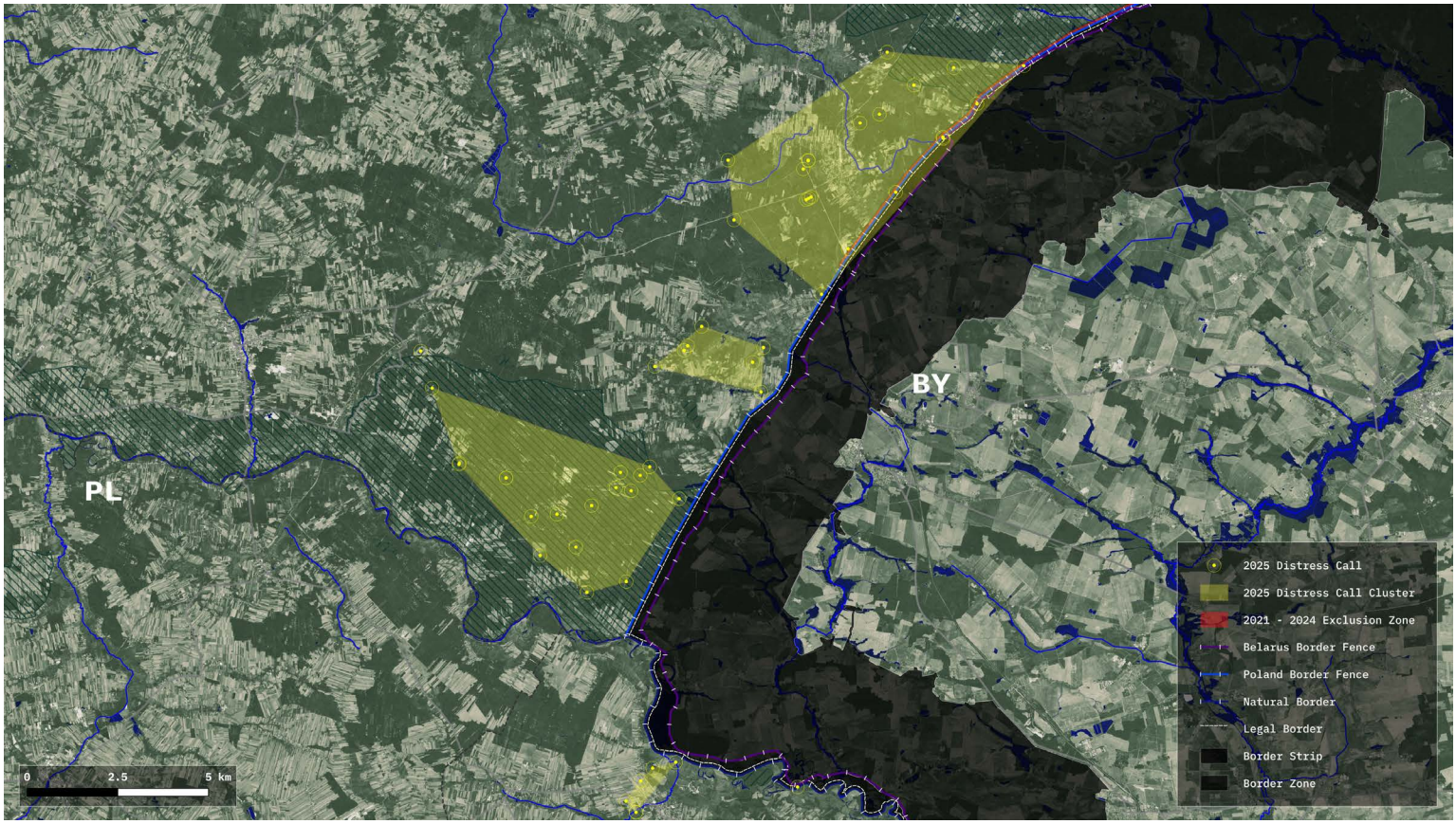


Figure 3.26. Temporal evolution of distress-call clustering along the Bug River, 2023–2025. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

The Border Guard data indicates renewed activity in 2025, while the intervention data shows how distress was distributed spatially: first concentrated near the border infrastructure, then dispersed across several points around the river–barrier interface. The Bug sector therefore shows that border infrastructure does not simply prevent crossings but redirects movement into fragmented and dangerous riverine areas. Where the physical barrier meets the river, the border does not end; it changes form, with the river becoming part of the border apparatus and producing its own harmful, and potentially lethal, effects.

Świsłocz River

The Świsłocz River forms a key section of the Poland–Belarus border within the Podlaskie region. Unlike the land sections, fortified with a 5.5-metre-high steel barrier that was completed in 2022, this riverine stretch has remained without a physical wall. Nonetheless, the river border has been transformed through several infrastructural interventions. In 2022, the Polish authorities carved a path alongside the river, and in 2024, several control points were established, and concertina was laid, as seen in the images above. In 2025, border guards announced that they finalised the electronic barrier along the Świsłocz river.



Figure 3.27. Photograph of the electronic barrier and concertina fence along the Świsłocz River. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, March 2025.

Considering geocoded intervention points between 2021 and 2025 in relation to this river border, the Świsłocz River zone shows one of the clearest patterns of concentration of distress calls. The yearly distribution is, however, uneven: only a few distress calls per year were recorded until 2023, followed by a sharp increase in 2024. In other words, the Świsłocz sector became a particularly significant area of crossing and distress after 2024. This shift is also visible in the distance analysis. In 2021, the median distance of intervention points in this sector from the border line was approximately 14.6 kilometres. By 2022 and 2023, this had fallen to around 3–4 kilometres. In 2024, the median distance dropped further to approximately 1.9 kilometres, remaining close to the border in 2025 at around 2.3 kilometres. This contraction may also reflect a change in migrants' strategies: between March 2024 and March 2025, people seeking assistance to lodge an application for international protection often contacted civil society actors shortly after crossing, usually within approximately two kilometres of the border, whereas those seeking only humanitarian assistance were more likely to call from farther inland. The Świsłocz zone therefore does not only show more calls over time; it shows a contraction of documented distress towards the border infrastructure and riverine frontier, shaped both by border enforcement and by changing forms of assistance sought by migrants.

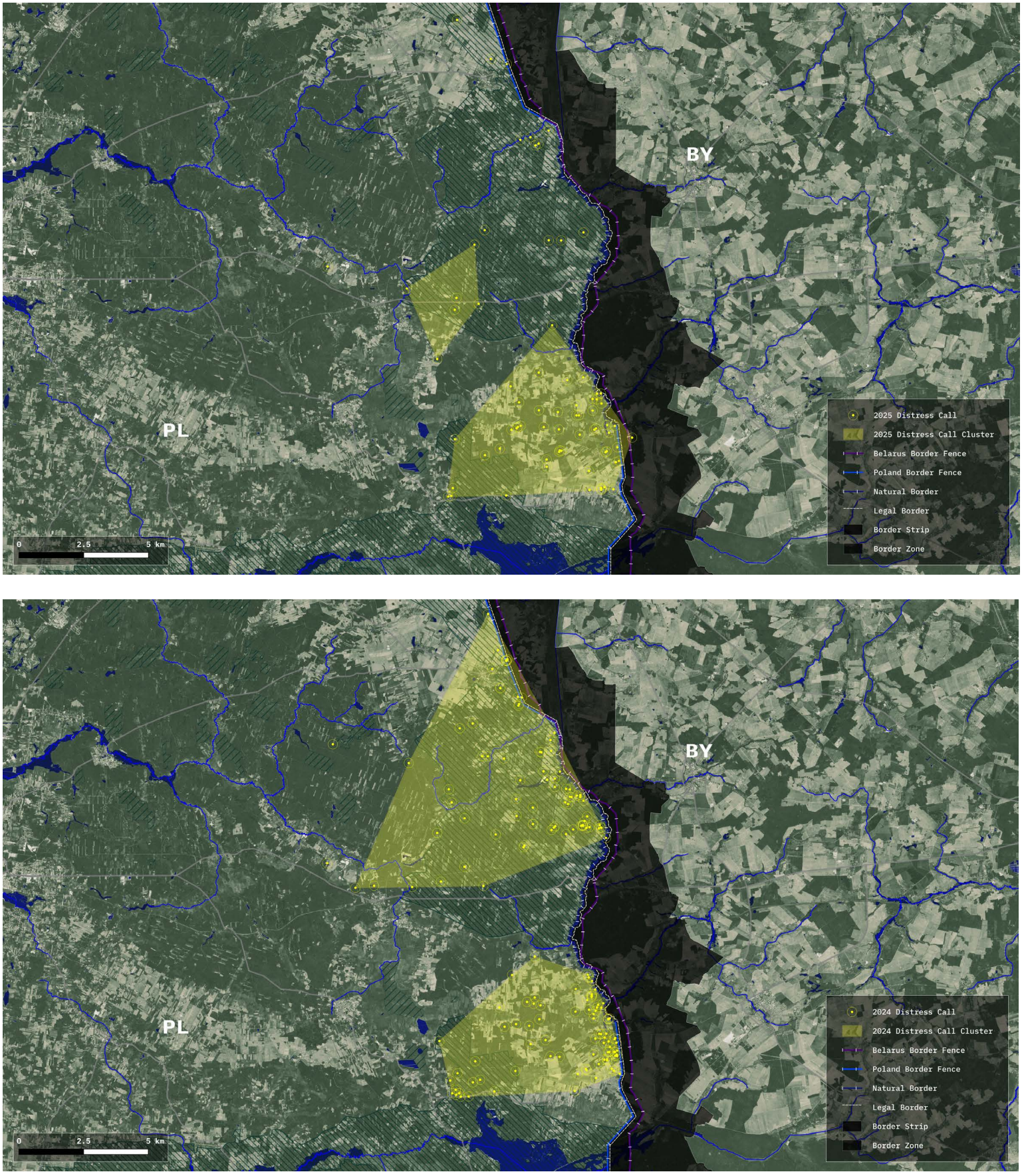


Figure 3.28. Temporal evolution of distress-call clustering along the Świsłocz River, 2024–2025. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

The clustering analysis reinforces this interpretation. In 2024, the high number of points formed a small number of dense clusters, suggesting recurrent distress around specific locations. In 2025, the number of points decreased, but the number of clusters increased, indicating partial re-fragmentation. This suggests that the Świsłocz River sector may have become both a concentrated zone of distress and a space of renewed route splintering. Here, migrants are not simply moving "through" the river zone; they are being channelled, blocked, dispersed, and forced to seek assistance from several nearby but distinct locations.

The analysis of the Bug and Świsłocz border rivers has shown how border infrastructure contributes to the spatial redistribution of crossings at specific barrier interfaces. By blocking some passages and changing trajectories of migrant's movements, the fence and associated surveillance systems push migrants towards more hazardous routes, including river sections, wetlands, and forested corridors. In these locations, the landscape itself becomes enrolled into the border regime: the river does not stand outside the infrastructure, but functions as part of it, shaping the terrain through which movement is delayed, redirected, and made more dangerous. These cases therefore show an infrastructural contribution to route splintering, but they do not explain the full spatial transformation of migrant trajectories across the borderland. Changes in alert distances, yearly clustering, and wider route fragmentation also reflect law enforcement practices, pushbacks, surveillance, environmental terrain, humanitarian access, and migrants' own adaptive strategies, which we have partially discussed in this chapter. The broader geostatistical analysis of these combined spatial-temporal effects is therefore developed in the next section, where the entanglement between bordering practices, infrastructures, and environmental harm can be analysed together.

Environmental violence

Throughout this chapter, we have already alluded several times to different ways in which the operations of border guards or the infrastructure of the fence increase the exposure of migrants to the environment, in ways that lead to different forms of harm, including death. Bashir described how, in order to avoid detection by authorities, he and others moved carefully and deliberately through the forest, staying off paths, altering their routes, and remaining hidden for extended periods. Testimonies we analysed within the framework of this investigation,[324] interviews we

324 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.
Anonymous Humanitarian Actor active in Belarus. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2023.

conducted with humanitarian actors,[325] and the geostatistical analysis of distress calls suggest that migrants increasingly move away from main roads or hiking trails and navigate the dense forest by moving alongside animal tracks or pushing through dense vegetation. The forest itself becomes a source of threat: its density, darkness, and unfamiliarity, navigated at night, where the sounds of animals – wolves, elk, and bison – add a layer of fear that is difficult to separate from the fear of detection and capture. Likewise, the section above demonstrated how the border infrastructure pushes migrants to attempt the crossing through dangerous rivers.

This displacement of risk onto such terrain as forest, wetlands, and rivers, along with darkness points to a form of violence that is, at first glance, neither enacted by a border guard nor recorded in an incident report, but is structured into the landscape itself. Exposure to cold, heat, and humidity, alongside the topography of dense forests, marshes, wetlands, and rivers; pathogens causing wound infection; or the consumption of contaminated water are the modalities through which environmental harm is inflicted. What emerges here are mechanisms in which state policies, infrastructures, and practices play a key role, but in which harm is inflicted through the environment – what we thus refer to as *environmentally mediated violence*. It is to the analysis of this environmentally mediated infliction of injury and harm that we now turn.[326]

In this section, we first describe several ways in which border control policies, practices, and infrastructure transform environmental conditions into sources of harm for migrants across the Polish–Belarusian borderland, including hypothermia, orthopaedic injuries, and pathogenic infections. We analyse these as forms of topographic, liquid, and meteorological violence. Second, because environmental violence is shaped by the spatial and temporal effects of border control on migrants' trajectories, we examine these effects in greater detail through geostatistical analysis. Third, this analysis allows us to model how they influence migrants' exposure to one particular form of environmentally mediated harm: cold.

Topographic violence

The landscape of marshes, wetlands, and dense forest makes the journeys of people slower and longer, exhausting them. The border's architecture and the practices of authorities have been instrumental in channelling migrants into remote, hazardous terrain, deeper into the forest. Once in distress, they are often left without assistance, due to

325 Teramiski School. "Mapping Crisification 3." Research Team. Podlaskie, March 2025.

326 The role of different environments and their specific geophysical characteristics in harmful bordering practices has been analysed in a range of contexts. See, for example, C. Heller and L. Pezzani, "Forensic Oceanography: Tracing Violence Within and Against the Mediterranean Frontier's Aesthetic Regime," in *Moving Images: Mediating Migration as Crisis*, ed. Krista Lynes, Tyler Morgenstern, and Ian Alan Paul (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020), 95–126; P. Teunissen, "Infrastructures, Riverscapes, and the Governance of Mobility: The Evros/Meriç River and the Infrastructuring of Nature," *Antipode* 57, no. 2 (2025): 691-713.

the difficulty of monitoring these areas, poor mobile phone coverage, the indifference of state authorities, and the exclusion of civil society actors from restricted zones that would otherwise enable the delivery of humanitarian aid. Here, the dense canopies of the forest offer shelter to migrants, but this density also hides the violence inflicted on migrants, and the traces left behind, and most likely interferes with connectivity to mobile phone networks. Furthermore, dense forests produce falls, fractures, disorientation, and exhaustion, where the terrain slows movement, prolongs exposure, and increases attrition.

327 See Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Trapped Between Borders.

Liquid violence

During their journeys, migrants must navigate through wetlands, rivers, and swamps, where people have drowned or disappeared (a topic we will return to in Chapter Four). But liquid violence does not only kill; it injures those who come into contact with it. Immersion in cold water can cause not only hypothermia but also trench foot, where prolonged exposure to moisture damages nerves and tissue. Beyond cold, the water itself is a source of harm. Drinking from rivers or stagnant pools exposes migrants to waterborne pathogens, causing infections, parasites, and vomiting, which could, potentially, without medical intervention, lead to death.[327] Bashir had no access to clean drinking water. As he described, "We didn't have water anymore, we ran out of water. So, going there, we would fill up on water. [..] there was a lot of dirt in it, even animals, like worms or something, ok? The colour of water was like urine, excuse me, it was like urine." Another respondent, described to WAM how he and his group "[..] stayed for three days without food and clean water. We were waiting for those people, they would come from the Belarusian border, they were new, they were trying to cross the border. They had water and food, we would take some of, they were giving us some of that."



Figure 3.29. A migrant sits on the ground, their foot and sock visibly soaked, a sign of prolonged exposure to cold, dampness, and moisture during the journey. Conditions like these can lead to trench foot, a painful condition resulting from hours or days of such exposure, cases of which have been documented by MSF at the Poland–Belarus border. Photograph by Małgorzata Klemens, 2021.

Environment-related injuries

Medical data from MSF has shown injuries related to the environmental conditions that have been intensified by the infrastructure of control and bordering practices. As seen in the graphs below, more than half of MSF patients suffered frostbite, hypothermia, or other cold-related injuries after spending weeks stranded without shelter, food, or water. This illustrates the pervasive nature of violence enacted through the environment.

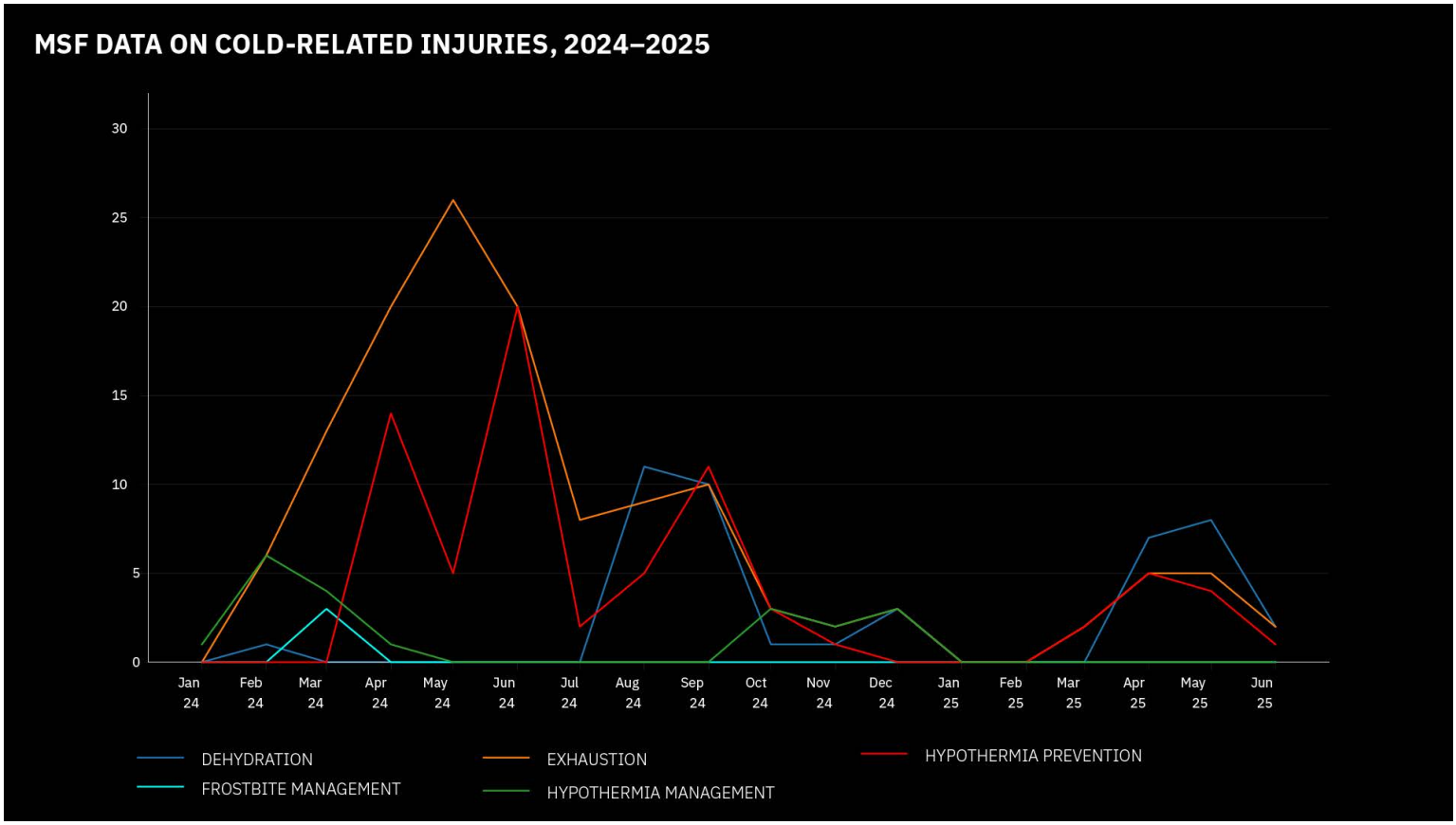


Figure 3.30. MSF data on cold-related injuries, 2024–2025. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

Spatial and temporal border effects and environmental exposure

The different forms of environmentally mediated harm experienced by migrants across the Poland–Belarus border are not produced by the environment alone and have nothing "natural" about them. Rather, as we have shown throughout the previous sections, they are shaped by the indirect effects of state policy, practice, and infrastructure on migrants' trajectories. First, they shape the *spatiality* of migrants' trajectories across the borderland, pushing them to more dangerous areas; second, they shape the *temporality* of these crossings, exposing migrants to harsh environments for longer. Both these spatial and temporal effects, of law enforcement agents and infrastructure, play an essential role in making the environmental elements, including meteorology and topography, harmful and even lethal for migrants.

This section analyses the spatial and temporal effects produced by the interaction of law enforcement, infrastructure, and the environment. Where effects can be attributed more specifically to one actor or entity, we identify them as such: law enforcement produces repeated interruption, forced im/mobility, and prolonged exposure; infrastructure slows down, filters, contains, and channels migrants' movements. The broader transformation of migrant trajectories, however, cannot be explained by either law enforcement or infrastructure alone. It emerges from their

interaction with surveillance systems, exclusion zones, humanitarian access, migrants' adaptive strategies, and the environmental characteristics of the landscape itself.

To understand this interaction, we analysed, first, the spatiality of exposure experienced by migrants and, second, the temporality of this exposure, geostatistically, for which we relied on geocoded data for humanitarian intervention points between 2021 and 2025. We read these as traces of documented distress: points at which people were stranded, injured, lost, immobilised, or forced to seek external support. The analysis also draws on five years of monthly meteorological data,[328] used to establish a baseline understanding of environmental conditions across the borderland. We then, in collaboration with Sam Chambers, modelled how different border-control interventions and scenarios extend the time migrants spend in these environments, thereby intensifying their exposure to meteorological and topographical harm.

328 D. Zanaga, R. Van De Kerchove, W. De Keersmaecker, N. Souverijns, C. Brockmann, R. Quast, J. Wevers, A. Grosu, A. Paccini, O. Cartus, M. Santoro, S. Fritz, S. Bontemps, P. Defourny, and O. Arino, *ESA WorldCover 10 m 2020 Product and Project Documentation* (ESA WorldCover project, 2021); European Space Agency, *Copernicus Digital Elevation Model (COP-DEM) Product Handbook*, Issue 5.0 (Copernicus Programme / ESA, 2022); European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts, "ERA5-Land Hourly Data from 1950 to Present," Copernicus Climate Data Store, n.d.; J. Muñoz-Sabater, E. Dutra, A. Agustí-Panareda, C. Albergel, G. Arduini, G. Balsamo, S. Boussetta, M. Choulga, S. Harrigan, H. Hersbach, B. Martens, D. G. Miralles, M. Piles, N. J. Rodríguez-Fernández, E. Zsoter, C. Buontempo, and J.-N. Thépaut, "ERA5-Land: A State-of-the-Art Global Reanalysis Dataset for Land Applications," *Earth System Science Data* 13 (2021): 4349–4383.

329 We Are Monitoring. Testimony Database. Unpublished dataset, restricted access, 2022–2025.

Spatiality of exposure

In the previous section, we showed how border infrastructure contributes to the splintering of routes at specific barrier interfaces. This spatial redistribution, however, cannot be attributed to infrastructure alone. It is also shaped by the practices of Belarusian and Polish authorities, by the threat of detection and violence, by the destruction of phones, by the obstruction of humanitarian assistance, and by migrants' own attempts to avoid capture and survive. As Bashir's experience showed, moving through the forest to avoid detection is not incidental to the crossing, but a central condition under which it takes place. This pattern recurs across testimonies collected by WAM, in which migrants describe leaving paths, avoiding roads, hiding for long periods, and navigating through dense vegetation, wetlands, and riverine terrain.[329]

To analyse this spatial redistribution, we examined distress-call points recorded between 2021 and 2025. For each alert, we calculated the shortest distance to the legal Poland–Belarus border and examined the changing morphology of the alert field through yearly DBSCAN clustering. Median distance from the legal border was approximately 6.4 kilometres in 2021, 5.9 kilometres in 2022, 7.5 kilometres in 2023, 4.7 kilometres in 2024 and 4.5 kilometres in 2025. The annual series therefore does not show a simple progressive movement towards the border. Rather, alerts remained distributed across a relatively broad borderland through 2023 before contracting markedly in 2024. At the annual level, the median

remained broadly similar in 2025. This contraction coincided with a period in which a large proportion of people contacting civil society actors were seeking support to apply for asylum in Poland and therefore often called shortly after crossing, while still close to the border.[330] This shift may partly reflect the suspension of access to asylum procedures from March 2025, after which people were less able to remain near the border and request assistance with an application. The pattern therefore suggests not a simple linear movement towards or away from the border, but a partial re-fragmentation of routes and distress locations shaped by changing access to asylum.

330 We've discussed this in the pushback section of this chapter.

Year	Median distance
2021	6.4 km
2022	5.9 km
2023	7.5 km
2024	4.7 km
2025	4.5 km

Table 3.3. Annual median distance of cartographiable distress-call points from the legal Poland–Belarus border, 2021–2025. The figure shows a relatively broad distribution through 2023, followed by a contraction towards the border in 2024 and a broadly similar annual median in 2025.

transformation. The number of DBSCAN clusters changed from nine in 2021 to six in 2022, five in 2023 and six in 2024, before rising sharply to eleven in 2025. In 2024, approximately 88 per cent of clustered points belonged to the largest cluster; in 2025, the largest cluster contained only around 37 per cent. The principal transformation in 2025 is therefore not an annual movement farther away from the border, but a pronounced fragmentation of documented distress across a larger number of spatially distinct concentrations. Read together, the distance, clustering and ellipse analyses indicate processes of contraction, re-clustering and splintering rather than a single linear spatial trend.

The monthly distance analysis reveals a further temporal shift that annual medians obscure. During the first months of 2025, documented distress remained concentrated very close to the border, with a median distance of approximately 0.8 kilometres in March. From April onwards, distances increased sharply: approximately 4.0 kilometres in April, 7.5 kilometres in May, and around 7.7 kilometres by September. January and February contain relatively few observations and should be interpreted cautiously.

This post-March redistribution is temporally consistent with changes in access to asylum procedures, but the spatial data alone cannot establish that policy change as its cause. Changes in crossing sectors, assistance sought, humanitarian access and migrants' adaptive strategies may also contribute to the observed pattern.

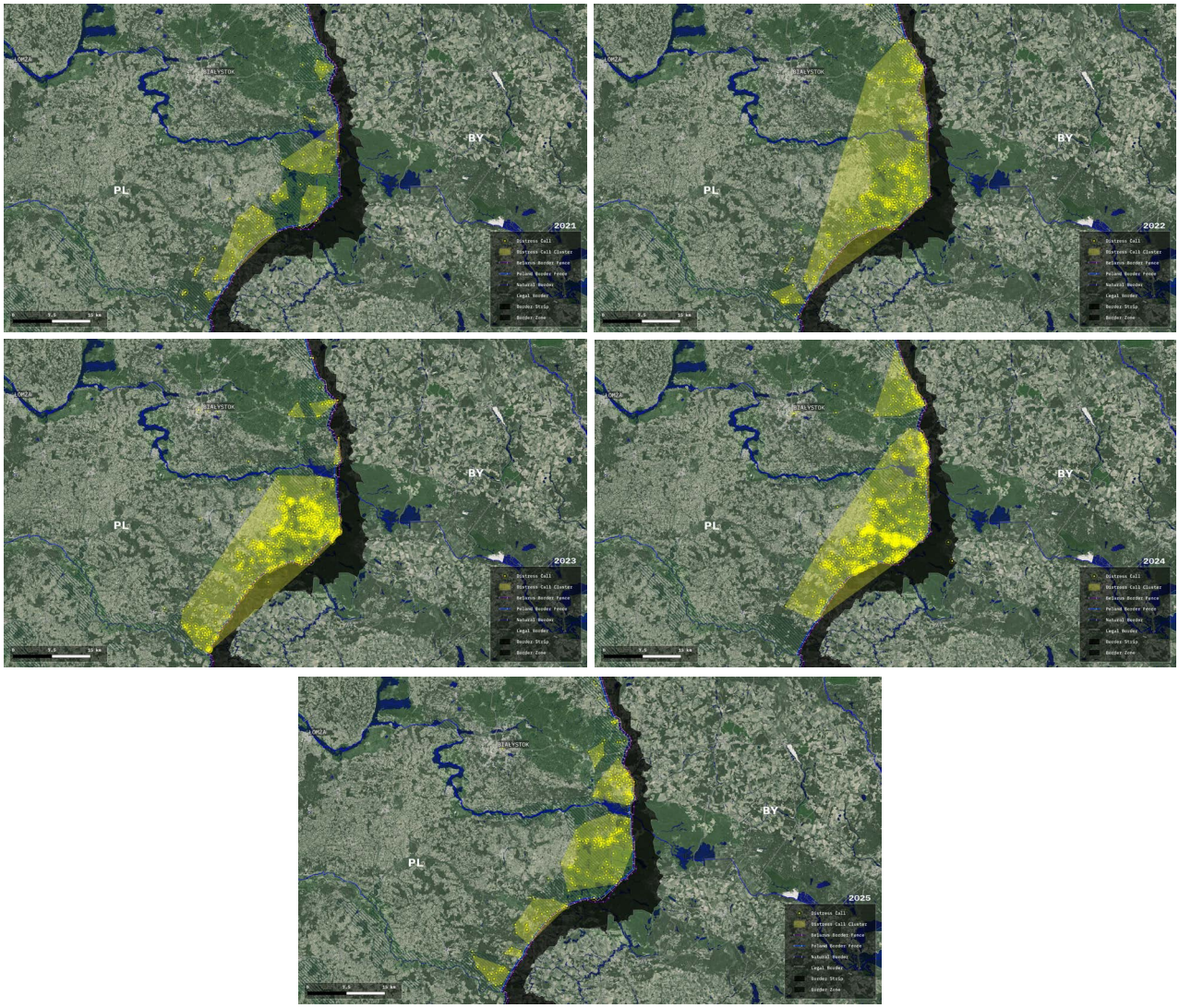


Figure 3.31. Yearly distribution of distress-call points along the Poland–Belarus border, shown with DBSCAN clusters for 2021–2025. Each panel shows the spatial distribution of recorded distress calls for a given year, with clusters indicating recurrent concentrations of documented distress. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

The resulting map is one of the effects of bordering on migrants' precarious mobility. It shows how infrastructure, enforcement practices, terrain, and humanitarian access redistribute distress across the forest. Distance from the border should, however, not be interpreted as a simple measure of danger or safety. A person located close to the fence may

still be exposed for hours or days if they are trapped between structures, repeatedly pushed back, unable to cross, unable to call, or unreachable by humanitarian actors. Conversely, alerts farther from the border may indicate evasive movement through forests, wetlands, or riverbanks, where avoiding detection produces longer and more dangerous trajectories. The spatiality of exposure is therefore not only about where migrants are located, but about how the border regime distributes vulnerability across terrain.

There are methodological limits to this analysis. Alert points record situations in which contact with civil society actors was possible; they do not capture those who could not call, who lost network connection, whose phones were destroyed, or who disappeared without being recorded. Some coordinates are also repeated, meaning that clusters may partly reflect recurrent reporting from known intervention sites. For this reason, the clustering analysis should not be read as a full map of all crossings, but as a spatial index of documented distress. Even with these limitations, the relation between the spatial patterns of migrants' crossings and changing state policies, infrastructure, and practices over time is significant: the morphology of alerts changes as the border regime changes.

Temporality of exposure

The second dimension through which environmental harm is mediated is time. As we have shown throughout this chapter, repeated cycles of forced im/mobility expose migrants to prolonged and repeated periods in the forest and other hazardous environments. Time, in this context, is not a neutral or incidental factor. It structures harm. Migrants are made to move, stop, hide, return, wait, recover, and attempt the crossing again. Each interruption adds time; each additional hour can intensify exhaustion, cold stress, dehydration, wound infection, hunger, fear, and psychological distress.

This temporal dimension is central to understanding how environmental conditions become violent. Cold, rain, wet clothing, darkness, injury, contaminated water, or the absence of food and medical care do not have the same effects after one hour as after one night, several days, or repeated cycles of pushback and re-crossing. The same forest, riverbank, or wetland can therefore become more dangerous as time accumulates. Environmental violence is produced not simply by exposure to a hostile landscape, but by the enforced duration of that exposure.



Figure 3.32. A migrant is wrapped in a thermal (emergency) blanket, near the village of Orla, which is often distributed by aid workers to prevent hypothermia after exposure to cold, wet, or otherwise harsh conditions of the borderlands. Photograph by Maciej Moskwa, 2021.

The temporal analysis therefore complements the spatial analysis. While the intervention points allow us to examine how distress is redistributed across the borderland, meteorological modelling allows us to examine how added time changes the physiological risk of being exposed to these environments. Using five years of monthly meteorological data, we established a baseline of environmental conditions across the area of interest. We then modelled different border-control scenarios to assess how delays generated by containment, pushbacks, rerouting, waiting, and obstruction of assistance extend the time migrants spend in conditions of cold, humidity, and low accessibility.

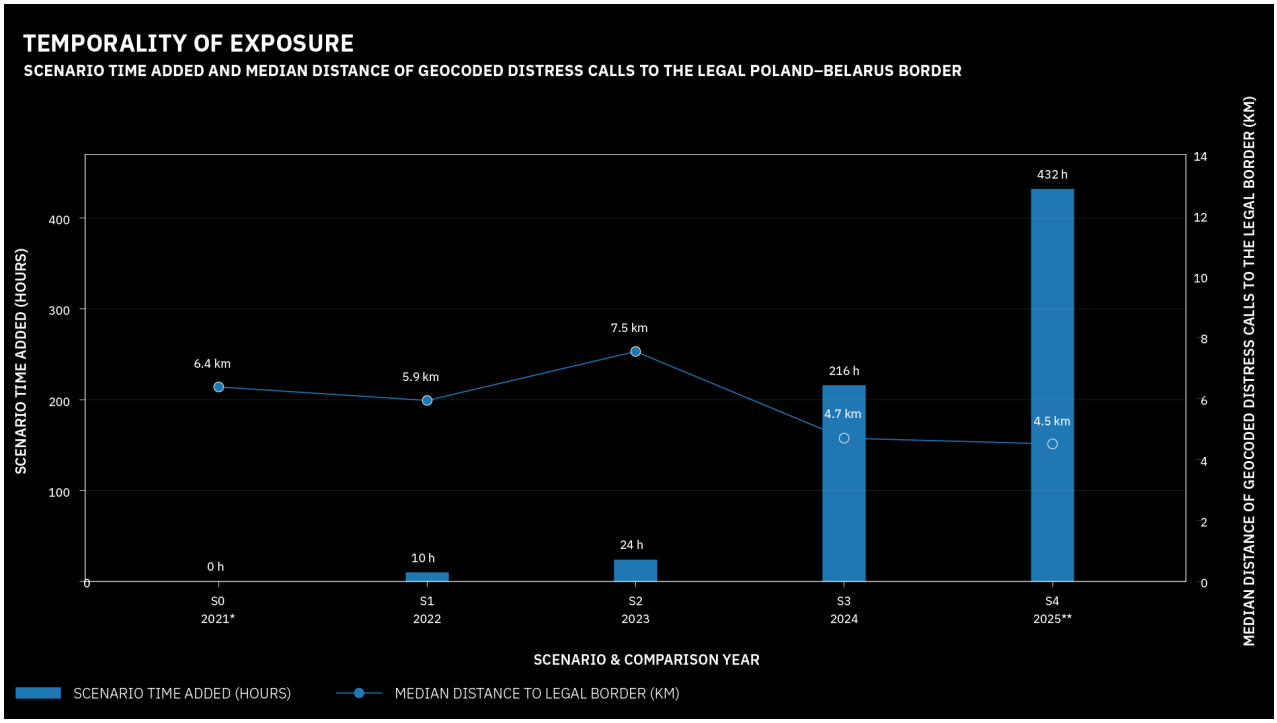


Figure 3.33. Modelled scenario time added and observed median distance of geocoded distress calls to the legal Poland–Belarus border. Bars show the additional time imposed in scenarios S0–S4; the line shows the observed annual median distance of distress calls to the border. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026..

The results of our analysis show why time must be treated as a mechanism of harm. As border practices add hours or days to a crossing through delays, rerouting, and repeated pushbacks, dangerous exposure thresholds can be reached even close to the border, despite migrants having travelled for extended periods. The border therefore becomes not only a line to cross, but a duration imposed on the body.

Having analysed the way bordering practices and infrastructures shape the shifting spatiality and temporality of migrant trajectories, we can now analyse in more detail the specific forms of environmentally mediated harm that emerge as a result. This temporal mediation is especially important for understanding meteorological harm, to which we now turn. As we will see, cold and heat do not harm migrants only because of seasonal weather conditions, but because bordering practices force people to remain in those conditions for longer than their bodies can safely endure.

The spatio-temporal production of cold exposure

Testimonies from migrants crossing the Polish–Belarusian borderlands describe prolonged exposure to cold, particularly during winter, resulting in exhaustion, hypothermia, and other forms of bodily harm. To examine this risk, we modelled two complementary indicators of cold stress across the borderland between 2021 and 2025: duration-limited exposure (DLE) and required clothing insulation (IREQ). DLE estimates how long a person wearing the assumed clothing can remain exposed before reaching the modelled cold-strain threshold. Lower DLE values therefore

indicate more rapidly dangerous conditions. IREQ estimates how much clothing insulation would be required to remain within the same threshold. Higher IREQ values indicate that warmer and more protective clothing is needed.



Figure 3.34. A migrant wrapped in an emergency blanket is supported by a humanitarian worker. Photograph by Maciej Moskwa, 2021.

February and July provide a simple contrast. In February, DLE values across much of the borderland are generally around one to two hours, meaning that under the assumed clothing and activity conditions, the cold-strain threshold may be reached rapidly. At the same time, IREQ values are high, indicating that more insulation than the assumed ordinary clothing would be required. In July, DLE values are generally near the upper end of the modelled range—around five hours—while IREQ values are much lower. Cold stress is therefore substantially less acute during summer under the same assumptions. Within each month, the values also vary spatially because temperature, wind, humidity, terrain, and land cover differ across the borderland. These estimates should not be read as universal survival times: wet clothing, exhaustion, injury, illness, immobility, and individual physical conditions may considerably shorten the time a person can endure exposure.

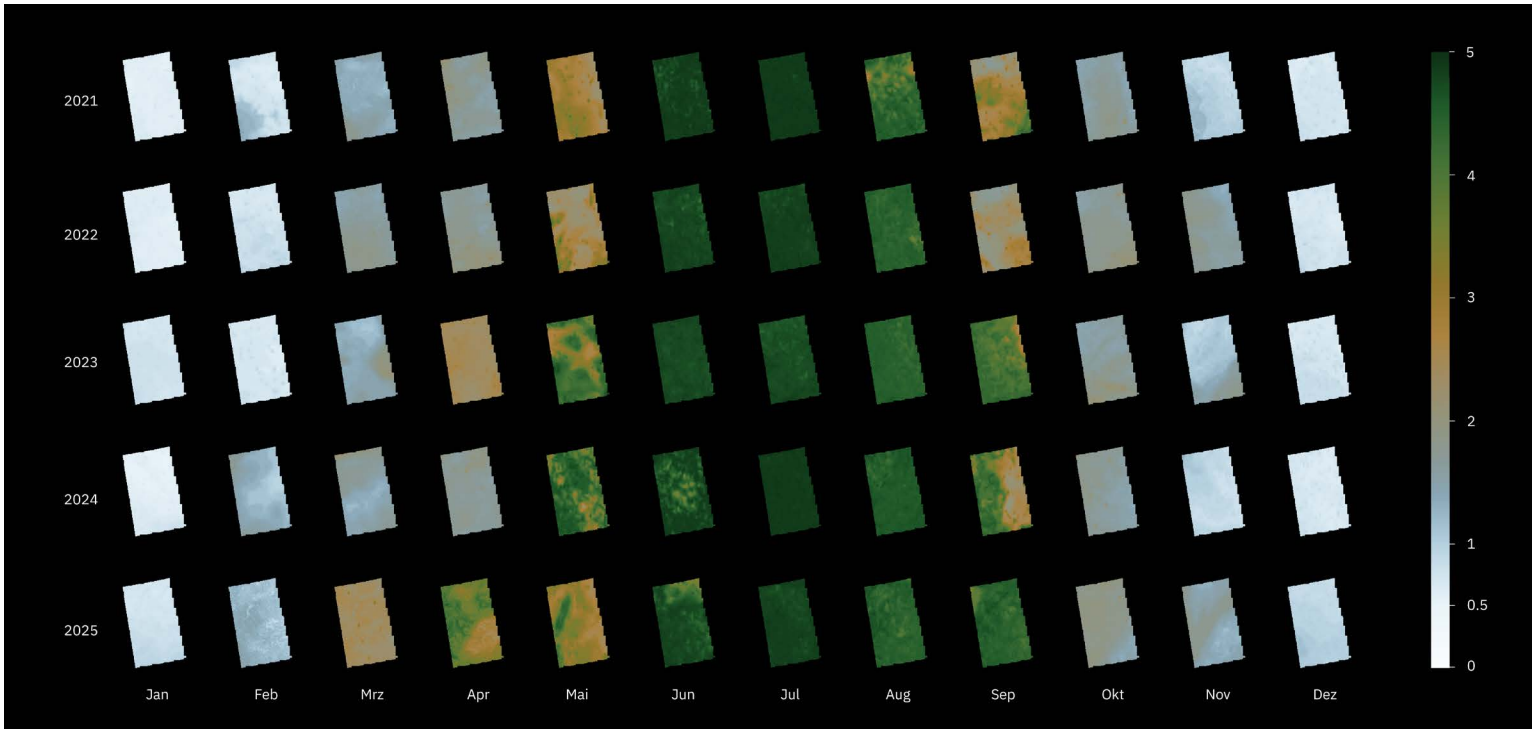


Figure 3.35. Monthly 1 km downscaled surfaces of minimum duration-limited exposure (DLE, hours), masked to the area of interest, for January 2021 through December 2025. Higher values indicate longer allowable exposure under the assumed clothing and activity conditions, whereas lower values indicate shorter allowable exposure and therefore greater cold stress. Seasonal structure and spatial heterogeneity are evident. Map by Border Forensics, 2026..

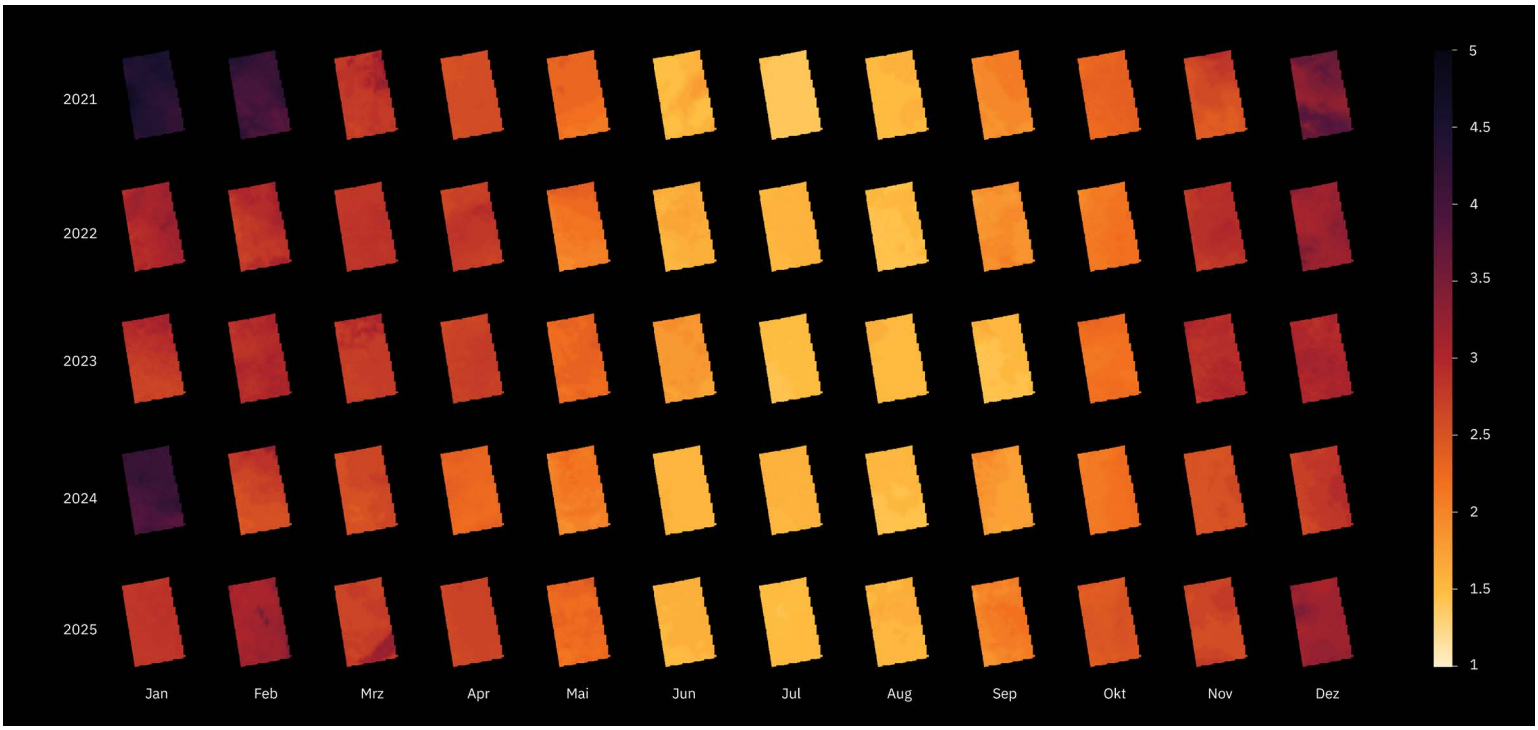


Figure 3.36. Monthly 1 km downscaled surfaces of minimum required clothing insulation (IREQ, clo), masked to the Poland area of interest, for January 2021 through December 2025. Higher values indicate greater clothing insulation required to remain within the modeled cold-strain criterion, whereas lower values indicate lower clothing demand. Seasonal structure and spatial heterogeneity are evident but not identical to DLE. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

To further examine how meteorological harm is produced through bordering practices, we used computer modelling to understand how bordering practices prolong migrants' exposure to meteorological conditions discussed above.[331] We analysed the meteorological data together with estimates of how long people spent in the forest, extracted from the WAM testimony database. We then developed six scenarios (S0–S5) representing increasingly prolonged exposure associated with the different phases of border fortification discussed in the previous chapter, from the first concertina barriers to the development of physical and electronic surveillance infrastructure.

These scenarios are not intended to assign an exact delay to each type of infrastructure that we analysed in Chapter Two. Instead, they allow us to compare what happens when bordering practices add progressively more time to a journey through obstruction, rerouting, repeated crossing attempts, pushbacks, or immobilisation.

S0 represents a pre-bordering baseline, with no additional time added to the base travel surface which correspond to the period before the crisification of 2021. S1 adds a short bordering delay of ten hours, corresponding to early post-fortification conditions of layers of concertina. S2 adds twenty-four hours, representing a conservative post-bordering delay of the 5.5-metre-high physical barrier. S3 adds 216 hours, corresponding to a significant bordering scenario associated with the electronic barrier phase. S4 adds 432 hours, corresponding to a more restrictive reinforced-barrier scenario. S5 adds 1,440 hours and functions as an extreme stress-test scenario, based on the maximum recorded time rather than a routine condition.

331 The model includes four main outputs. The first, mean_monthly_COLDENVLOSS, estimates the rate of cooling produced by environmental conditions, expressed in watts per square metre of body surface. The second, scenario_cumulative_time_h, estimates the cumulative time required to move across the landscape under a given scenario. The third, scenario_cumulative_dT_C, estimates the cumulative thermal deficit associated with that movement and exposure. The fourth, the dT_C contour layer, represents cumulative drops in temperature from the starting point as isolines across the landscape.

Scenario	Time added	Use in text
S0	0h	Baseline mobility
S1	10h	Early fortification / short delay
S2	24h	One-day obstruction
S3	216h / 9 days	Electronic barrier phase
S4	432h / 18 days	Reinforced barrier phase
S5	1440h / 60 days	Stress test only

Table 3.4. The five scenarios used for the analysis

We then overlaid these scenario surfaces with the clusters of distress calls. This shows how the location of distress and the duration of exposure interact. Some clusters lie close to the border or to possible points of assistance, but this does not necessarily mean that people are close to safety. Under the longer-delay scenarios, these same places correspond to much greater cumulative exposure because people may be immobilised, pushed back, or prevented from moving directly towards support.

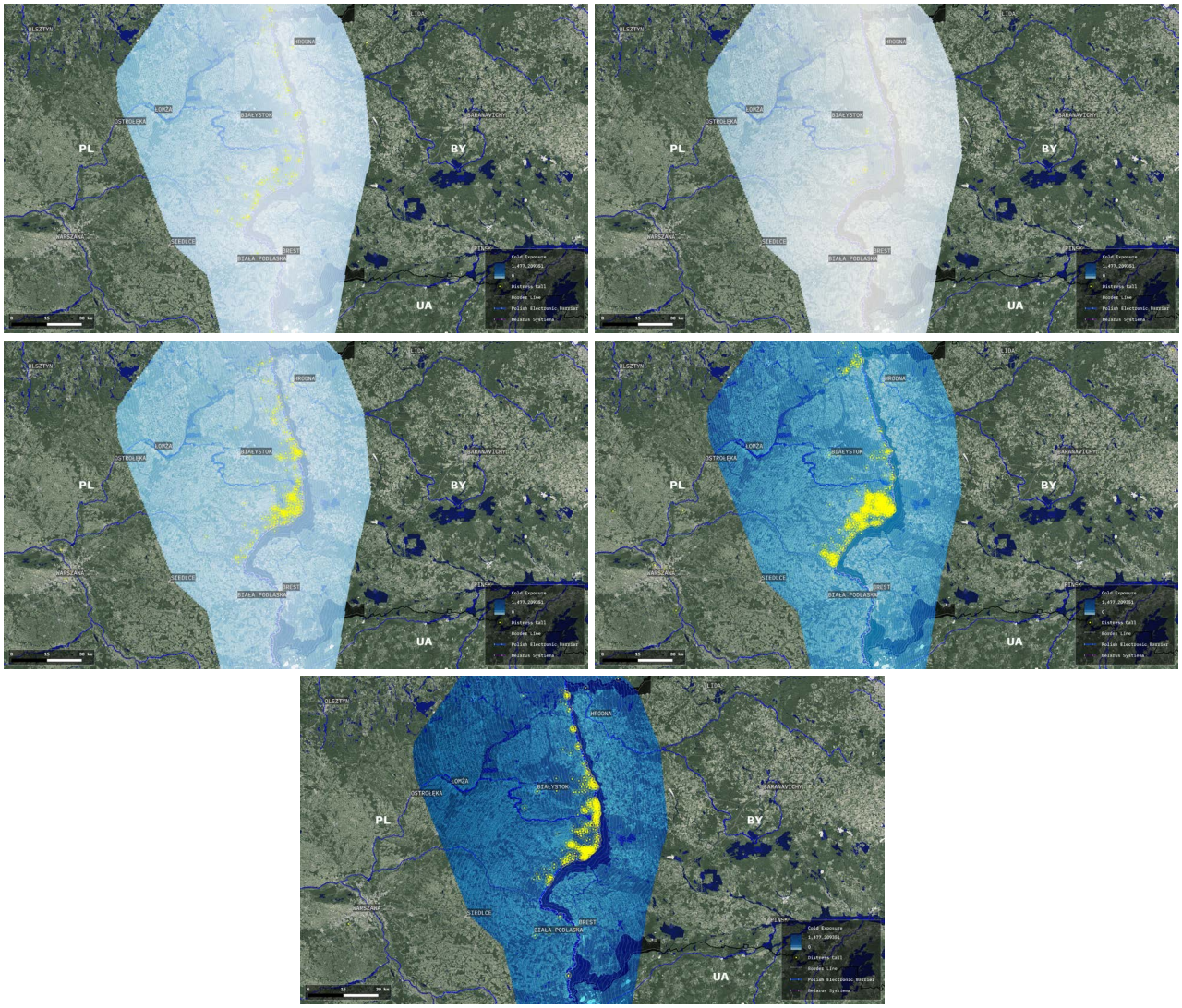


Figure 3.37. Modelled cumulative cold exposure and distress-call clusters along the Poland–Belarus border. This map overlays a scenario-based surface of cumulative cold exposure across the borderland with the spatial distribution of documented distress-call clusters. The blue surface represents the modelled intensity of cold exposure under the selected delay scenario, while yellow circles indicate distress-call locations/clusters. These layers show that exposure is produced not only by environmental conditions, but by the interaction between terrain, bordering infrastructures, and the forced duration of migrants' immobility or rerouting. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

The overlays also show different spatial patterns. Clusters close to fences or river–barrier interfaces suggest repeated distress in places where movement is obstructed. More dispersed clusters farther from the border may reflect route splintering and evasion, as people move deeper into forests, wetlands, or riverine areas to avoid detection. As the scenarios move from S1 and S2 to S3 and S4, a larger share of these clusters falls within higher-exposure contours.

The model shows that the danger of a location cannot be understood through distance alone. The position of each distress call indicates both how far a person still had to travel to reach safety and the meteorological conditions they had to endure while doing so. When bordering practices add hours or days through obstruction, rerouting, pushbacks, or immobilisation, even a location close to a road or the border can become a site of severe cumulative exposure. Conversely, calls farther inside forests,

wetlands, or riverine areas point to longer routes of evasion and fewer possibilities of reaching assistance.

The underlying *dh* values represent the additional time imposed in each scenario and should be read comparatively rather than as exact durations experienced by every individual. Their significance lies in showing how the spatial position of distress and the time imposed by the border regime act together on the body. Bordering practices do not merely delay movement: they keep people in cold environments for long enough to intensify exhaustion, hypothermia, injury, and the risk of death. The model therefore makes visible how the space and time produced by border control can turn exposure to cold into a potentially lethal mechanism of violence.

Unpublished dataset, restricted access

Bringing together the spatial and environmental analyses discussed above reveals that a number of forms of harm experienced by migrants as they attempt to cross the borderlands are produced through the interaction of location and duration. Distress calls are not randomly distributed across the borderland: they become concentrated, displaced, and fragmented as infrastructures and enforcement practices reshape migrants' routes. When these locations are read together with the cold-exposure scenarios, a point on the map no longer indicates only where distress occurred. It also indicates how far people remained from safety, what terrain they still had to cross, and how long bordering practices could keep them exposed.

Distance therefore cannot be read simply as proximity to the border or to assistance. A person stranded two kilometres from the fence may remain beyond the reach of care when barriers, patrol roads, exclusion zones, destroyed phones, and bureaucratic obstruction prevent assistance from arriving. A point farther from the border may, in turn, be the result of rerouting, avoidance, fear of detection, or repeated pushbacks. These mechanisms compound one another: a beating slows movement; an injury caused by the fence increases exposure; a pushback returns someone to hazardous terrain; a destroyed phone interrupts navigation and communication; and delayed assistance allows injuries and cold stress to deepen. The border produces harm by organising the time, space, and conditions through which exhaustion, debilitation, and death become more likely.

Conclusion: Cumulative and combined mechanisms of violence

The central insight of this chapter is that direct bodily violence – such as beatings, pepper spray, cuts, broken legs caused by border infrastructure – cannot be understood in isolation from the mediated violence produced by the environment (cold, heat, humidity) and by the very architecture of the border itself. The architecture of enmity analysed in Chapter Two shapes that violence experienced by migrants in multiple, intertwined, yet analytically distinct, ways. Here, each pushforward, pushback, each blocked route, each act of violence that interrupts movement adds time. Every injury inflicted through the border infrastructure – whether a broken leg, lacerations from barbed wire, or sprained ankles – or a forced river crossing slows movement, and so accumulates time spent in the borderlands. And time, in these conditions, is a mechanism of harm. More time in the forest means more time without food, without clean water, without dry clothing, without medical attention. It means wounds that do not heal, infections that deepen, hypothermia that accumulates degree by degree. Humanitarian aid, where it exists at all, is actively obstructed. Here, practices of law enforcements that weaponise the inhabitability, policies legalising pushbacks, no-go zones preventing access, combined with infrastructure, both extend time and injure migrants. What emerges from this system is exhaustion, not as a side effect, but as a structured outcome. Migrants are worn down incrementally, through the compounding of violence, displacement, and exposure, until movement itself becomes impossible. As Bashir recalled: “I sat on my knees and that’s it.” That collapse is not a personal failure. It is the intended endpoint of a machinery that pushes, blocks, withholds, and waits.

The mechanisms of violence analysed in this chapter did not remain unchanged between 2021 and 2025. During the initial phase of the border crisis, violence was particularly visible through large-scale pushforwards, pushbacks, concertina barriers, emergency restrictions, and the containment of groups within the border zone. As the physical barrier, patrol roads, and electronic surveillance systems were constructed and operationalised, these practices became embedded in a more permanent architecture. Crossings were slowed down and redirected, routes splintered towards forests and riverine sectors, and injuries and prolonged environmental exposure became recurring effects of the border’s operation. Earlier practices were increasingly supplemented, rather than replaced, by a new administrative and legal layer: declaration forms presented as evidence that migrants did not wish to seek protection, and renewed access restrictions and broader legal protections for the use of

force. In 2025, this trajectory culminated into the suspension of access to the asylum procedure itself – no longer merely a friction imposed on the right to seek protection, but an attempt to close that avenue altogether, exemplifying what Alison Mountz has called the "death of asylum".[332]

While during his 2023 electoral campaign Donald Tusk pledged to put an end to the violations of migrants' rights and deaths at the border, the change of government in Poland at the end of 2023 did not bring a clear rupture with these mechanisms.[333] The coercive practices documented in testimonies analysed for this investigation persisted and, in some respects, diversified. Practices initially presented as emergency responses became more routine, bureaucratically organised, technologically supported, and legally defended. In other words, the border did not become more humane under the new government; the mechanisms established since 2021 were largely maintained and further consolidated. Belarusian forces pushed migrants towards Poland, while Polish forces intercepted and returned them to Belarus. Law enforcement violence, border infrastructure, obstruction of assistance, and environmental exposure continued to reinforce one another.

That Bashir eventually reached Warsaw does not refute this system of violence. It reflects his endurance and the assistance he eventually received. Others reached the limits of movement, health, and survival. The cumulative mechanisms of violence that we have analysed here have made the premature death of migrants attempting to cross the Polish-Belarussian borderlands a recurring and predictable outcome of the pushback regime. It is to this lethality that the next chapter turns.

332 A. Mountz, *The Death of Asylum: Hidden Geographies of the Enforcement Archipelago* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

333 Of many statements in this direction by Donald Tusk during his 2023 campaign, the following offers an example: "We need to address migration in a way that is consistent with our values and international law. Violence and forced disappearances of migrants are not only morally wrong, but also contrary to our responsibilities as members of the international community." Donald Tusk, Chairman of the Civic Platform, August 12, 2023, interview with TVN24. The changing discourse on migration of Donald Tusk before and after his institution as Prime Minister has been analysed in an internal analysis of communication strategies drafted by Tomasz Lisiecki under the coordination of Katarzyna Czarnota as part of the Oxfam-funded project "Disappearances at the Polish–Belarusian Border: Diagnosis of the Situation and Recommendations for Change," implemented by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights in 2023–2024.

CHAPTER 4. BORDER DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES

It was a winter evening in early 2023. Snow had been falling for hours, covering the forest roads of the Białowieża Forest. Shortly after 9 pm, Rafał Kowalczyk, a biologist specialising in the ecology of the Białowieża Forest, received a phone call. A man was stranded somewhere inside the strict reserve. He could no longer move. Through a series of fragmented messages, he described his surroundings. The place where he was trapped, he wrote, looked like an "island." Rafał began working with maps, trying to reconstruct the man's location from the limited information available. At the same time, civil society actors alerted the police and requested an urgent search-and-rescue operation. During the night, Rafał was informed that access to the reserve would be arranged for him and two others whose familiarity with the terrain could speed up the search. Before dawn, Rafał, Eliza Kowalczyk, and Adam Wajrak prepared to enter the forest. At 5 am at the entrance to the reserve, they were stopped by guards from the Białowieża National Park. No permit was issued. They were told that the location would be checked by state services. Weeks passed. The man's family received no answers. Neither did those who had searched for him. Rafał returned repeatedly to the maps, tracing wetlands, animal paths, and patches of higher ground where someone exhausted might have sought shelter. A month later, while conducting field research on badgers, he returned to the area with other people. The first trace was a fragment of a shirt. Its colour matched the description they had been given. Then came scattered belongings around the remains of a campfire. A short distance away lay the body of a 27-year-old man from Afghanistan – Mohammad Jan Goorbaz. The traces suggested that he had continued moving after the moment when the search had first been requested. He was found frozen to death in an area that had not previously been searched.

Fieldnotes, March 2026

For years, Rafał Kowalczyk had studied the life of Europe's last primeval forests. As a professor specialising in biology, he had devoted much of his professional life to understanding the movements of animals and the ecology of the Białowieża Forest. Together with his life partner, Eliza Kowalczyk, a nature photographer, he had documented the rhythms of this ecosystem: the movement of animals, the circulation of life and death, and the slow processes through which the ancient forest continually renews itself. Rafał Kowalczyk and Eliza Kowalczyk's role in the discovery of Mohammad Jan Goorbaz's body, as recounted in the field notes above, conveys the striking transformation of the border area. Since 2021, their expertise, once used to understand the forest, has become essential for searching for missing persons, supporting rescue operations, and, where official search efforts have ceased, recovering the bodies of those whose disappearances ended in death. Ancient forests renowned for their wildlife have become spaces of violence and death inflicted on migrants who have travelled from across the Global South to reach Europe. In these forests, this new reality is encountered by local inhabitants, who have been forced to find ways of coping with it.

In the previous chapters, we demonstrated that the logics of enmity that defined migrants crossing the Poland–Belarus border as threats and weapons have been encoded into law and materialised into a distinct border architecture and different forms of violence – including direct violence and organised abandonment inflicted by law enforcement agents, infrastructural violence inflicted by the layers of fences, and environmentally mediated harm. As a result, migrants experience combined and cumulative forms of harm throughout their trajectories across the Polish–Belarusian borderland, across which they remain trapped in cycles of pushforward and pushback. This chapter builds on the analysis developed in the previous chapter on mechanisms of violence and focuses on the way these combined and cumulative forms of harm culminate in lethal incidents and disappearances.

Indeed, deaths and disappearances are the most extreme and irreversible forms of harm inflicted onto migrants and their families. The loss of life extends beyond the individual, producing enduring consequences for entire families and communities. Disappearances also constitute a form of violence in their own right. While they are the outcome of conditions similar to those leading to death, here, a haunting uncertainty remains as to the ultimate fate of the disappeared person, thereby foreclosing the possibility of mourning for families. The specific violence of disappearance thus allows us to understand death not only as a physiological process, but as a social, political, and legal one, which the unknown fate of a loved one prevents from fully unfolding.



Figure 4.1. Photograph of the graves of migrants who died at the border and were buried in the Muslim cemetery in Bohoniki, Poland. Photograph by Małgorzata Klemens, 2023.

While, in official prosecutorial investigations, deaths are routinely reduced to the immediate physiological mechanism that led to the loss of life, as identified in forensic examinations – most often related to hypothermia or drowning – in this chapter we ask:

> *How have forest and river environments been made lethal for migrants and turned into spaces of death and disappearance? What role do state policies, infrastructures, actions and omissions play in these outcomes ?*

To address these questions, the chapter assembles dispersed traces, testimonies, administrative practices, and material conditions into a series of counter-investigations concerning cases of deaths for which the bodies of the deceased have been recovered, and unresolved cases of disappearances. Rather than limiting the explanation of death to its immediate physiological or biological cause, as is common in prosecutorial investigations, we reconstruct the broader mechanisms through which state policies, infrastructure, institutional practices, and the border environment recurrently generate conditions leading to death. We further compare the mechanisms we identify through the reconstruction of particular incidents with findings emerging from geostatistical methods. Our analysis leads us to challenge the depoliticisation, normalisation, and

naturalisation of cases of death and disappearance in state narratives and legal processes. We demonstrate instead how state policies, infrastructure, as well as the actions and inactions of law enforcement agents have transformed the Polish–Belarusian borderlands into a landscape of death and disappearance across which the lives of numerous migrants have been erased.

Our approach represents an important analytical shift in relation to official state investigations, which deserves to be emphasised. As we will discuss in more depth in the following chapter, prosecutorial investigations tend to focus on individual criminal liability for particular actions. However, as we will see here, deaths at the Poland–Belarus border are the outcome of complex chains of events involving human actors and non-human actants, which leads to a fragmentation of responsibility. Furthermore, post-mortem findings indicating no signs of direct physical violence on the body of deceased individuals – such as injuries resulting from beating immediately prior to death – combined with the location in which the deceased body was found (in a river, forest, or marsh, rather than an enclosed space), are often used as grounds to consider the death an incident related only to physiological causes (biological death), and to exclude the involvement of third parties. In other words, where the available evidence does not indicate that another individual directly inflicted the fatal injury, and the cause of death is determined to be hypothermia, drowning, cardiac arrest, or another physiological cause, the state investigation rarely extends beyond establishing the circumstances of the individual's death. What is occluded through this narrow focus is the cumulative role of state policies, infrastructure, actions and omissions of law enforcement agents, which systematically produce the conditions leading to such deaths. Put differently, the state-led investigation isolates the final moment and cause of death from the broader sequence of practices and conditions that led to it, foreclosing demands for accountability.

In relation to this narrow focus of state-led investigations, our counter-investigative practice – which builds on the methodological insights of numerous counter-investigations led by Forensic Architecture and Border Forensics[334] – operates a reversal. Starting from the same fatal incidents and the ultimate moment and cause of death, we trace backwards the complex causal chains that ultimately led to it. We reveal that environmentally mediated deaths and disappearances are not incidental events, and that many were preventable. By reconnecting disparate state policies, infrastructure, actions and inactions to fatal incidents, we aim to make the responsibility that has been fragmented and obscured

334 C. Heller and L. Pezzani, Mare Clausum: Italy and the EU's Undeclared Operation to Stem Migration across the Mediterranean, report by Forensic Oceanography, affiliated with Forensic Architecture, Goldsmiths, University of London (London: Goldsmiths, University of London, May 2018), https://content.forensic-architecture.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2018-05-07-FO-Mare-Clausum-full-EN.pdf.

re-emerge.

Our analysis in this chapter is structured as follows. First, by cross-referencing multiple sources of data and evidence – testimonial, legal, operational, geospatial, and open-source – we offer detailed spatial and temporal reconstructions of the unfolding of events that led to ten lethal incidents. Building on these reconstructions, we identify the recurring mechanisms that produced migrant deaths. While each case presents specific circumstances, the web of relations between state actors, infrastructure, and the environment they are embedded in, and the sequences of state actions and inactions – the boundary of which is often blurry, as we indicate by using the term *in/action* – that recurrently emerge from them and lead to the same outcome of death, indicate distinct mechanisms.

Second, we move from individual reconstructions to broader spatial analysis. Drawing on a dataset of 102 documented deaths,[335] we use geostatistical methods to examine how the mechanisms identified in the reconstructed cases become visible at the scale of the pushback regime,[336] analysing their spatial and temporal distribution in relation to environmental conditions, border infrastructure, distress-call locations, seasonal cold-stress scenarios, and successive phases of border policy. We identify consistent spatial, temporal, and environmental configurations in which the border environments have been made lethal through the interaction of pushbacks, restricted access, and delayed, absent, or prevented assistance.

Third, we consider the relation between deaths and disappearances. While five of the lethal incidents we have reconstructed were initially cases of disappearance which were later confirmed as deaths, we show through the analysis of a particular process of search for a missing person that disappearances have their own distinct dynamics, and constitute a form of harm in their own right for families. In turn, we analyse a broader corpus of 214 fragmentary records relating to potential border-related disappearances reported between 2021 and 2024. Through their analysis we identify recurring spatial and environmental conditions – including terrain, temperature, and weather – and reveal broader patterns in the geography of disappearances. We then compare this geography of potential disappearances to that which has emerged from our analysis of confirmed deaths, and assess the extent to which there may be more deaths than have been recorded. The spatial analysis of this database highlights that deaths and disappearances should not be understood as

335 The analysis builds on the dataset of documented deaths published by We Are Monitoring but applies a distinct analytical methodology. The methodological approach is explained in the Methodological Note.

336 See description in Methodological Note

separate phenomena but as different outcomes produced through the same conditions and operational sequences at work in the pushback regime.

Our analysis demonstrates that the deaths and disappearances of migrants are not isolated incidents but recurrent and widespread. Although most recorded fatalities can indeed be formally attributed to environmental factors – cold, water, forest terrain – we demonstrate that there is nothing accidental or "natural" about them, and reveal instead how have been politically, spatially, and operationally produced. While state responsibility has been obscured in official investigations, our analysis reveals the fundamental role of state actors, both in generating situations of imminent risk to the lives of migrants, and in refraining from assisting them or preventing others from doing so, while making accountability elusive.

Reconstructing lethal incidents across the borderland

We first reconstruct ten cases of migrant deaths at the Polish–Belarusian borderland between 2021 and 2025, presented chronologically across successive years of the border crisis. Selected from a larger body of documented deaths[337], these cases were chosen because they are among the most documented, and their evidentiary richness makes it possible to reconstruct interrupted chains of events that official investigations often fail to establish. Five of these cases were fatal disappearances, preceded by prolonged periods during which families lost contact with their relatives and turned to civil society actors for assistance in establishing their fate.[338]

These reconstructions are the outcome of collective knowledge production, generated through collaboration with actors directly engaged in search-and-rescue practices – migrants, family members, residents of the Podlasie region, and legal experts. Since the beginning of the humanitarian crisis at the Poland–Belarus border in 2021, deaths and disappearances have been documented by numerous grassroots initiatives, humanitarian volunteers, journalists, residents of the Podlasie region, lawyers, researchers, and non-governmental organisations. Using methods developed within critical forensic practice over a number of years and in different contexts, we have analysed and cross-referenced multiple sources of data – often initially collected by NGOs and activists working at the border over many years – and verified documents, locations, digital evidence, and OSINT data. Field-based interviews and site visits were

337 We Are Monitoring, "List of Border Deaths," last accessed 24 June 2026, https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/en/list-of-the-deceased/

338 Although formal missing-person procedures exist in Poland, they are poorly adapted to disappearances occurring in the context of cross-border migration. Families – often located outside Poland – face significant legal, administrative and practical barriers to reporting disappearances, difficulties compounded by undocumented pushbacks that frequently leave no official record of prior contact with Polish state actors. Consequently, families often rely on humanitarian organisations, journalists and other civil society actors to initiate searches, reconstruct migrants' last known movements and engage with the relevant authorities. Civil society organisations did not replace state authorities and lacked access to official databases, DNA comparison systems, forensic facilities, post-mortem examinations and prosecutorial case files. Their role was to document information provided by families, reconstruct migrants' last known movements, coordinate humanitarian search efforts and repeatedly press the competent authorities to undertake investigative action. They also played a crucial watchdog role by exposing procedural barriers that impeded effective searches and identification. A particularly illustrative example is the investigative work of journalist Piotr Czaban, whose sustained reporting and public scrutiny contributed to replacing anonymous "NN" grave markers with the names of identified migrants buried in Polish cemeteries. Beyond improving official identification practices, such interventions restored the identity of the deceased and enabled families to mourn their relatives by name. For more information see Piotr Czaban website: https://czabanrobiraban.pl/

conducted in forest environments in collaboration with members of the POPH Association, and with individuals including eyewitnesses to the lethal events. The research drew primarily on cooperation with HFHR , POPH, the Egala Association, as well as investigative materials produced by Piotr Czaban. Finally, the data we collected and analysed was supplemented by documents shared by the Border Death Monitoring Group.

Through the critical forensic methodology developed by Forensic Architecture and Border Forensics, all data and evidence were combined and cross-referenced with these published and unpublished elements to produce detailed, fact-based accounts of the spatial and temporal unfolding of events that led to lethal outcomes – while acknowledging the gaps in understanding that persist as a result of the state's lack of disclosure and accountability. As we will see, the circumstances leading to migrant deaths involve the erasure of life and of the process of killing itself. We see our investigative work as one of *re-appearance* – of the lives that have been lost or left missing, and of state responsibility. Indeed we seek to reverse this erasure by reconstructing these obscured encounters and revealing the chains of events and state responsibility that led to death and disappearance.

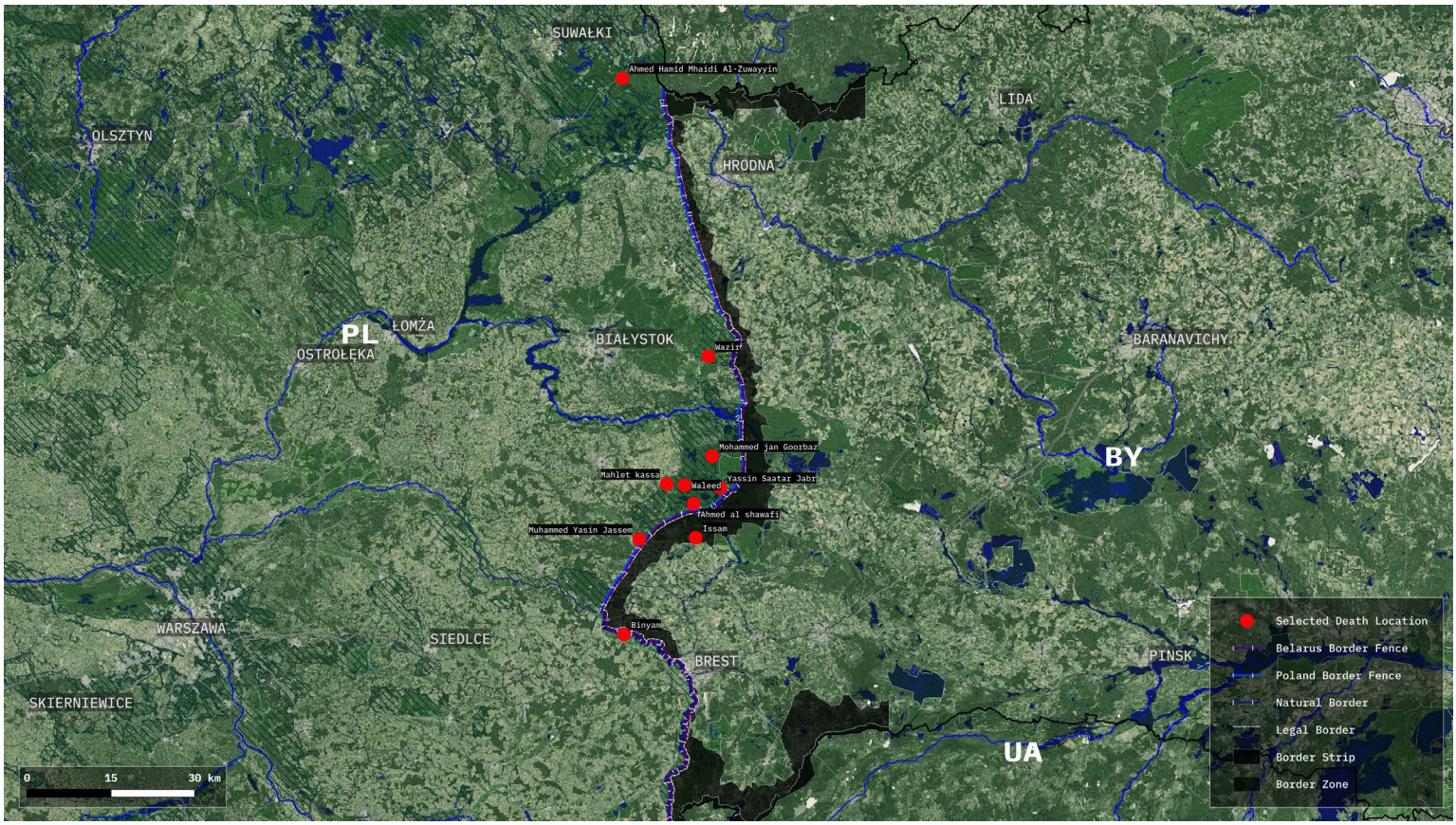


Figure 4.2. Map showing the location of the ten cases that were reconstructed for this investigation. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

We begin with a detailed reconstruction of the death of Ahmed Al-Shawafi as a point of entry into the complex interactions between state policies, the operational practices of Polish and Belarusian authorities, border infrastructure, and environmental conditions that have transformed the Polish–Belarusian borderland into a space of violence and death (see Chapters Two and Three). We then synthesise the findings from the remaining nine cases, presented here in summary form, while their complete reconstruction is available in annex to this report and on the accompanying digital platform. Taken together, these cases allow us to identify the recurring mechanisms through which border violence produces lethal trajectories and systematically obscures institutional responsibility.

The death of Ahmed Al-Shawafi

On 21 February 2022, the body of Ahmed Al-Shawafi, a 26-year-old man from Yemen, was found in the wetlands along the Leśna Prawa River, inside the Nature Reserve on the Polish side of the border.[339] Our reconstruction is based on materials collected by Piotr Czaban[340], interviews with "Maryam"[342] – one of Ahmed's travel companions, who was witness to the events and who requested that her identity not be revealed – and fieldwork conducted with the assistance of biologist Rafał Kowalczyk,[343] whose role we mentioned in the opening of this chapter and who found Ahmed Al-Shawafi's body.

339 The media reported only the general location, whereas the precise location was verified during the investigation.

340 P. Czaban, Pogranicze smierci | Goscie: Czlowiek Lasu i Rafal Kowalczyk, YouTube video, published via Patronite,

341 Accessed June 6, 2026, https://patronite.pl/post/45780/pogranicze-smierci-i-goscie-czlowiek-lasu-i-rafal-kowalczyk.

342 The name has been changed to protect the interviewee's identity. The online interview was conducted by Katarzyna Czarnota approximately two to three days after the events, following contact facilitated by Piotr Czaban.

343 The research team's field visit was conducted in March 2025. Conducting the interview in situ made it possible to analyse the surrounding environment and produce photographic documentation.



Figure 4.3. Screenshot of Piotr Czaban's post on X (formerly Twitter), 21 February 2022. After receiving information about the discovery of the body and comparing the clothing visible in the photograph with the description provided by Ahmed's travelling companions, Czaban published the information on his account. At this stage, he described the deceased as "most likely Ahmed, a 26-year-old from Yemen," reflecting that his identity had not yet been formally confirmed.

Between 10 and 15 February 2022, a group of approximately 35–40 people – including men, women, and children – carrying limited supplies, was repeatedly forced back and forth between the two sides of the Poland–Belarus border, remaining trapped in a cycle of exposure to violence and forced im/mobility.[344] On 15 February, Ahmed Al-Shawafi crossed the Przewłoka (Perewołoka, Перавалока) River on Polish territory with a smaller group, which included Maryam, a Syrian woman travelling with her child who joined Ahmed because he carried a GPS device.[345] The crossing took place at a section of the border where the Przewłoka River interrupted the continuity of the metal border barrier under construction. At this location, the 5.5-metre-high metal wall was about to be erected on land that could not be extended across the river (see Chapter Two).

After crossing the border river in early February, the group continued on foot under persistent winter conditions. Crossing cold water left clothing and footwear saturated, resulting in prolonged environmental exposure. Meteorological records for the period indicate that night-time temperatures repeatedly fell below 0°C, reaching approximately –4°C, while daytime temperatures remained only slightly above freezing. Relative humidity remained consistently high, accompanied by moderate winds and intermittent precipitation. Physiological research demonstrates that movement in soaked clothing under such conditions substantially increases energy expenditure, accelerates heat loss, and elevates the risk of hypothermia, exhaustion, and physiological collapse.

344 Although no previous pushback has been documented in this case, the absence of such documentation cannot be interpreted as evidence that no pushback occurred. As discussed throughout this report, interceptions and pushbacks at the Polish–Belarusian border have frequently not been documented at the level of individual persons. According to the available information, Ahmed Al-Sawawi had spent an extended period in the border area and was already physically exhausted prior to his death.

345 Information presented here is based on an interview conducted with “Maryam” (pseudonym).

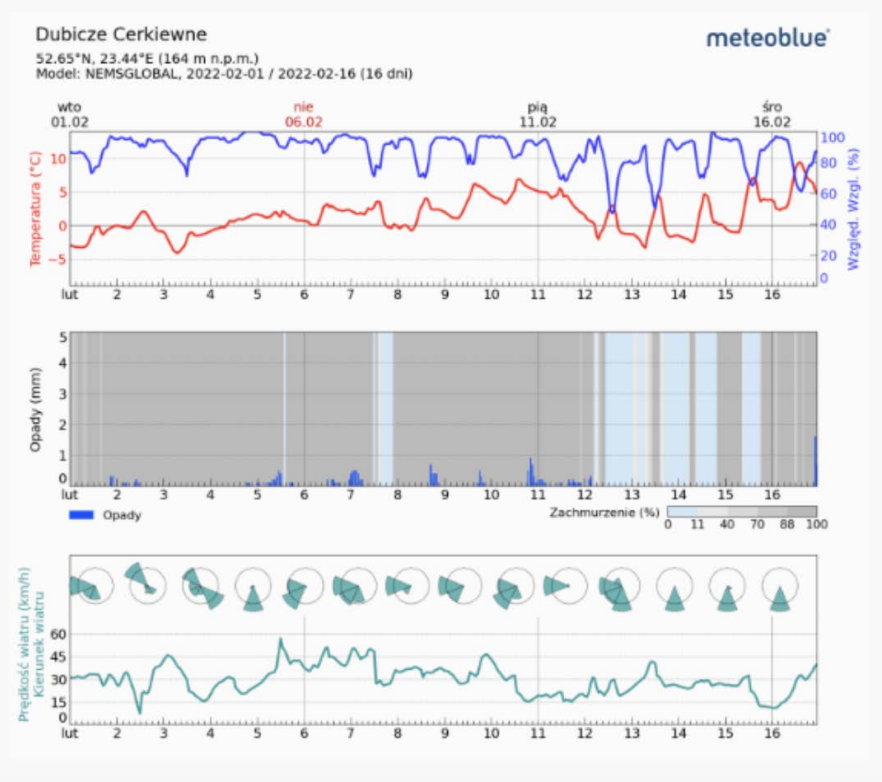


Figure 4.4. Meteorological conditions in the Dubicze Cerkiewne area between 1 and 16 February 2022, showing air temperature, relative humidity, precipitation, cloud cover, wind speed and direction. Graph: meteoblue, "Historical Weather Data: Dubicze Cerkiewne, Poland," meteoblue.com.

Our reconstruction showed that they first entered the forested area of the Kozłowe Borki Nature Reserve before continuing along the Leśna Prawa River. According to Maryam's testimony, the group moved through dense reed beds, wetlands, and marshland, following animal tracks for several hours. Movement through wetlands, dense reed beds, and seasonally flooded terrain required sustained physical effort while maintaining prolonged exposure to low winter temperatures.[346] Such conditions are recognised as increasing physiological strain, heat loss, and the risk of hypothermia (see Cold Index methodology and Chapter Three).

346 For an overview of the physiology of cold exposure, thermoregulation, and the mechanisms leading to hypothermia during prolonged environmental exposure, see, for example J. W. Castellani and A. J. Young, "Human Physiological Responses to Cold Exposure: Acute Responses and Acclimatization," Comprehensive Physiology 6, no. 1 (2016): 443-469, PMID: 26924539, https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26924539/.



Figure 4.5. During the on-site investigation, biologist Rafał Kowalczyk identified the narrow corridors through the reeds as animal trails. Although they may resemble human-made paths to an untrained observer, he explained that they can be distinguished by their width and the way they cut through the vegetation. Photograph by Charles Heller, 2025..

The group then attempted to cross what they believed to be a shallow water channel. Entering the river resulted in the immersion of both people and their belongings. Immersion substantially increases the weight of clothing and equipment, requiring greater physical effort during subsequent movement, particularly when negotiating steep and uneven riverbanks. Maryam recalled that, after leaving the river, she and Ahmed abandoned their soaked backpacks in order to continue moving. Shortly afterwards, Ahmed began to shiver violently, cried out, stumbled, and collapsed in a peat-forming wetland characterised by raised tussocks and water-filled depressions. Despite repeated attempts by the group to assist him, he lost consciousness and stopped breathing. The subsequent investigation conducted by the Polish prosecutor concluded that the immediate cause of death was hypothermia.

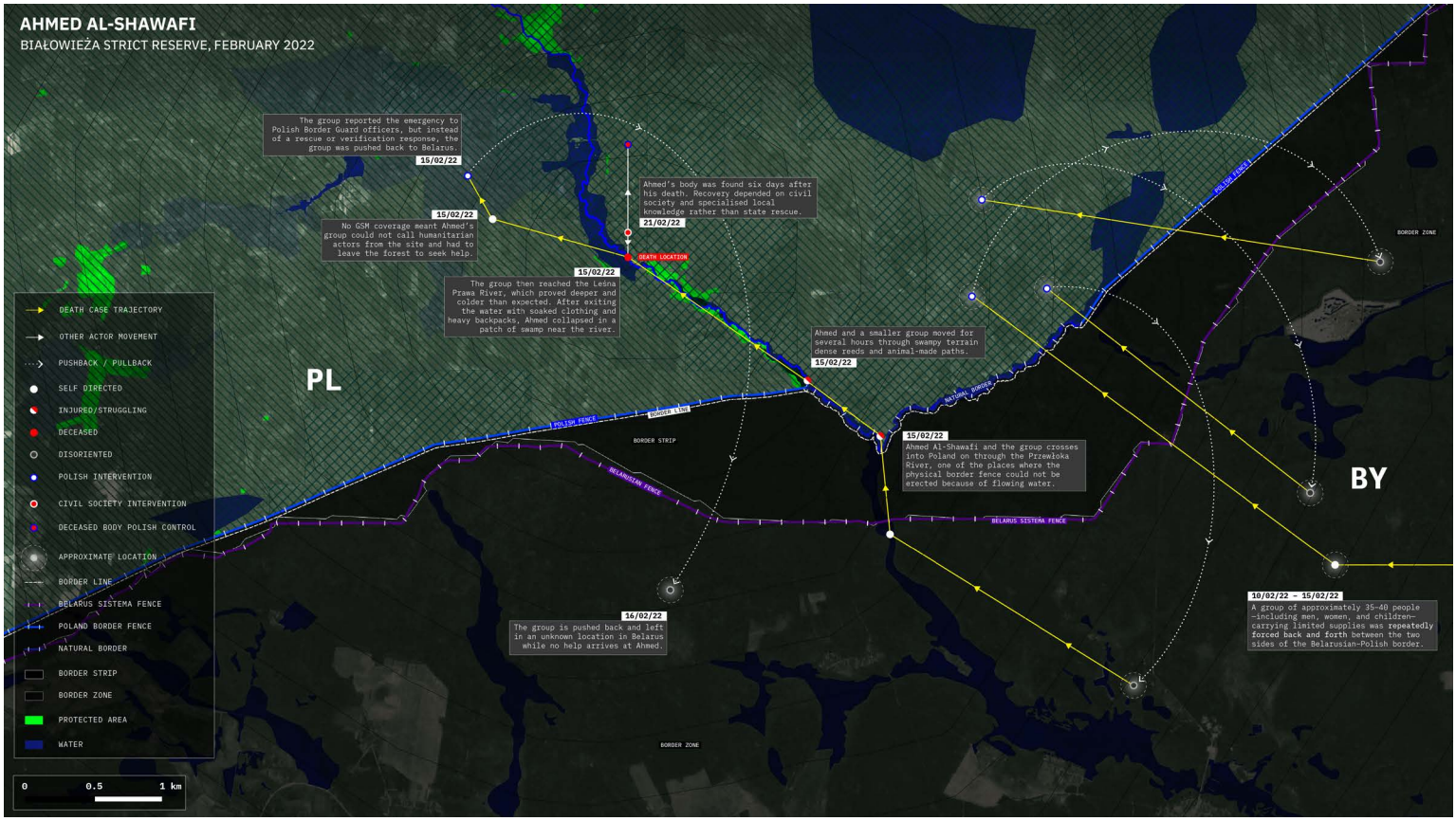


Figure 4.6. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Ahmed Al-Shawafi. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

The spatial reconstruction indicates that the group reached an area within the Kozłowe Borki Nature Reserve, characterised by dense forest, limited infrastructure, and difficult terrain. GSM coverage analysis undertaken during field investigation indeed indicated limited or no mobile-network coverage in this section of the reserve. According to Maryam's testimony, the group attempted to use a mobile phone to call for help but was unable to establish a connection. She further recalled that the group attempted to resuscitate Ahmed for approximately 15–20 minutes, without success. Maryam stated that, believing they could no longer assist Ahmed, the group decided to leave the site and seek help from the Polish Border Guard. According to her testimony, they left Ahmed where he had collapsed because they were unable to carry him through the surrounding wetlands and forest terrain. The group then walked to the nearest road, where they encountered Border Guard officers, indicated Ahmed's location, and requested immediate assistance.



Figure 4.7. Location where Ahmed collapsed and was later found dead. The wetland is characterised by water-filled depressions and small elevated patches formed by grass tussocks and trees. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, 2025.

It cannot be established whether Ahmed was already dead when the Polish Border Guard was notified of his location or whether he remained alive. Under the prevailing winter conditions, however, prolonged environmental exposure would have continued to increase the physiological effects of hypothermia, making timely intervention critical. Instead of verifying the information regarding Ahmed's possible location and deploying all means to reach him, the officers took action against the remaining migrants – the entire group was pushed back to Belarus in an undocumented pushback procedure, leaving no administrative record of either the apprehension or the return. Only after being pushed back to Belarus and regaining phone signal did those who had been with him inform Ahmed's brother and contact available civil society emergency numbers, reporting that he was likely dead and requesting that his body be located and that he be given a dignified burial.

Following the undocumented pushback, the group remained in Belarus until they were able to leave the forest, reach temporary accommodation, recharge a mobile phone, and re-establish communication. One or two days later, as recalled by Maryam's testimony, they informed Ahmed's brother and contacted humanitarian organisations, reporting Ahmed's last known location and requesting assistance in locating his body.

Based on the information provided by the group, humanitarian actors attempted to verify the reported location. As Piotr Czaban explained, however, reaching and systematically searching the site required not only detailed knowledge of the protected reserve but also specialised off-grid navigation equipment, as mobile phone coverage was unavailable in this part of the forest.[347]

347 P. Czaban, Pogranicze smierci | Goscie: Czlowiek Lasu i Rafal Kowalczyk, YouTube video, published via Patronite, accessed June 6, 2026, https://patronite.pl/post/45780/pogranicze-smierci-i-goscie-czlowiek-lasu-i-rafal-kowalczyk.

Several days later, while conducting ecological field research on badgers in the reserve, local biologist Rafał Kowalczyk came across a body. After comparing the location with the information previously provided by Ahmed's travelling companions and consulting Piotr Czaban, they concluded that the body was most likely Ahmed's.[348] The Polish authorities were subsequently notified and initiated the standard prosecutorial procedures following the discovery of a body (see Chapter Two).

348 ibid.





Figure 4.8. Rafał Kowalczyk returning to the location where he found Ahmed Al-Shawafi's deceased body during the on-site spatial investigation. Photograph by Charles Heller, 2025.

The circumstances of Ahmed Al-Shawafi's death provide a tragic example of how different forms of violence converged and reinforced each other, leading to his death: first, the violence of Belarusian and Polish law enforcement agents as he was forced back and forth across the border, making him more vulnerable; second, the spatial effects of the border fortification, which funnelled movement towards a river crossing and into difficult terrain; third, the forced exposure to the environmental factors – the cold over several days in forest, and the cold rivers that ultimately triggered a state of hypothermia; fourth, the organised abandonment of state actors who disregarded his need for urgent assistance. Within these converging practices and conditions, the characteristics of the site of death – a wetland, in an swampy and inaccessible area of the protected nature zone, without GSM coverage – proved critical in determining his fate. Combined with several days of exposure to winter conditions, immersion in cold water, and sustained physical exertion, these conditions constitute forced environmental exposure and are recognised as substantially increasing the risk of hypothermia and physiological collapse.[349]



Figure 4.9. Belongings found at the reconstructed location where Ahmed's group exited the Leśna Prawa River. According to the spatial reconstruction, some of these objects had been left by members of the group after crossing the river on 15 February 2022. They remained at the site more than three years later, when the investigation team documented the location on 6 March 2025. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, 2025.

The prosecutor's investigation established hypothermia as the immediate physiological cause of Ahmed Al-Shawafi's death. This finding identifies the terminal physiological mechanism of death but does not explain how the conditions leading to hypothermia were produced. From a medical perspective, hypothermia is not an instantaneous event but a progressive

349 Research on human physiological responses to cold demonstrates that prolonged exposure, exhaustion, dehydration and negative energy balance progressively impair the body's ability to maintain core temperature. Once an individual becomes unable to continue moving or seek shelter, the likelihood of survival depends increasingly on timely external assistance. see, for example: J. W. Castellani and A. J. Young, "Human Physiological Responses to Cold Exposure: Acute Responses and Acclimatization," Comprehensive Physiology 6, no. 1 (2016): 443-469, PMID: 26924539, https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26924539/.

physiological process. Continued exposure to cold, wet conditions, and wind accelerates heat loss, progressively impairs physical performance and cognitive function, and, if exposure persists, may ultimately lead to loss of consciousness, cardiorespiratory failure, and death. Under the environmental conditions reconstructed in this investigation – including repeated exposure to near-freezing temperatures, immersion in cold water, saturated clothing, movement through wetlands, and delayed rescue – the risk of severe hypothermia increases substantially.

Ahmed's death therefore exemplifies a form of indirect violence in which harm is inflicted not through direct force, but through a series of in/actions that create conditions incompatible with survival. In relation to the complex chains of events we have reconstructed, and the implication of multiple actors we have demonstrated, the biological endpoint of his death occludes the chain of causality linking state policies, infrastructure, and practices to the circumstances of death. Rather than treating the forest, cold, and water as neutral environmental conditions, our investigation demonstrates how these elements became operational components of the pushback regime. Official investigations establish the immediate physiological cause of death; our counter-investigation explains how that physiological condition was produced.

The death of Ahmed Al-Shawafi and other migrants may not have been the explicit objective of Polish authorities at the outset; their focus was primarily on intercepting and pushing migrants back across the border, while deterring further crossings. In the process, however, their border policy, infrastructure, and practices generated lethal conditions for migrants. These conditions were perpetuated in full knowledge of their lethal effects, after the first death cases had been documented and denounced by civil society actors, and no systematic, state-led search operations were established to mitigate the risks that migrants have faced, or to determine and verify whether additional bodies remained undiscovered on the Polish side of the border. Instead, the architecture of enmity – in particular its restrictions on access to the border zone – has been further consolidated in ways that have both limited the capacity for civil society-led rescue activities, and restricted the visibility and documentation of deaths.



Figure 4.10. Ahmed Al-Shawafi's grave at the Muslim cemetery in Bohoniki. Photograph by Maciej Moskwa, 2024

Tracing mechanisms of migrant deaths across cases

The circumstances of Ahmed Al-Shawafi's death raise two broader analytical questions: was this chain of events exceptional, or does it recur across other documented deaths at the Poland–Belarus border? If so, what recurring mechanisms leading to migrant deaths can be identified across these cases? To answer these questions, we reconstructed nine further cases of death between 2021 and 2025 that, similar to Ahmed Al-Shawafi's death, show a set of relations between actors, practices, infrastructure, and the environment resulting in migrant deaths. Although each case unfolded under different circumstances, together they reveal recurring mechanisms emerging from the interaction of state practices, border infrastructures, environmental conditions, and institutional responses across different places and moments.

Presented chronologically, the following summaries of our reconstructions enable a comparative reading of the cases. The full counter-investigation of each case, including the complete evidentiary reconstruction, spatial analysis, witness testimonies, and visualisations, is available in annex to this report and on the accompanying digital platform.

The death of Ahmed Hamid Mhaidi Al-Zuwayyin

Ahmed Hamid Mhaidi Al-Zuwayyin was a 29-year-old Iraqi Kurd, a husband and father to a young daughter. He died on 19 September 2021, becoming one of the first documented deaths at the Polish–Belarusian border following the introduction of the state of emergency and the establishment of the so-called "no-go zone" earlier that month.[350] After being subjected to multiple pushbacks, he was found dead by the Polish Border Guard on 19 September 2021 in a forest near Frącki, on the Polish side of the border. According to the testimony of two migrants who had travelled with him, Ahmed experienced severe disorientation, vomiting, and paradoxical undressing before his death.[351]



Figure 4.11. Photograph of Ahmed Hamid Mhaidi Al-Zuwayyin from his Facebook account.

In the days following Ahmed's death, the Polish government issued an RCB emergency text message to Polish and foreign mobile phone numbers detected near the border. The alert stated: "The Polish border is protected. You are being deceived by the Belarusian authorities. Return to Minsk! Do not take any pills from Belarusian soldiers."[352] Recipients were directed to a government website containing further instructions and warnings.

350 Piotr Czaban, "Ahmed zmarł we wrześniu niedaleko wsi Frącki. 'Do tej pory nie mamy pojęcia, jaka była przyczyna śmierci'," *Fakty po Południu*, TVN24, 17 October 2021. https://fakty.tvn24.pl/fakty-po-poludniu/stan-wyjatkowy-ahmed-byl-pierwsza-ofiara-kryzysu-na-granicy-do-tej-pory-nie-mamy-pojecia-jaka-byla-przyczyna-smierci-ra1081259-ls6319879.

351 Piotr Czaban, *Ahmed Was the First: Interview with a Witness to His Death*, YouTube video, Czaban robi raban, published November 2, 2025, https://patronite.pl/post/89195/ahmed-byl-pierwszy-rozmowa-ze-swiadkiem-smierci.

352 Ministry of the Interior and Administration of the Republic of Poland, "Information for Migrants," official public information for migrants, accessed August 5, 2026, https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia-en/information-for-migrants.

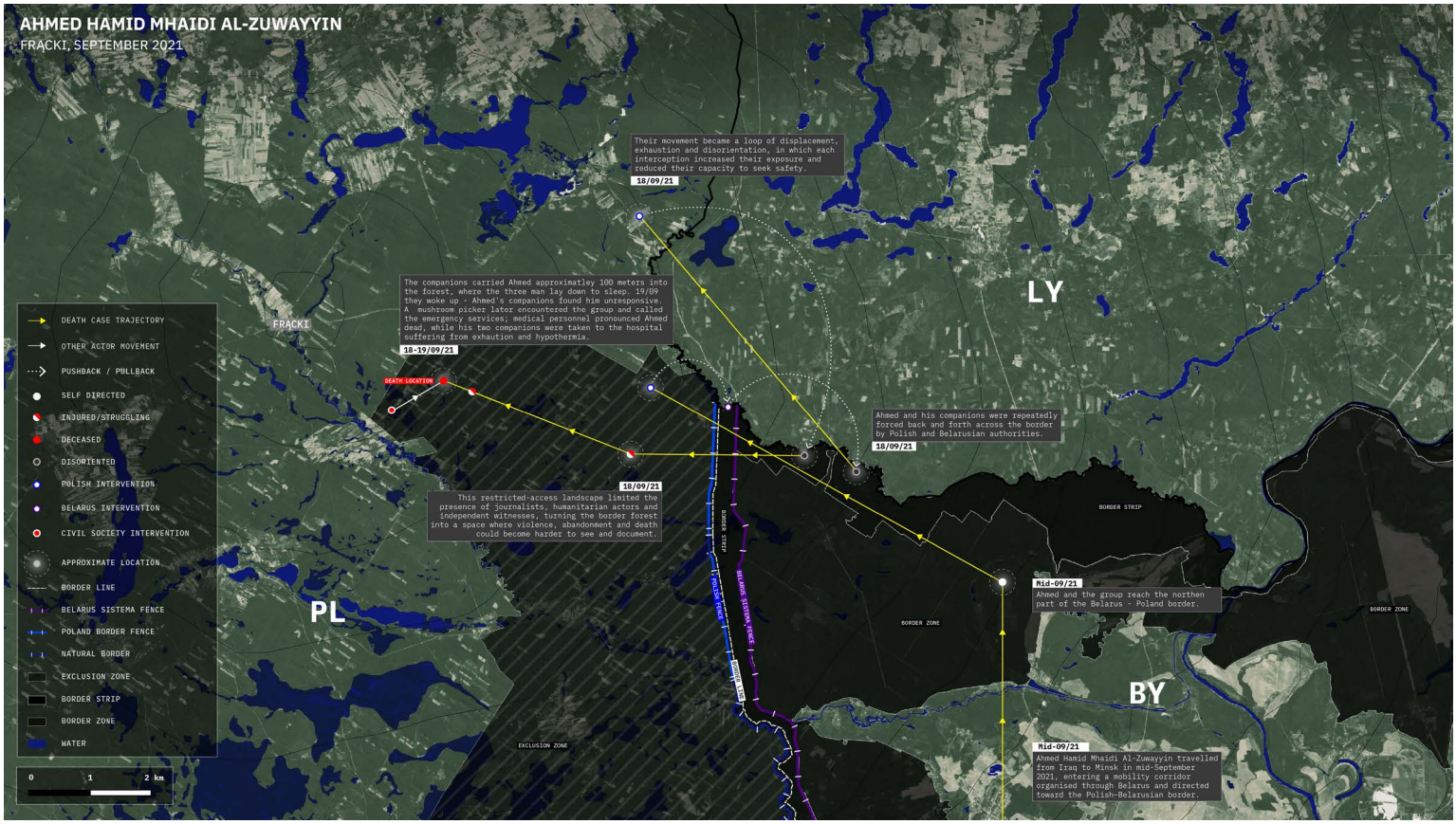


Figure 4.12. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Ahmed Hamid Mhaidi Al-Zuwayyin. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

The public communication surrounding Ahmed's death focused on deception by the Belarusian authorities and alleged substance use, while omitting the cumulative effects of repeated pushbacks, environmental exposure, and the absence of assistance preceding his death.[353] Ahmed's family subsequently encountered prolonged difficulties in obtaining information about his fate and the circumstances of his death[354]. The prosecutor's investigation established hypothermia and exhaustion as the immediate causes of death. Toxicological analysis found no evidence of psychoactive substances.

The death of Muhammad Yasin Jassem

Muhammad Yasin Jassem, a 31-year-old Syrian national, died between 9 and 12 November 2021 in the Polish–Belarusian border zone. According to the testimony of his younger brother, Bashar, Muhammad's health rapidly deteriorated shortly after they crossed into Poland, eventually preventing him from continuing the journey. After leaving him with food and water, Bashar sought assistance from the Polish Border Guard, reporting Muhammad's condition and providing information about his location. According to the available evidence, no rescue operation followed. Instead, Bashar was returned to Belarus in an undocumented pushback, preventing him from returning to Muhammad.

353 Mariusz Kamiński, *Mariusz Kamiński on the Pressure of Migrants on Poland's Eastern Border*, official government press conference, Chancellery of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland, YouTube video, 20 September 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ohx504k-bW-4 (accessed 6 June 2026).

354 In the absence of an institutional mechanism for informing and assisting the family, journalist Piotr Czaban provided practical support by obtaining information and guiding the family through the relevant administrative procedures. This illustrates how functions ordinarily performed by state institutions were instead carried out by individual civil-society actors.

On 12 November 2021, Muhammad's body was discovered by a forest guard near Wólka Terechowska. By that time, his passport had been confiscated by the Polish Border Guard, removing a key means of identification. The body was subsequently buried as an unidentified person (NN), delaying both formal identification and notification of his family. For the following five months, Muhammad's relatives searched for him without knowing his fate. His identity was established only after investigative journalist Piotr Czaban traced the burial site and initiated the process leading to the correction of official records.

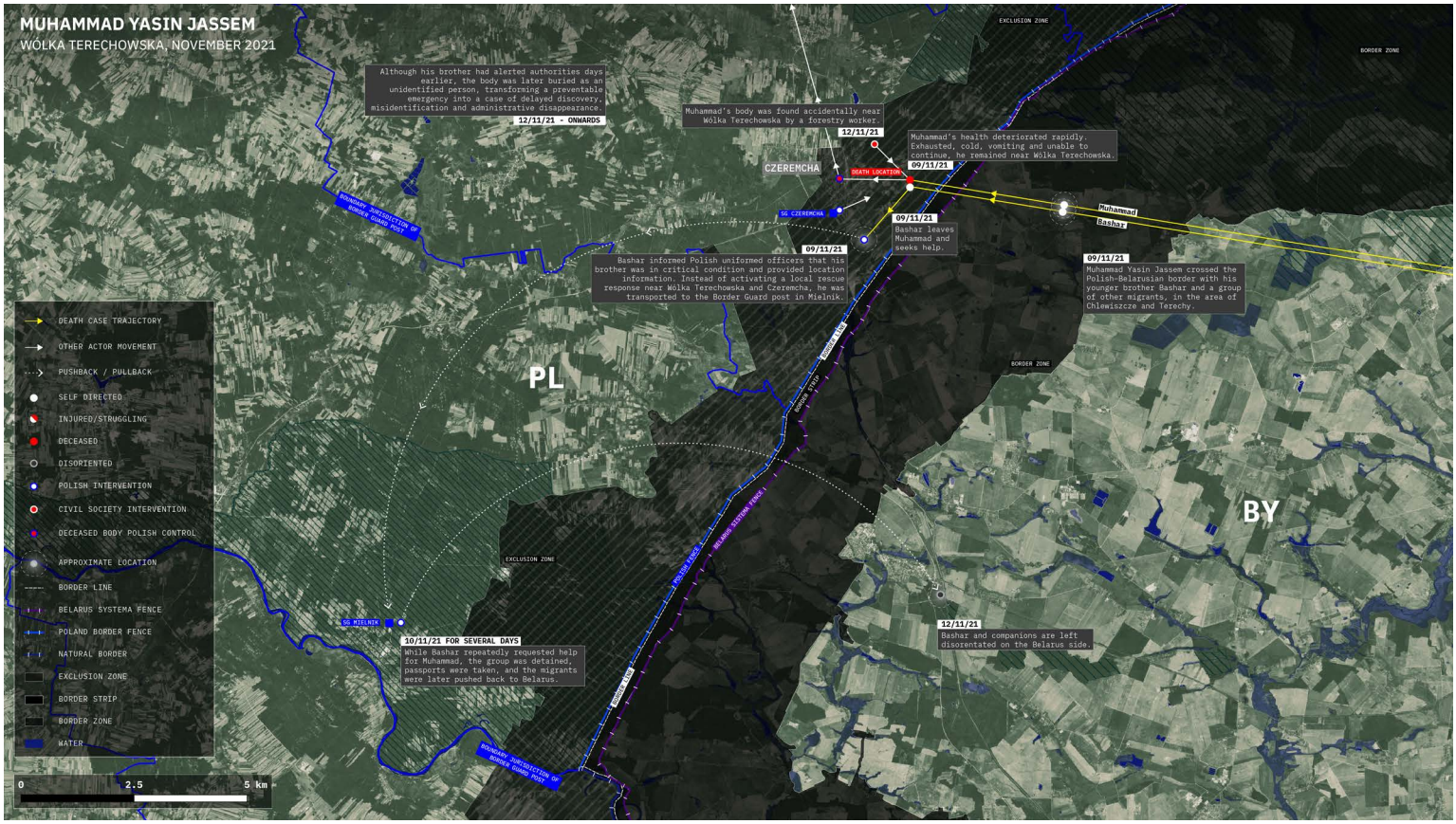


Figure 4.13. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Muhammad Yasin Jassem. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

This case illustrates how the absence of rescue was followed by a second process of institutional erasure, in which the loss of identity became an additional form of violence affecting both the deceased and his family.

The death of Yassin Sattar Jabr

Yassin Sattar Jabr, a 25-year-old Iraqi national, crossed the Polish–Belarusian border with a group of companions in October 2021. According to available evidence, he was last seen alive on 19 October 2021 by one of his companions while the latter was being transported to hospital in a Polish Border Guard vehicle. Between October 2021 and March 2022, the border region experienced prolonged winter conditions, including temperatures falling to approximately –20°C and heavy snowfall in the Białowieża Forest.



Figure 4.14. Yassin Sattar Jabr (left) resting in a forest during his journey through Poland. The photograph was later provided to journalist Piotr Czaban by one of Yassin's travelling companions.

On 24 March 2022, Yassin's body was accidentally discovered by employees of the State Forests near Białowieża, close to a forest path. At the time, the area remained subject to state-imposed restrictions on access, limiting entry primarily to state authorities – including the Border Guard, the military, and the police – while local residents retained access. Police officers, the

prosecutor's office, and a forensic medical examiner attended the scene. The body was found in an advanced state of decomposition. According to the medical examiner, the condition of the remains indicated prolonged exposure to environmental conditions over several months.

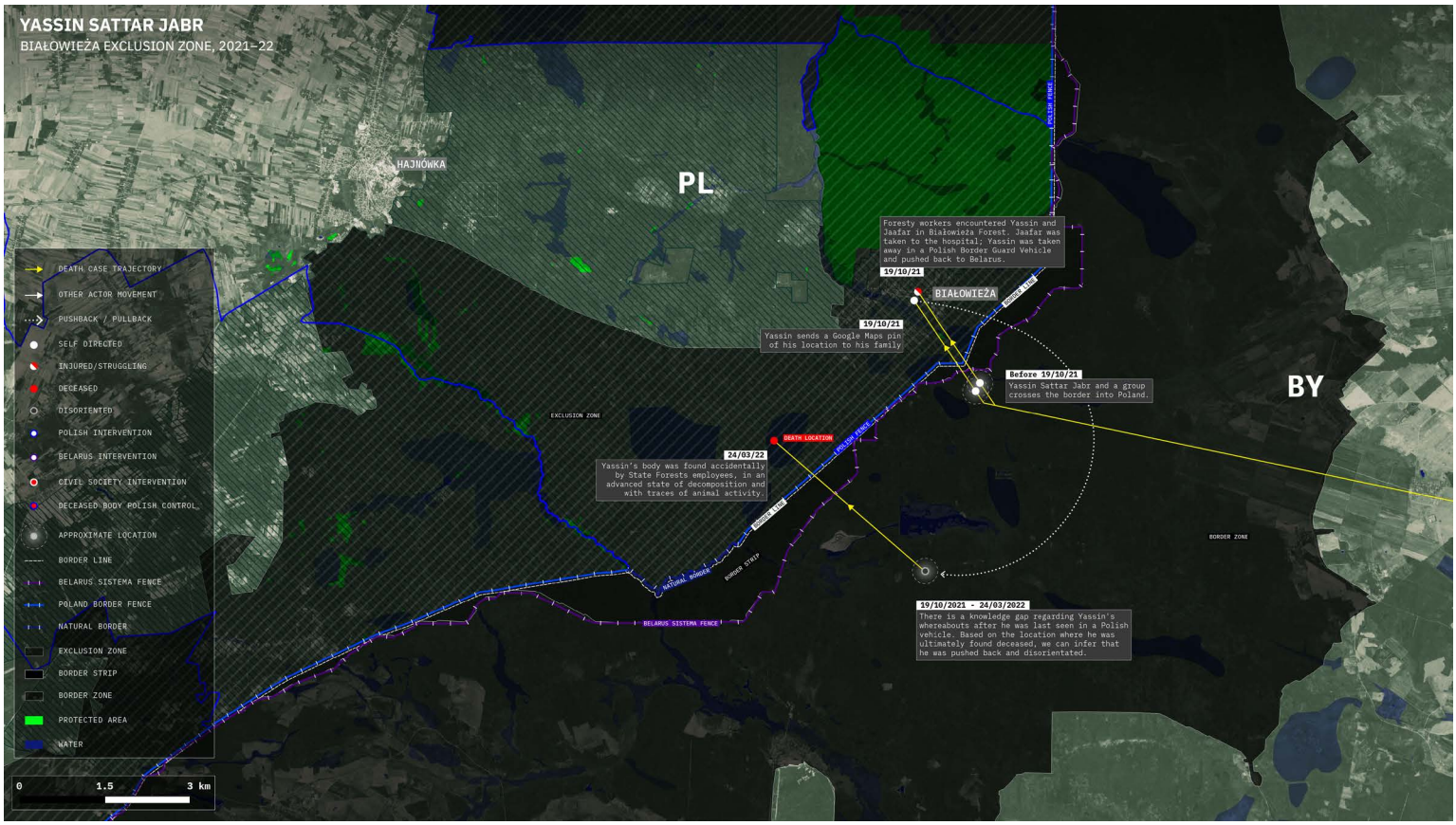


Figure 4.15. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Yassin Sattar Jabr. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Although fragments of clothing, a necklace, a mobile phone, and a phone case containing a photograph were recovered from the scene, the prosecutor's office was unable to establish the deceased's identity. At the same time, numerous families were searching for relatives who had disappeared in the border zone and faced significant administrative barriers in obtaining information. On 16 May 2022, investigative journalist Piotr Czaban published information about the case, including the location of the body and a description of the recovered clothing. This initiated a broader identification effort, which ultimately led to confirmation of Yassin's identity. At the request of his family, his body was repatriated to Iraq. The investigation into the circumstances of his death was conducted by the District Prosecutor's Office in Suwałki.





Figure 4.16. Two photographs documenting the search for Yassin Sattar Jabr, a 25-year-old man from Iraq, in the Białowieża Forest on 24 March 2022, the day his body was found. The first shows members of a grassroots search-and-rescue group during the search; the second documents a photograph recovered among the personal belongings found with his body. Photographs by Adam Wajrak, 2022.

This case illustrates how prolonged environmental exposure, restricted access to the border zone, and difficulties in identifying recovered bodies contributed to the delayed recognition of the deceased and prolonged uncertainty for families searching for missing relatives.

The death of Mahlet Kassa

Mahlet Kassa, a 28-year-old Ethiopian national, was found dead on 12 February 2023 in a forest near Hajnówka, approximately one kilometer from a local school. According to the testimony of her travelling companions, Mahlet crossed into Poland during the early morning hours of 3 February 2023. While walking towards Hajnówka, her physical condition rapidly deteriorated and she became unable to continue. Mahlet remained in the forest with one member of the group, while two others walked to the nearest town to seek assistance. There they encountered a local security guard, who notified the police and the Polish Border Guard. According to the available evidence, the companions were subsequently returned to Belarus through an undocumented pushback, while no coordinated search-and-rescue operation was initiated despite information concerning Mahlet's critical condition and reported location. Mahlet's body was located nine days later on the basis of information provided by her companions after they had been pushed back to Belarus, re-established communication, and contacted civil society emergency networks at POPH.



Figure 4.17. Portrait of Mahlet Kassa. Unknown Photographer, date unknown.

This case illustrates how the failure to initiate mandatory search-and-rescue procedures after receiving information that a person's life was in immediate danger, together with the undocumented pushback of the companions who knew Mahlet's location, became a central element of the reconstructed chain of events leading to her death.

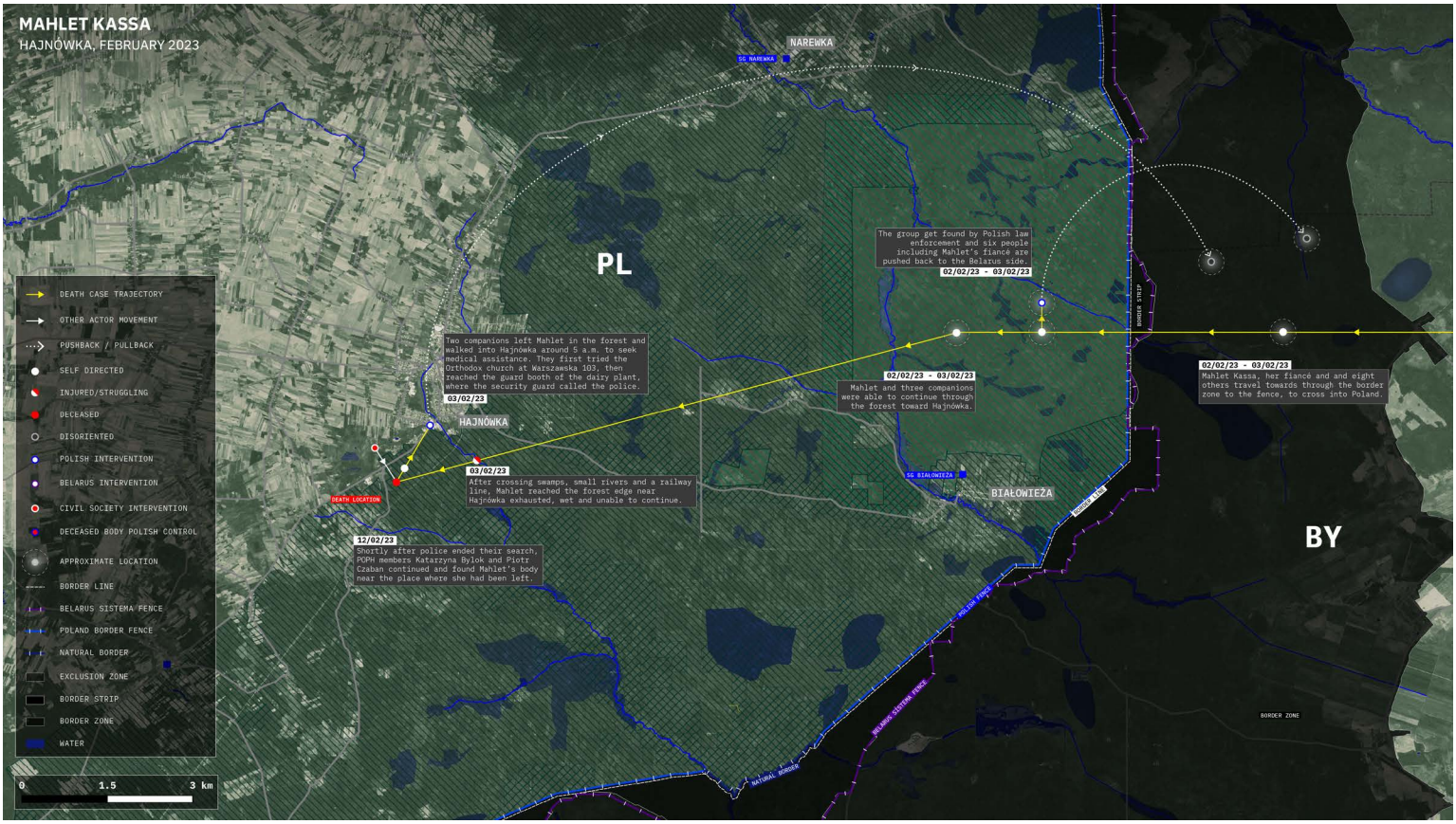


Figure 4.18. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Mahlet Kassa. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Mahlet Kassa's case serves as a recurring analytical thread throughout this report and is revisited in Chapter Five, where we examine the legal proceedings and questions of institutional accountability arising from her death.

The death of Mohammad Jan Goorbaz

The opening vignette of this chapter introduced Mohammad Jan Goorbaz's case through the perspective of those searching for him. The summary below presents the principal findings of our counter-investigation.



Figure 4.19. Photograph of Mohammad Jan Goorbaz provided by his family following his death in Poland. Source: Podlasie Volunteer Rescue Service (POPH).

Mohammad Jan Goorbaz, a 27-year-old Afghan national, disappeared in February 2023 after crossing the Poland–Belarus border into the Białowieża Forest. On the evening of 20 February, humanitarian actors received information that Mohammad was alive but in critical condition. Efforts were immediately undertaken to initiate a search-and-rescue

operation. According to the available evidence, humanitarian actors notified the police because of the urgency of the situation and severe weather conditions. The police initially refused to accept a missing person report and redirected responsibility to the Polish Border Guard. After several hours, state search efforts were discontinued, while civil society actors continued attempts to locate Mohammad.

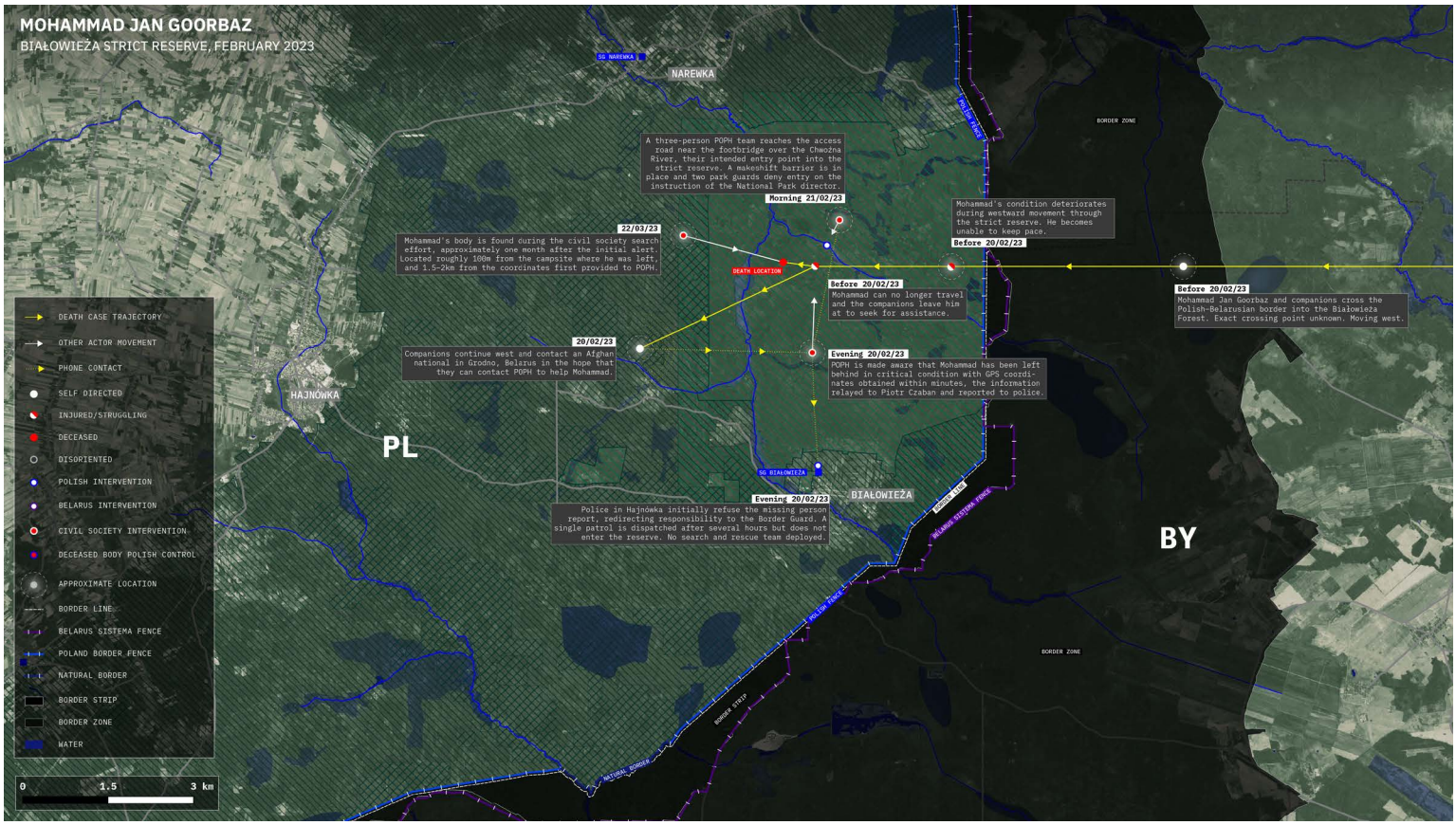


Figure 4.20. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Mohammad Jan Goorbaz. Source: Border Forensics, 2025.

On 21 February, following communication between investigative journalist Piotr Czaban and the police, civil society actors requested access to the strictly protected reserve of the Białowieża National Park, where Mohammad was believed to be located. According to the available evidence, it was indicated that permission from the park's director would be obtained through the police, although no formal authorisation was subsequently issued. In the early morning of 22 February, a search team including Adam Wajrak, Rafał Kowalczyk, Eliza Kowalczyk, and other experienced field researchers was stopped by National Park guards and denied access to the reserve. As a result, the planned search operation could not be carried out.

In the following weeks, further efforts were made to establish Mohammad's whereabouts based on information that the area would be searched by state authorities. On 21 March 2023, after approximately one month of searching, civil society actors located Mohammad's body in the strictly protected reserve of the Białowieża National Park. According to the reconstructed evidence, the body was found in a different location from that initially indicated by Mohammad's companions, suggesting that he may have remained alive and continued moving after the first distress information had been transmitted.

This case illustrates how the pushback regime extended beyond the control of migrant mobility to the regulation of rescue itself. The failure to initiate an effective state-led search-and-rescue operation, coupled with restrictions on access to the border zone and the exclusion of experienced civil society search teams, became integral components of organised abandonment, contributing to the reconstructed chain of events that culminated in Mohammad's death.

The death of Issam Mohammed Ali Heslan

Issam Mohammed Ali Heslan, a 55-year-old Yemeni national, entered Belarus with his 14-year-old son in late December 2023 as part of a group attempting to cross into Poland. According to the available evidence, the group spent approximately ten days in the restricted border zone and was subjected to pushbacks. During this period, Issam became separated from his son, who subsequently remained in Minsk. According to information later provided by Issam's daughter when reporting his disappearance, Issam had previously informed his family that he had been pushed back from Poland to Belarus. As undocumented pushbacks generally leave no administrative record of migrants' contact with Polish authorities, this information could not be independently verified.



Figure 4.21. Photograph showing Issam Mohammed Ali Heslan in the forest in the Belarus–Poland border area during his journey in winter 2023–2024. The photograph, provided by his daughter, shows the temporary shelter used while staying in the forest. Photograph from Issam Mohammed Ali Heslan's family archive.

According to the testimony of members of the group travelling with him, Issam was last seen during the night of 6–7 January 2024 on the Belarusian side of the border while attempting to leave the restricted border zone (see Chapter Two for a description of the border infrastructure). Witnesses reported hearing border guard dogs, after which the

group dispersed. They subsequently heard Issam shouting and observed uniformed officers approaching his location. Contact with him was lost thereafter, and his phone remained unreachable from February 2024 onwards.

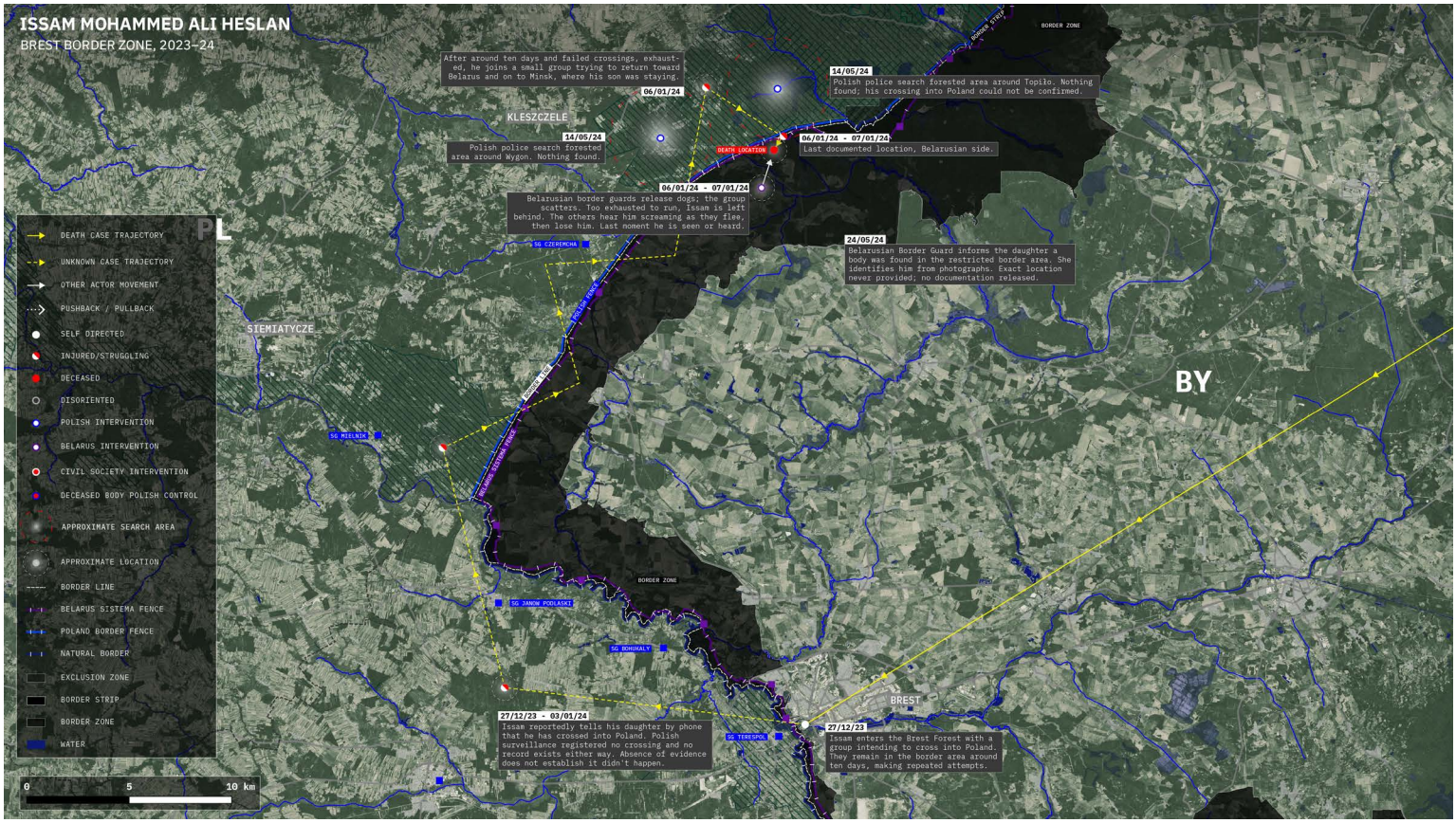


Figure 4.22. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Mohammed Ali Heslan. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

In February 2024, Issam's daughter reported his disappearance to civil society organisations in Poland. In an effort to establish her father's fate, she also contacted the Belarusian authorities directly. In May 2024, she received a reply informing her that Issam had died together with a photograph confirming his identity. According to the information communicated by the Belarusian authorities, his body had been recovered from the restricted border zone after remaining in the forest for approximately four months before being transferred to a morgue. No further information concerning the circumstances of his death was provided.

This case illustrates how the militarised infrastructure of the restricted border zone extended migrants' exposure to harm even after attempts to cross the border had ended, contributing to disappearance, delayed body recovery, and prolonged uncertainty for families.

The death of Waleed Abdulkareem Qasem

Waleed Abdulkareem Qasem, was a 37-year-old Yemeni national, who died on 6 January 2024 near the Polish–Belarusian border after being found unconscious by Belarusian border guards alongside a Syrian man. His earlier trajectory, the circumstances preceding his death, and the medical cause of death remain unknown. The case is primarily documented through footage produced by Belarusian state authorities, in which Waleed's body and testimony alleging violence and a pushback by Polish forces are incorporated into a broader narrative concerning Polish and European border violence. While such violence has been independently documented, the available material concerning this case does not allow to verify these accusations and excludes the role of Belarusian forces.

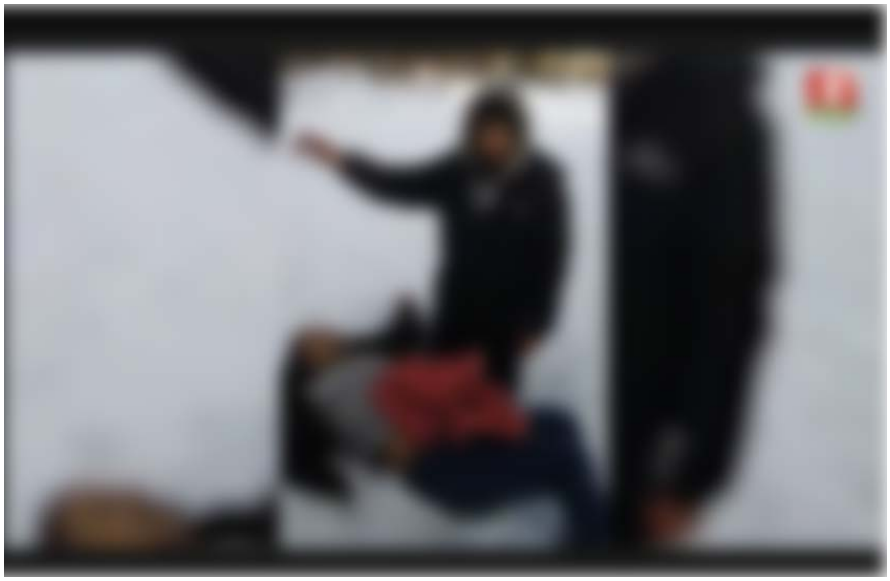


Figure 4.23. Still from a video published by a Belarusian state broadcaster on YouTube following the discovery of two men near the Poland–Belarus border on 6 January 2024. [355]

According to the State Border Committee of the Republic of Belarus, on 6 January 2024 Belarusian border guards encountered two men – citizens of Yemen and Syria – close to the Polish border, probably in the Kamyenyets district. Both were reportedly exhausted and in need of medical assistance; the Yemeni man was unconscious.

355 Международное радио „Беларусь" [International Radio „Belarus"], „Polish Servicemen Leave Two Refugees at Border, One Dies," YouTube video, 0:41, January 9, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1yFue7T9Lg.

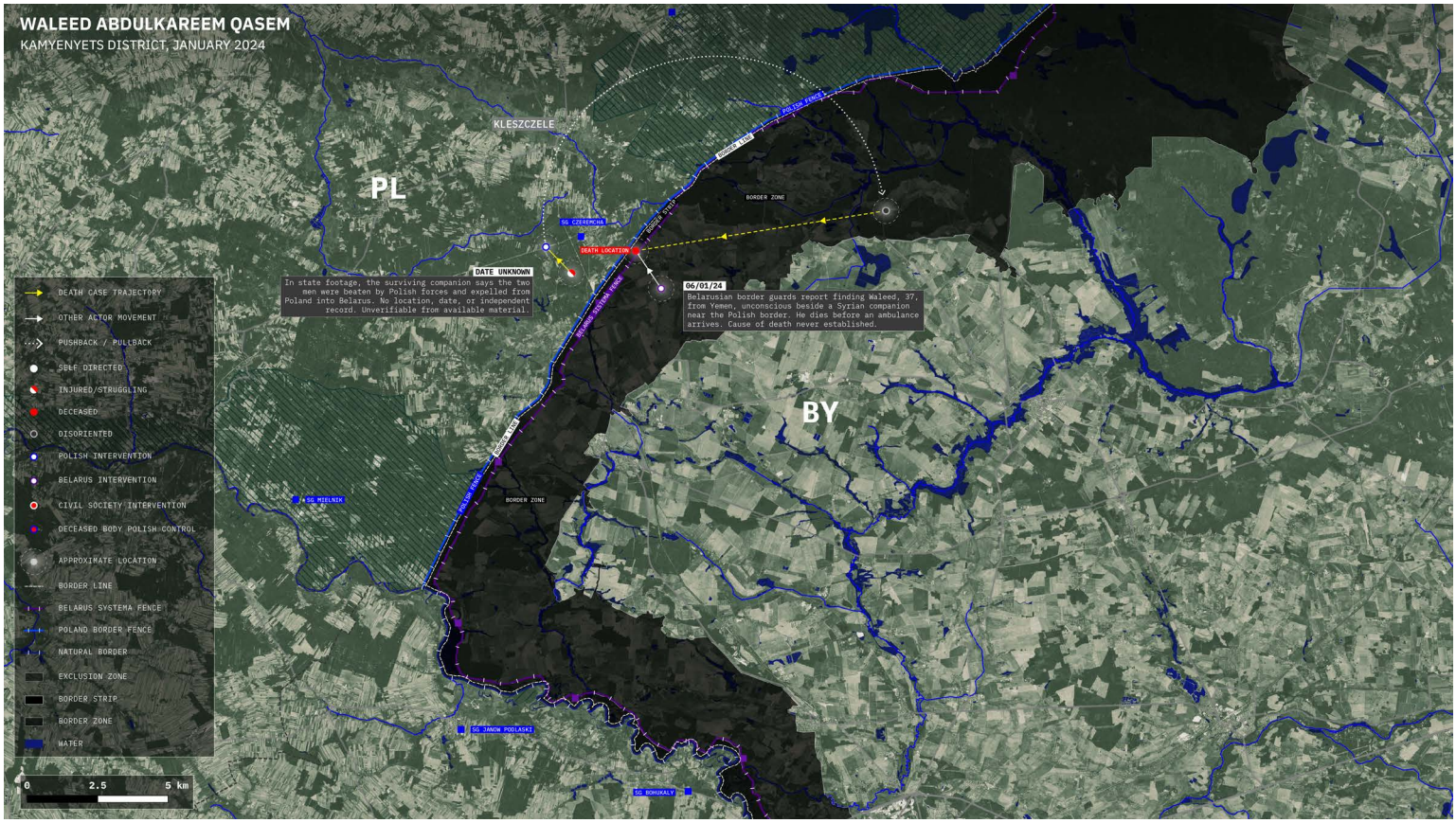


Figure 4.24. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Waleed Abdulkareem Qasem. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

The Yemeni man was Waleed Abdulkareem Qasem. According to the Belarusian authorities, he died before an ambulance reached the location. No autopsy report or other publicly available medical documentation establishes his immediate cause of death.

The location is significant to the conditions under which the available evidence was produced. Waleed and his companion were found within the highly militarised Belarusian border zone, a territory controlled by the Belarusian Border Guard and other state security structures, where independent access by journalists, civil society organisations and external observers is severely restricted. The encounter, access to the two men, the documentation of Waleed's body, and the recording of the surviving witness therefore took place within a space whose physical and informational access was controlled by the Belarusian state.

The footage subsequently broadcast by Belarusian state television shows Waleed lying motionless on snow-covered ground, with another man beside him. The surrounding landscape is covered in snow. The surviving man, identified in the available materials as a Syrian national travelling with Waleed, describes events that he says preceded their arrival at this location, in particular violence that he attributes to Polish forces and states that the two men had been expelled from Poland into Belarus. His account therefore constitutes a potentially important trace for

reconstructing Waleed's trajectory immediately before his death, however we could not corroborate it.

Waleed's case illustrates the lethal violence of the pushback regime and points to the circumstances that may lead to deaths on the Belarusian side of the border following pushbacks. However, the case should be treated with caution as it also exemplifies the way violations and deaths have come to be embedded into the conflictual relations between Poland and Belarus, which may lead to substantial distortion of facts, in particular the occlusion of the responsibility of the state formulating the accusation.

The death of Binyam Molla Tegegne

Binyam Molla Tegegne, a 26-year-old Ethiopian national, last contacted his family on 12 March 2025. He was reported missing on 19 March 2025 after attempting to cross the Poland–Belarus border. According to testimonies gathered during the investigation, on 18 March 2025, a group of migrants crossing the Bug River informed Polish Border Guard officers, soldiers, and police officers present on the riverbank that two members of the group had drowned during the crossing. According to the available evidence, no search operation was initiated following these reports.



Figure 4.25. Photograph of Binyam Molla Tegegne shared with this investigation by Piotr Czaban. Photograph from Tegegne family archive.

In April 2025, the body of an unidentified man was recovered from the Bug River near the village of Stary Bubel and registered as an unidentified person (NN). Efforts undertaken by investigative journalist Piotr Czaban and civil society actors to contact families of missing migrants led to the provisional identification of the deceased. Based on photographs of the clothing and footwear recovered with the body, Binyam's relatives identified him. Despite this, he officially remained classified as a missing person while the recovered body continued to be registered as unidentified pending formal DNA confirmation involving his brother.

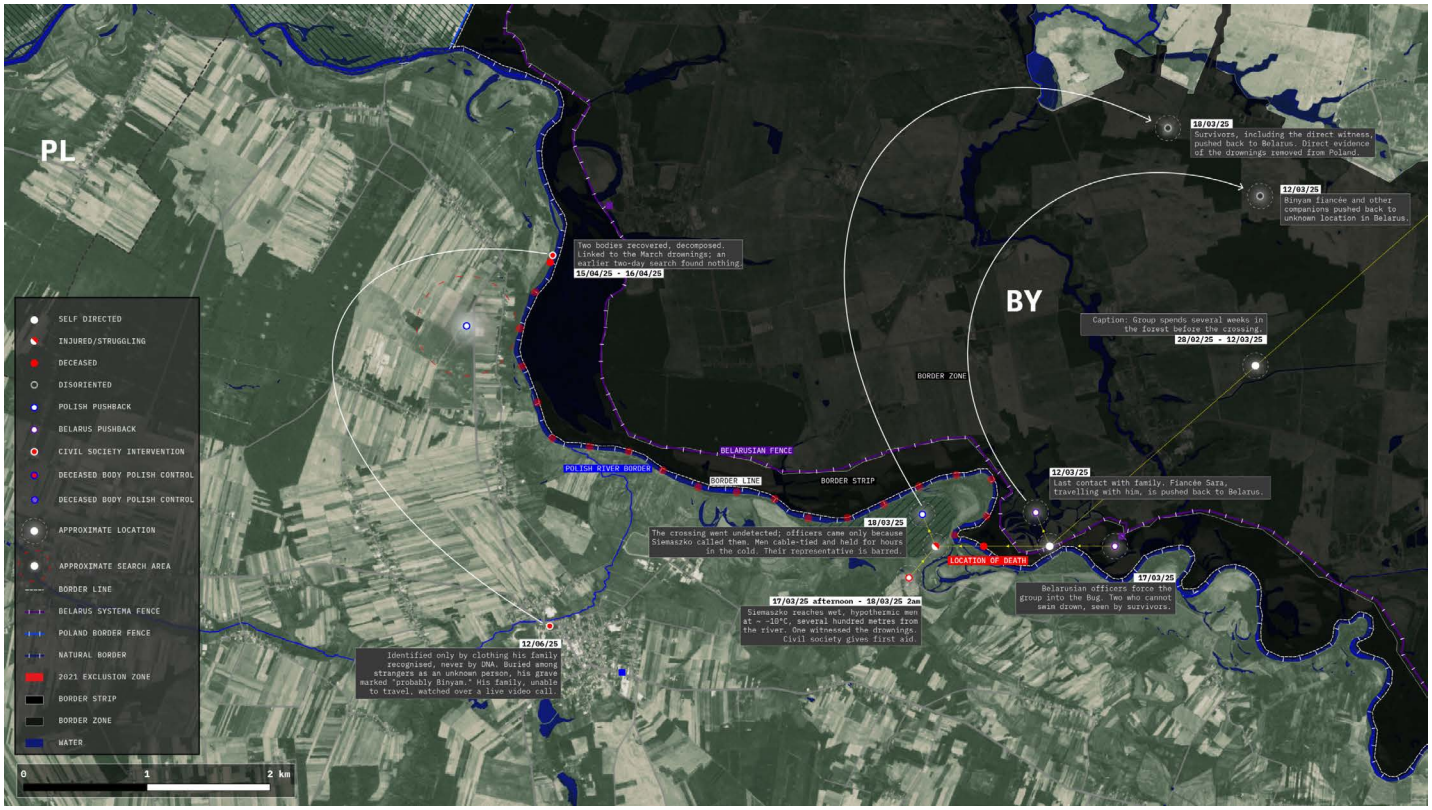


Figure 4.26. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Binyam Molla Tegegne. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

On 12 June 2025, Binyam was buried at the municipal cemetery in Janów Podlaski alongside another Ethiopian national, Halid Abdel Ali, whose body had also been recovered from the Bug River on the same day and likewise remained officially unidentified. Although both bodies continued to be classified as unidentified by the prosecutor's office, their families identified them through photographs of personal belongings recovered with the bodies. At the time of writing, the formal identification process remains ongoing. Binyam's grave bears the inscription "Probably Binyam Molla Tegegne" together with the prosecutor's case reference number, reflecting the continuing gap between the family's identification of the deceased and his formal legal identification.

This case illustrates how the failure to initiate search operations following reports of drowning, combined with prolonged failures in the formal identification of recovered bodies, extended uncertainty for families even after the deceased had been located.

The death of Wazir Khan Sahak

In mid-February 2025, Wazir crossed the Poland–Belarus border through the Świsłocz River. On 15 February, he was apprehended by Polish state authorities apprehended him and took him to the Polish Border Guard facility in Bobrowniki. The following day, he was formally identified, issued with a return decision, and pushed back to Belarus.

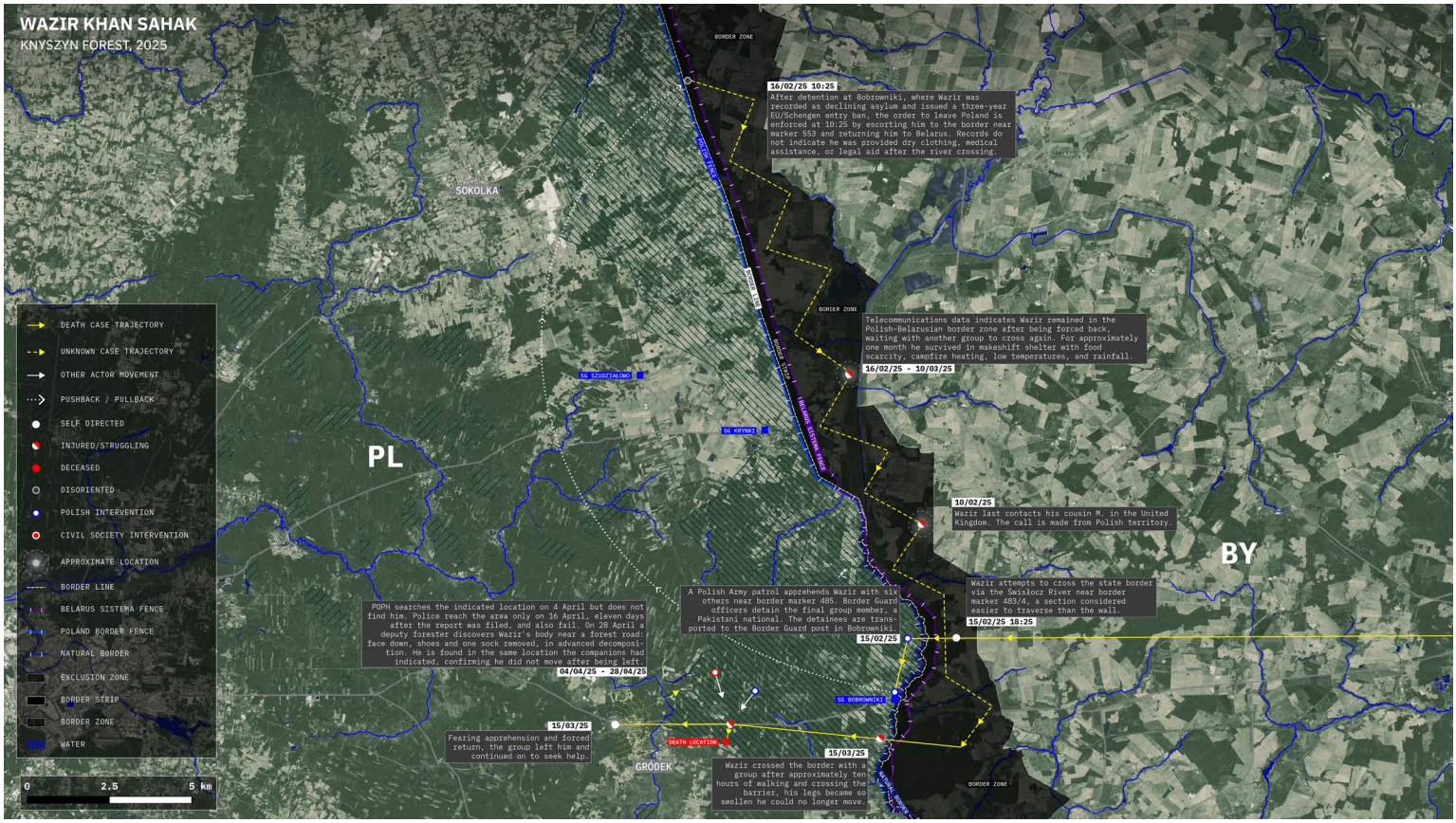


Figure 4.27. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Wazir Khan Sahak. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

According to the reconstructed evidence, Wazir remained in the border zone for several weeks, hiding with other migrants while exposed to prolonged cold, rain, and physical exhaustion. On 10 March 2025, he made his last phone call to his cousin. Around 15 March, after crossing into Poland again, his physical condition deteriorated to the point where he was no longer able to move. His location was communicated to relatives, who attempted to report his disappearance and obtain assistance but encountered administrative barriers.

Nearly three weeks later, Wazir's cousin contacted the Podlaskie

Humanitarian Emergency Service (POPH), requesting that the reported location be searched. On 4 April, a civil society search team reached the indicated area but did not locate him. On 5 April, a formal missing person report was submitted to the police, stating that Wazir was immobilised and required urgent assistance. In the following days, the case was processed administratively and transferred between police units. According to the available documentation, the reporting person was not informed of the actions undertaken. Although information suggesting that Wazir may have drowned had also been communicated, no search operation was initiated until 16 April, when police officers searched the area. On 28 April 2025 – more than one month after Wazir had become immobilised – a forestry worker discovered his body in the Waliły Forest District. The following day, the prosecutor's office opened an investigation into his death.

On 22 December 2025, the prosecutor discontinued the investigation, identifying hypothermia (acute circulatory-respiratory failure caused by exposure to cold) as the immediate physiological cause of death.

This case illustrates how repeated pushbacks, prolonged exposure to environmental conditions, delays in initiating search operations despite repeated reports of imminent danger, and fragmented administrative procedures became interconnected elements in the reconstructed chain of events leading to Wazir's death.

Recuring lethal mechanisms across cases

The ten reconstructions summarised above demonstrate that the documented deaths were not isolated incidents but recurring outcomes of the broader pushback regime analysed in the preceding chapters. As discussed in chapters 1–3, this regime emerged through the interaction of Belarusian and Polish state practices, the securitised responses adopted by the European Union, border infrastructures, and the progressive normalisation of pushbacks and other exceptional measures. While each death unfolded under distinct circumstances, their reconstruction reveals how these broader political, legal, and operational dynamics became materialised in individual cases, repeatedly generating lethal outcomes. This web of interactions generating similar outcomes – what we refer to as mechanisms – allows us to see recurring sequences of practices and events – at times combined in different order – which connect the in/actions of law enforcement agents (such as pushbacks or refusals of assistance) with their cumulative effects (such as exhaustion, immobilisation, and ultimately death). Drawing on these reconstructions, we identify five recurring mechanisms leading to migrant deaths. The mechanisms identified below should not be understood as discrete or independent processes. Rather, they form successive and cumulative stages of the same lethal trajectory, each reinforcing the effects of the others across individual cases.

Law enforcement practices

Across the reconstructed cases, law enforcement practices repeatedly placed migrants in situations of prolonged displacement, environmental exposure, and increasing physical vulnerability. These practices included pushbacks, deprivation of liberty, repeated transfers between jurisdictions, and forced returns to the border zone (as discussed in Chapter Three). While some pushbacks were undocumented or documented through administrative decisions, others were reconstructed from consistent testimonies provided by survivors, relatives, and travelling companions. Because undocumented pushbacks generally leave little or no institutional trace, they could not always be independently verified through official records.

Rather than constituting isolated incidents, these practices repeatedly produced the same operational sequence. Pushbacks prolonged migrants' presence within the border zone, forcing them to remain hidden from state authorities while repeatedly attempting to move through

forests, wetlands, and rivers. Repeated displacement generated cumulative exhaustion, disorientation, and the fragmentation of travelling groups, leaving injured or immobilised individuals increasingly isolated from assistance.

At the same time, institutional responsibilities became fragmented. Reports concerning missing migrants were frequently redirected between the police and the Border Guard. While the police hold statutory responsibilities for missing-person searches within Polish territory, the Border Guard simultaneously implemented border enforcement measures, including undocumented pushbacks (see Chapter Two). This institutional configuration repeatedly delayed or prevented effective search-and-rescue responses. The repeated displacement of migrants through pushbacks did not itself produce death. Rather, it created the conditions under which border infrastructures and environmental exposure, discussed in the following sections, became progressively more lethal.

The cumulative effect of these practices is to prolong migrants' exposure to life-threatening conditions while simultaneously reducing the likelihood of timely rescue.

Border infrastructure

As demonstrated across the reconstructed cases, border infrastructure does not prevent movement but selectively channels it. While the Polish border barrier has substantially restricted crossings along fortified sections, it has not eliminated them. Instead, migrants are repeatedly forced to cross at locations where the barrier is absent, discontinuous, or more permeable – most commonly along rivers, wetlands, and densely forested areas. Rather than crossing the border at random, migrants are funnelled into a limited number of environmentally hazardous corridors (see Chapter Three). These routes frequently require movement through rivers, peatlands, wetlands, dense forests, and protected nature reserves, often along unmarked or animal paths and in areas without GSM coverage or nearby infrastructure. This spatial channelling produces two cumulative effects. First, it concentrates movement within environments associated with greater physiological risk, including cold-water immersion, prolonged physical exertion, and delayed access to assistance. Second, it spatially isolates migrants precisely where rescue operations become most difficult to initiate and conduct. Border infrastructure therefore operates not only as a barrier but as a mechanism that actively redistributes

exposure to lethal environmental conditions across the landscape. The reconstructed cases demonstrate that migrants did not encounter these environments by chance. Rather, they reached them because border infrastructure constrained the range of available routes through the border zone. As the geostatistical analysis in the following section demonstrates, these environmentally hazardous corridors also correspond to the spatial concentration of documented deaths.

Environmental exposure and forced immobility

Across the reconstructed cases, environmental conditions did not function as a neutral backdrop but became active components of the push-back regime. Repeated displacement into rivers, wetlands, forests, and other difficult terrain, combined with prolonged exposure to low temperatures, water, precipitation, and physical exertion, progressively increase physiological stress, heat loss, and the risk of hypothermia, and reduced migrants' physiological capacity to continue moving.

Across the cases, as exhaustion, hypothermia, injury, or drowning progressively impaired movement, individuals became increasingly dependent on timely search-and-rescue interventions for survival. In multiple cases however, this moment coincided with delayed, absent, or ineffective rescue responses, substantially reducing the chances of survival.

Environmental conditions also shaped what happened after death. Wetlands, rivers, dense forests, and areas with limited accessibility delayed the discovery of bodies, while decomposition, flooding, and animal activity altered or dispersed human remains, complicating identification and the reconstruction of the circumstances of death. In some cases, bodies remained undiscovered for weeks or months; in others, they have never been recovered. In this way environmental conditions functioned both as mechanisms of lethal harm and as mechanisms of disappearance, obscuring evidentiary traces and limiting the reconstruction of the chain of events leading to death.

Organised abandonment

Across multiple reconstructed cases, state authorities received information that migrants were in life-threatening situations, often including their approximate or precise location. Rather than consistently triggering an effective search-and-rescue response, these reports were frequently met with delayed action, fragmented institutional responses, or the prioriti-

sation of border enforcement over the protection of life (see also Chapter Three).

The reconstructed cases reveal a recurring operational sequence. Reports of persons requiring urgent assistance were redirected between institutions, search-and-rescue operations were delayed or not initiated, and in some cases individuals seeking help or reporting the location of those left behind were themselves subjected to undocumented pushbacks. At the same time, restrictions on access to the border zone and, in some instances, the criminalisation of humanitarian assistance limited the capacity of civil society actors to conduct rescue operations during the critical period in which survival remained possible.

Taken together, these practices produced *organised abandonment*: a recurrent form of state action involving both the refusal to activate state-led rescue operations and the obstruction of civil society rescue efforts reduced the likelihood of timely assistance. As illustrated by the reconstructed cases of Mahlet Kassa, Mohammad Jan Goorbaz, Binyam Molla Tegegne, and Wazir, these delays and omissions repeatedly coincided with the critical time window in which rescue remained possible. Across the reconstructed cases, the loss of this critical rescue window repeatedly marked the transition from severe environmental exposure to irreversible physiological collapse.

Disappearance and erasure

Death did not mark the end of the processes reconstructed in the analysed cases. Across multiple investigations, a second sequence emerged in which bodies, identities, and evidentiary traces progressively disappeared from institutional visibility. This occurred through delayed or accidental discovery of bodies, decomposition and environmental degradation of human remains, burial as unidentified persons (NN), the absence of documentation linking the deceased to their identity, and administrative barriers encountered by families seeking information.

The reconstructed cases also reveal institutional obstacles that further complicate identification, including the absence of effective international DNA comparison procedures, inconsistent assessment of evidence across police units and prosecutors' offices, and the limited evidentiary weight assigned to testimonies and documentation submitted by migrants, relatives, lawyers, journalists, and humanitarian organisations. Together, these practices repeatedly delayed both the identification of the

deceased and the reconstruction of the circumstances of death.

At the same time, the reconstructed cases reveal a recurring countervailing pattern. In numerous instances, the recovery of bodies, the identification of the deceased, and the reconstruction of events depended on the cumulative work of families, journalists, humanitarian organisations, scientists, lawyers, and local residents rather than on official investigative processes alone. Rather than replacing state investigations, these actors repeatedly generated the evidence on which subsequent official procedures depended.

The reconstructed cases demonstrate that these mechanisms do not operate independently or according to a fixed sequence. Rather, different combinations of law enforcement practices, border infrastructures, environmental exposure, organised abandonment, and post-mortem erasure repeatedly interacted to produce lethal outcomes. Although the specific trajectories differed between cases, the cumulative logic through which harm was produced remained remarkably consistent[356]. Having identified these recurring mechanisms through detailed counter-investigations of particular incidents, we now ask whether they also leave observable spatial, temporal, and environmental traces across the wider corpus of documented deaths. The geostatistical analysis that follows does not replace the detailed counter-investigations presented above. Instead, it asks whether the recurring mechanisms identified through those reconstructions also become visible at the scale of the broader dataset of documented deaths.

356 The reconstructions also demonstrate that the production of knowledge about these deaths followed a similarly recurrent pattern. Case after case, the recovery of bodies, the identification of the deceased, and the reconstruction of events depended on the cumulative work of families, journalists, humanitarian organisations, scientists, lawyers, and local residents. Rather than replacing official investigations, these actors repeatedly generated the evidentiary basis upon which subsequent investigations, legal proceedings, and counter-investigations became possible.

Geostatistical patterns of lethality

The ten counter-investigations presented above identify recurring mechanisms through which individual deaths were produced at the Poland–Belarus border. Because these reconstructed cases represent only a fraction of the documented deaths, this section examines whether the same mechanisms leave observable spatial, temporal, and environmental patterns across a wider dataset. The analysis draws on a dataset of 102 documented deaths recorded across the Polish–Belarusian borderlands. These were retained from a larger list of deaths documented up to 30 September 2025, after excluding cases that occurred outside the relevant border-zone context or were not sufficiently connected to the mechanisms examined here. Of the 102 retained cases, ninety-seven could be

spatially referenced as point locations at varying levels of precision, while five could only be associated with broader areas or non-point locations. Geospatial analyses therefore use the ninety-seven mapped records, while the five broader records are retained for contextual interpretation where relevant.

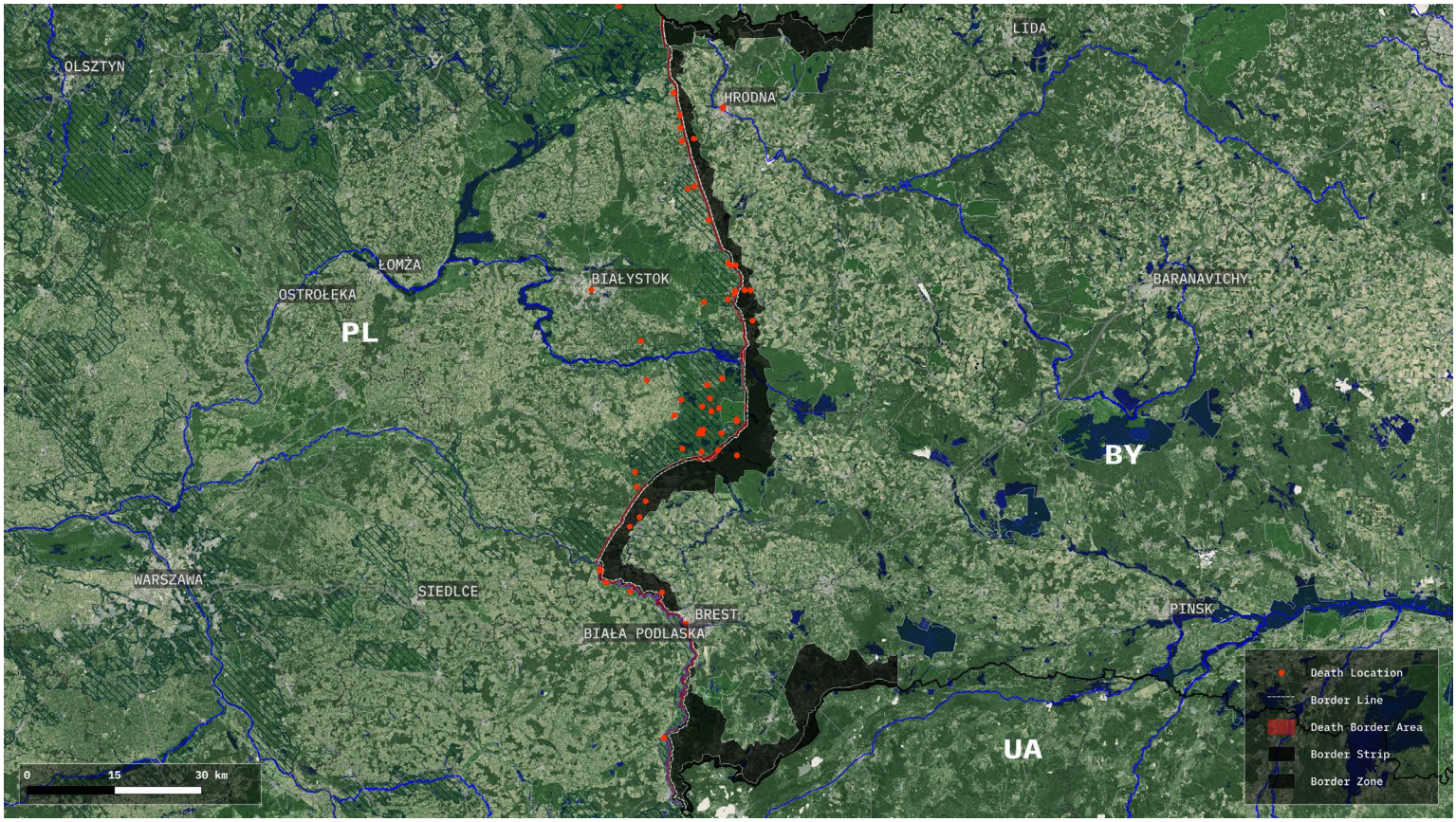


Figure 4.28. Map of deaths at the Polish–Belarus border. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Mapped body-recovery locations and broader area records overlaid with rivers and water bodies, wetlands, forests, protected areas, and restricted-access zones. Point locations represent the best available spatial reference for each case and vary in precision.

The wider dataset serves a different analytical purpose from the detailed counter-investigations. It does not record, for every case, the full sequence of pushbacks, route changes, group fragmentation, calls for assistance, institutional responses, forced im/mobility, or the circumstances leading to body recovery. These cumulative chains of causation can only be reconstructed through detailed case analysis. The geostatistical analysis instead examines the spatial distribution of the geolocated

locations where bodies were found and asks whether this distribution exhibits recurring patterns consistent with the mechanisms reconstructed above. It also enables us to identify broader regularities – including shifts in the geography and temporal distribution of deaths, recurring environmental concentrations, and changes associated with successive political, legal, and infrastructural transformations at the border – which cannot be reconstructed from individual cases alone.

This requires methodological caution. The analysed points represent the best available spatial reference for each case, but they vary in precision. In many cases, they refer to the location where a body was found rather than the precise location where death occurred. This distinction is particularly important in river-related cases, where bodies may be displaced by water before being recovered. Consequently, the spatial analysis examine whether body-recovery locations exhibit recurring spatial and environmental patterns consistent with the mechanisms identified through the counter-investigations.

To undertake this analysis, the reconstructed mechanisms are translated into a series of spatial and temporal expectations. Forced displacement and infrastructural channelling should be reflected in the spatial distribution of the locations where bodies were found, with concentrations occurring within or near forests, wetlands, rivers, border-adjacent routes, and other areas of limited accessibility. Environmental exposure and forced immobility should be reflected in landscapes where movement is impeded, communication is difficult, and prolonged exposure to cold or water increases physiological risk. Organised abandonment should become visible through the relationship between the locations where bodies were found, restricted-access areas, and the wider geography of distress, even where these locations do not coincide with the points from which assistance was requested. Finally, post-mortem disappearance and erasure should be reflected in patterns of delayed body recovery, riverine displacement, unidentified bodies, evidentiary loss, and uncertainty concerning the relationship between the place where a body was found and the place where death occurred.

The following sections examine these expectations through several complementary analyses: the spatial relationship between mapped body-recovery locations, environmental features and restricted-access zones; the relationship between documented deaths and recorded requests for humanitarian assistance; cold-stress modelling across successive phases of border policy; and the temporal distribution of deaths in relation to

major political, legal, and infrastructural transformations. Together, these analyses assess whether the mechanisms reconstructed through the ten counter-investigations leave recurring spatial, temporal, and environmental signatures across the wider dataset.

Deaths, restricted access, and environmental features

The first observable traces of the reconstructed mechanisms are spatial. Rather than simply mapping the locations where bodies were recovered, we examine whether documented deaths cluster within particular environmental and political landscapes, including rivers, wetlands, forests, protected areas, and restricted-access border zones. If the mechanisms reconstructed through the ten counter-investigations operate beyond individual cases, they should leave discernible spatial patterns across the wider dataset. Spatial analysis therefore allows us to examine whether the cumulative effects of forced im/mobility, infrastructural channelling, environmental exposure, and organised abandonment that we discussed in Chapter Three, and delayed body recovery become visible in the geography of documented deaths.

The spatial analysis combines overlap and proximity measures rather than relying solely on point mapping. We first compare mapped body-recovery locations with the changing territorial extent of restricted-access border zones established under successive legal regimes – including the state of emergency ("exclusion zones") and the subsequent temporary bans on staying in the border area – to assess how documented deaths were distributed in relation to areas from which civil society organisations, journalists, and humanitarian actors were excluded. We then compare mapped body-recovery locations with key environmental layers, including rivers and other water bodies, wetlands, forests, protected areas, and other landscapes characterised by limited accessibility.

Because the recorded coordinates frequently refer to the location where a body was found rather than the location where death occurred, the analysis does not rely exclusively on direct spatial overlap. Instead, it incorporates distance buffers around each environmental feature to account for the spatial uncertainty inherent in the dataset. This is particularly important for river-related deaths, where bodies may be displaced by water, found along riverbanks, or represented in the WAM Border Death Database by approximate coordinates corresponding to the place where the body was found.

Accordingly, the spatial analysis distinguishes between three types of spatial relationship. First, direct overlap, where documented deaths occur within wetlands, forests, protected areas, or restricted-access zones. Second, proximity, where deaths are located within a defined distance of these environmental and political features. Third, spatial displacement, recognising that the recorded location may differ from the place of death, particularly in river-related cases or during seasonal flooding and thaw. Together, these complementary measures allow recurring spatial patterns to be identified while acknowledging the uncertainty inherent in the available spatial data.

The results reveal a clear spatial concentration of mapped body-recovery locations near environmental features associated with difficult movement, environmental exposure, and delayed body recovery. Of the 102 documented deaths retained in the dataset, ninety seven could be spatially referenced as point records at varying levels of precision, while five could only be retained as broader area or non-point records. For measured proximity to environmental features, the analysis uses the sixty-nine point records that could be assessed through distance-based methods; broader “forbidden land” or Belarus-side border-zone proxy locations are retained for contextual interpretation but not treated as precise environmental-distance points.

Among these sixty-nine measured point records, forty-nine deaths, or 71%, are located within 500 metres of at least one mapped water/river, wetland, or protected-area feature. This rises to fifty-nine deaths, or 86%, within 1 kilometre, and all sixty-nine within 5 kilometres. This indicates that documented deaths are not spatially random, but recur in or near landscapes where movement is slowed, visibility is reduced and rescue becomes difficult.

Water is a major spatial feature, but the result must be read carefully. Using mapped river and water features on both sides of the border, thirty-nine of the sixty-nine measured point records, or 57%, fall within 500 metres of water or a river. Forty-six records, or 67%, fall within 1 kilometre, and all sixty-nine fall within 5 kilometres. The textual descriptions reinforce this relation, especially in 2025, when documented deaths are strongly concentrated along the Bug River. This suggests a clear recent shift toward river-border lethality.

Wetlands are also significant. Among the sixty-nine measured point records, twenty-two deaths, or 32%, fall within 500 metres of mapped

wetlands, thirty-three, or 48%, within 1 kilometre, and sixty-eight, or 99%, within 5 kilometres. This does not mean that all these deaths occurred inside wetlands, but it shows that many are located within wetland environments or their immediate surroundings. This matters because wetlands combine several lethal conditions: slow movement, disorientation, water exposure, difficulty carrying or assisting an immobilised person, and delayed recovery of bodies.

Protected areas, which we discussed in Chapter Two, form another important part of this geography. Seven of the sixty-nine measured point records fall directly inside mapped protected areas. Twenty records, or 29%, fall within 500 metres, twenty-four, or 35%, within 1 kilometre, and forty-nine, or 71%, within 5 kilometres. This proximity matters not because protected status itself produces death, but because many protected areas coincide with dense forest, wetlands, river corridors, limited infrastructure, restricted access and difficult rescue conditions.

The forest analysis reinforces this finding. Among the sixty-nine measured point records, twenty-one fall directly inside mapped forest polygons. Sixty-seven, or 97%, fall within 500 metres of a mapped forest, sixty-eight, or 99%, within 1 kilometre, and all sixty-nine within 5 kilometres. In addition, the twenty-eight broader “forbidden land” or Belarus-side border-zone proxy records are forest-associated by description, even though they are not used as precise distance points. Taken together, all ninety-seven mapped point records are therefore embedded in the forested border landscape, either through measured proximity or through case descriptions locating them in the “Forbidden Land” on Belarus side border forest. Forest should therefore be understood not only as a land-cover category, but as the wider matrix within which concealment, disorientation, poor visibility, limited GSM coverage, delayed access and delayed recovery become possible.

The spatial pattern that emerges from the geostatistical analysis is therefore not that all deaths occur inside one single type of environment, but that mapped body-recovery locations cluster around a limited set of lethal configurations already identified through the in-depth case reconstructions.

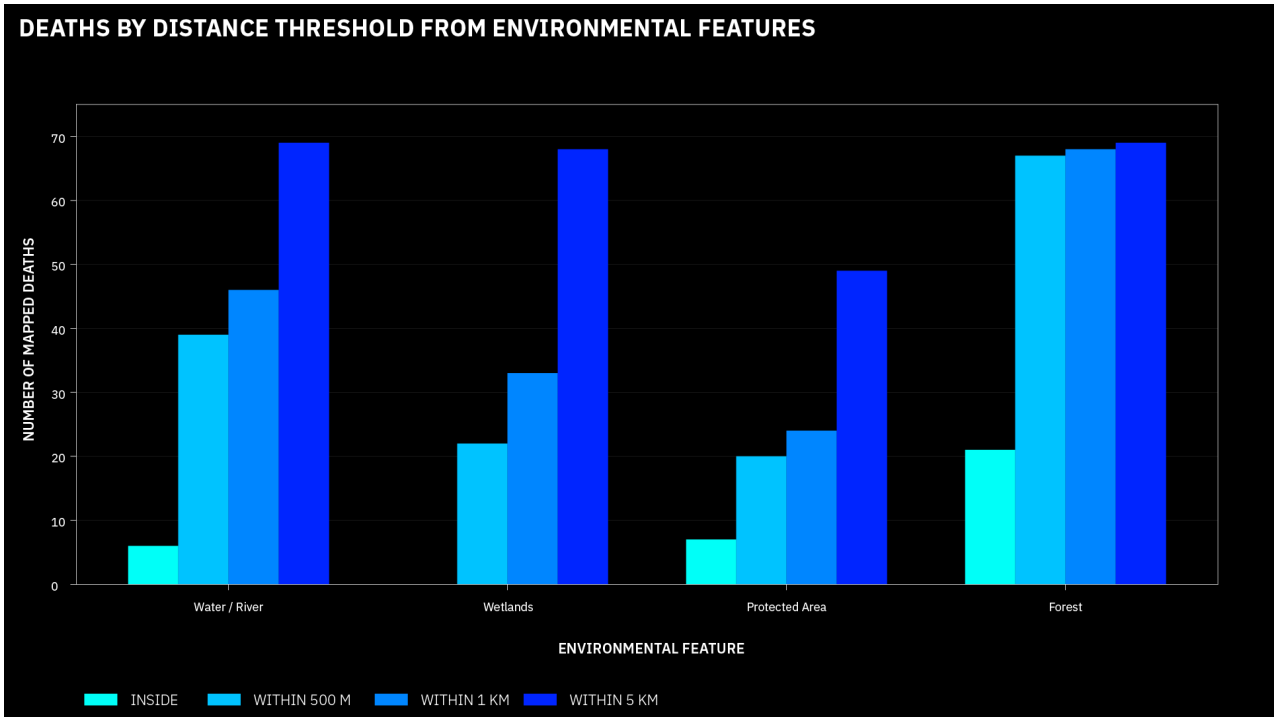


Figure 4.29. Bar chart showing the distance from mapped body-recovery locations to environmental features. The chart shows how many measured point records fall within 500 metres, 1 kilometre and 5 kilometres of mapped rivers/water features, wetlands, protected areas and forests. Broader "Forbidden Land" or Belarus-side border-zone proxy records are excluded from water, wetland and protected-area distance calculations, but retained as forest-associated where supported by case descriptions. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

The spatial analysis extends the findings of the counter-investigations by showing that the reconstructed mechanisms leave recurring spatial signatures across the wider dataset. Mapped body-recovery locations are not randomly distributed across the border landscape. They recur in environments where movement is impeded, visibility is reduced, communication is limited, and timely assistance becomes increasingly difficult.

As the preceding chapters have shown, these environmental features do not become lethal by themselves. Their lethal effects emerge through their operational incorporation into the pushback regime. Border infrastructure redirects movement towards rivers, wetlands and forests; repeated pushbacks prolong exposure within these environments; restricted-access zones limit the presence of humanitarian actors, journalists, and independent witnesses; and the absence of systematic state-led searches further delays body recovery and the reconstruction of causal chains. In this way, environmental conditions are transformed from natural settings into operational components of the pushback regime.

The spatial patterns identified here are consistent with several of the mechanisms reconstructed through the ten counter-investigations. The concentration of mapped body-recovery locations near rivers, wetlands and forests is consistent with infrastructural channelling: people do not simply die "in nature," but in environments towards which border infrastructure and enforcement practices repeatedly redirect movement.

Their proximity to forested, wetland, and protected landscapes is likewise consistent with forced environmental exposure and immobilisation, as these environments impede movement, weaken communication, and increase dependence on external assistance for survival. Finally, the relationship between body-recovery locations and restricted-access areas is consistent with organised abandonment and disappearance. The same environmental and political configurations that hinder rescue also delay body recovery, identification, and the reconstruction of the broader chains of causation.

Deaths and the geography of Requests for assistance

The counter-investigations reconstructed in the previous section showed that the inability to communicate with humanitarian actors repeatedly shaped the chain of events leading to death. In several cases, individuals who ultimately died had previously requested assistance themselves or had their location communicated to civil society organisations by relatives, companions, or other migrants. Building on these findings, we compare mapped body-recovery locations with the spatial and temporal distribution of requests for humanitarian assistance recorded by civil society organisations.

The aim of this analysis is not to establish a direct correspondence between individual requests for assistance and individual deaths. Rather, it asks whether the geography of body recovery overlaps with the geography from which civil society organisations repeatedly received requests for humanitarian, medical, or legal assistance. The analysis therefore examines the spatial distribution of requests for assistance rather than the specific circumstances or severity of individual interventions.

The comparison was undertaken at several temporal scales. First, body-recovery locations were compared with all geolocated requests for assistance available through the WAM database, in order to identify the broader geography of humanitarian need documented by civil society organisations. Second, each body-recovery location was compared with requests recorded during the same calendar year, allowing the analysis to account for changes in migration routes, border infrastructure, and enforcement practices over time. Third, each body-recovery location was compared with requests recorded during the same calendar month and within a ±30-day window. These narrower windows do not seek to reconstruct the exact relationship between a specific request and a specific death. They are used as sensitivity tests: the same-month comparison is

more restrictive, while the ±30-day window reduces the artificial effect of calendar-month boundaries and accounts, only approximately, for the fact that body recovery may occur days or weeks after death.

The comparison demonstrates that the geography of body recovery closely overlaps with the geography from which civil society organisations repeatedly received requests for humanitarian assistance. This relationship is substantially stronger than would be expected if body recovery locations were randomly distributed across the border zone, indicating that they emerge within the same geography of humanitarian need documented by civil society organisations.

For distance-based analysis, we use the measured point records rather than broad proxy locations. Across this measured point dataset, the median distance from a body-recovery location to the nearest geolocated request for humanitarian assistance is 0.76 kilometres. Sixty-six of the sixty-nine measured body-recovery locations, or 96%, lie within 5 kilometres of a recorded request, and all sixty-nine lie within 10 kilometres. To assess whether this pattern could be explained by chance alone, body-recovery locations were compared with randomly generated points distributed across the same study area. The randomly generated points were located substantially farther from requests for assistance, with a median distance of approximately 9.1 kilometres. Around 31% of random points fell within 5 kilometres of a recorded request, compared with 96% of the measured body-recovery locations. Taken together, these findings show that body-recovery locations are embedded within the broader geography of humanitarian assistance documented by civil society organisations rather than being randomly distributed across the border landscape.

Introducing the temporal dimension makes this relationship more selective while preserving the overall spatial pattern. As migration routes shifted over time in response to successive legal, political, and infrastructural transformations at the border, the geography of humanitarian assistance requests shifted with them. The temporal comparison therefore examines whether body recovery locations continued to emerge within these changing geographies of humanitarian need.

When body-recovery locations are compared only with requests recorded during the same calendar year, the median distance to the nearest request is 1.88 kilometres; fifty-seven of the sixty-nine measured locations fall within 5 kilometres, and sixty-three within 10 kilometres. The

same-month comparison is more restrictive: among the sixty-eight cases for which same-month requests were available, the median distance is 6.57 kilometres, with twenty-six locations within 5 kilometres, forty-four within 10 kilometres, and fifty-six within 20 kilometres. Using a ±30-day comparison window, the median distance falls to 3.98 kilometres, with forty of sixty-eight locations within 5 kilometres, fifty-four within 10 kilometres, and sixty within 20 kilometres. Although temporal proximity becomes more selective, the results continue to show that body-recovery locations remain embedded within the changing geography of humanitarian assistance rather than occurring at the precise locations from which assistance was requested.

The geography of requests for assistance and body recovery

The comparison distinguishes between two related but analytically distinct geographies: the geography of requests for humanitarian assistance and the geography of mapped body recovery. These two geographies strongly overlap across the border zone, yet they do not coincide. Requests for humanitarian assistance identify locations where communication with civil society organisations was possible. They represent the last documented points at which individuals or their companions were able to communicate their location and request humanitarian, medical, or legal assistance. Body recovery locations, by contrast, identify places where bodies were subsequently found. The spatial gap between these two geographies cannot be explained by geography alone. Rather, it reflects the cumulative mechanisms reconstructed through the counter-investigations.

The reconstructed cases explain how this gap is produced. Between the request for assistance and the recovery of a body, individuals may be subjected to further pushbacks, become separated from companions, lose access to communication, remain concealed because movement increases the risk of interception or violence, or become immobilised by exhaustion, injury, or environmental exposure. In some cases, remaining hidden constitutes a survival strategy, yet simultaneously prolongs exposure to cold, dehydration, and exhaustion. Ahmed Al-Shawafi's case illustrates how communication was followed by movement through wetlands and river channels, the loss of GSM coverage, and the abandonment of the body in a protected area before assistance could be sought. In Mahlet Kassa's case, companions left to seek help but were pushed back before assistance could reach her. In Mohammad Jan Goorbaz's case, delayed and obstructed access to the reserve prevented timely

intervention despite information indicating a possible location. In Wazir's case, relatives communicated that he had become immobilised, yet delayed institutional response meant that his body was recovered only weeks later.

Taken together, these reconstructions demonstrate that the spatial gap between requests for assistance and body-recovery locations is not a methodological limitation but itself a recurrent outcome of the pushback regime. It reflects the cumulative effects of repeated pushbacks, group fragmentation, concealment, forced immobility, environmental exposure, the progressive loss of communication, and delayed or absent rescue. The density analysis reinforces this interpretation. If body-recovery locations simply reflected the places from which assistance had been requested, they would be expected to coincide with the highest-density clusters of requests for humanitarian assistance. Instead, they are often located within or near these clusters, but not necessarily at their centre. Using a 5-kilometre grid, and defining high-density cells as the top quartile of occupied distress-call cells, twenty-five of the sixty-nine measured body-recovery locations fall directly inside high-density cells. Forty-three fall within 5 kilometres of these cells, and fifty-five within 20 kilometres. This indicates that body-recovery locations are embedded within the wider distress geography while often appearing at its margins, where communication, traceability, and rescue access may already have begun to break down.

The comparison should therefore not be interpreted as establishing a one-to-one relationship between individual requests for assistance and individual deaths. Instead, it demonstrates that requests for humanitarian assistance and body-recovery locations represent different outcomes within the same geography of exposure. They identify environments in which people were subjected to similar combinations of border enforcement practices and environmental conditions. The critical difference is not the environment itself, but whether communication remained possible, whether assistance could reach people in time, and whether people remained traceable before the cumulative effects of pushbacks, displacement, forced immobility, environmental exposure and loss of communication became irreversible. In this sense, the analysis supports the mechanisms reconstructed through the counter-investigations by showing that they leave recurring spatial signatures across the wider dataset.

Metric	Result
Median distance death → nearest call, all period	0.76 km
Deaths within 5 km of any call	96%
Deaths within 10 km of any call	100%
Random points within 5 km of call	31%
Median distance random point → nearest call	9.1 km
Median distance death → nearest same-month call	6.57 km
Deaths within 20 km of same-month call	83%
Median distance death → nearest ±30-day call	3.98 km
Deaths within 10 km of ±30-day call	79%
Deaths within 5 km of high-density calls	62%
Deaths within 20 km of high-density calls	80%

Table 4.1. Spatial relationship between body-recovery locations and requests for assistance. Random points are used only as a spatial baseline. They provide a comparison against which the observed proximity between body-recovery locations and requests for assistance can be evaluated.

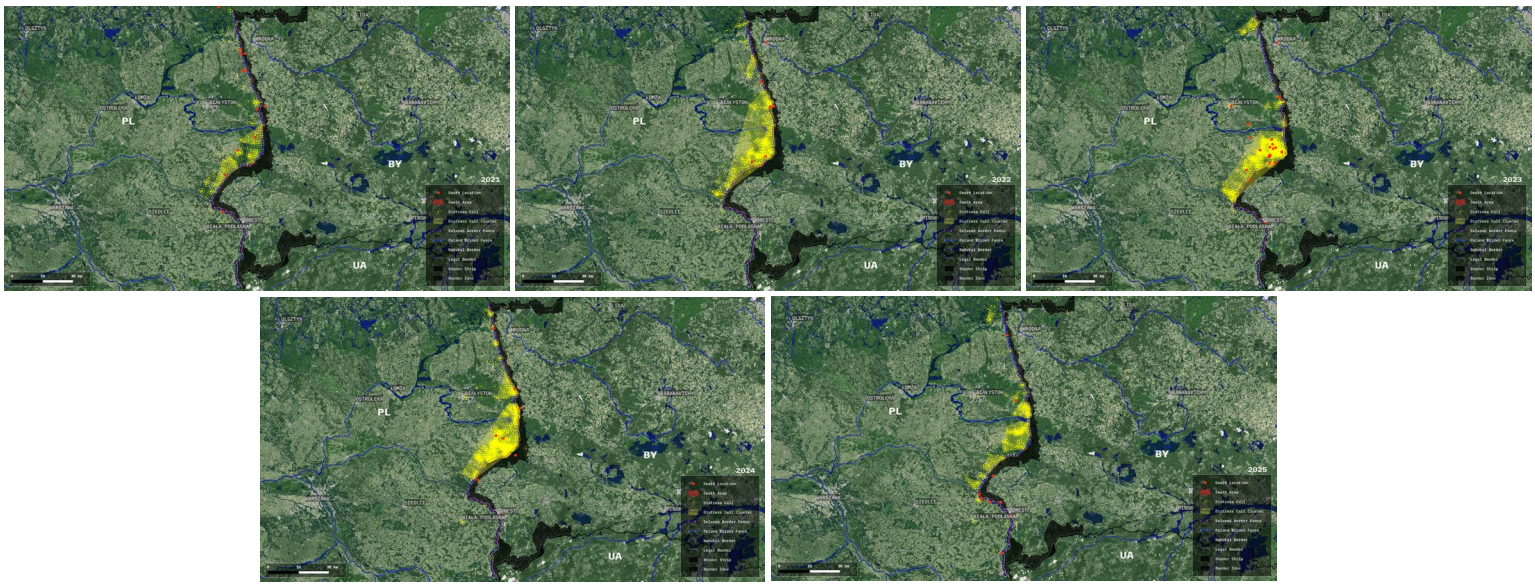


Figure 4.30. Map of distress call clusters and deaths, per year. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Deaths and cold-stress scenarios

In the reconstructed cases, the official medical cause of death was frequently recorded as hypothermia or other cold-related physiological failure. However, as the preceding analyses have shown, hypothermia does not explain why exposure became lethal. Rather, it represents the final physiological pathway through which the cumulative effects of border practices, environmental exposure, and prolonged time imposed on the body culminated in death.

The preceding sections demonstrated that body recovery locations cluster in low-access environments and within the same geography from which civil society organisations repeatedly received requests for humanitarian assistance. Together with the detailed counter-investigations, these analyses identified the spatial configurations through which environmental exposure becomes possible. The remaining question is physiological: how do these same bordering practices transform cold from an ordinary environmental condition into a predictable mechanism of death?

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, cold is a major environmental factor contributing to harm at the Poland–Belarus border. Its effects, however, are not determined by ambient temperature alone. Rather, cold exposure is shaped by the interaction between environmental conditions and bordering practices, including repeated pushbacks, prolonged waiting, hiding, wet clothing, exhaustion, forced immobility, and delayed rescue. In the reconstructed cases, these cumulative processes repeatedly culminated in hypothermia or other cold-related physiological failure. Across the wider dataset, references to hypothermia, freezing, exhaustion, wet clothing, river crossings, and prolonged exposure recur in the case descriptions, even where the official physiological cause of death remains unknown or has not been publicly established.

The cold-stress model extends this analysis by introducing a temporal and physiological dimension. It does not seek to reconstruct the exact medical moment of death or to estimate individual body temperature. Instead, it models how cumulative cold exposure develops when bordering practices impose additional time on the body. The model therefore provides an exposure index: it estimates where and how rapidly cold burden accumulates under different bordering conditions, including forced movement, waiting, hiding, wet clothing, exhaustion, immobilisation, and the absence of shelter or assistance. In this way, the model complements the case reconstructions by examining how the cumulative effects of

bordering practices translate into progressively more dangerous exposure conditions across the wider border landscape.

The model calculates cumulative cold-exposure burden (dT_C) by combining the environmental rate of cooling with the cumulative time that individuals are expected to spend moving through or remaining exposed within the landscape under different bordering scenarios. Mean monthly environmental cooling (mean_monthly_COLDENVLOSS) represents the environmental rate of heat loss (W/m^2), while scenario_cumulative_time_h estimates the cumulative duration of movement and forced exposure. These variables are combined to generate cumulative cold-exposure contours (scenario_cumulative_dT_C), which indicate the relative severity of exposure from a known or inferred starting point. The resulting contour fields should therefore be interpreted as indicators of cumulative cold-exposure burden rather than direct measurements of core body temperature.

The model then compares mapped body-recovery locations with successive cold-stress scenarios, from a baseline movement scenario to scenarios incorporating additional time imposed by pushbacks, waiting, concealment, immobilisation, and delayed rescue.

The principal finding of the model is that cumulative exposure is driven not simply by distance travelled, but by the additional time imposed by bordering practices. In the baseline scenario, exposure is primarily determined by terrain and walking time. As progressively longer delays are introduced in later scenarios, cumulative cold exposure increases even when movement remains limited. In scenarios incorporating prolonged forced presence within the border zone, dangerous exposure thresholds are reached after considerably less movement across the landscape. Scenario S5 extends this logic to its outer limit: it is not a realistic survival scenario, but a stress test illustrating the cumulative physiological consequences of prolonged entrapment under extreme bordering conditions.

These findings change how cold-related deaths should be interpreted. The relevant question is not only how far people travelled across the landscape, but how long bordering practices compelled them to remain exposed within it. Repeated pushbacks, the risk of interception, restricted access to assistance, and the criminalisation of humanitarian support can transform movement itself into a source of risk, forcing people to remain concealed or immobilised and thereby prolonging exposure to cold, wetness, and exhaustion. In this way, pushbacks, waiting, concealment,

entrapment, wet clothing, forced immobility, and delayed rescue transform cold from an ordinary environmental condition into a predictable physiological mechanism of death. The model therefore shows that bordering practices progressively increase physiological exposure within the same environments by imposing additional time on the body.

The distance-to-border analysis should therefore be read as a spatial complement to the cold-stress model rather than as a simple measure of movement towards or away from the border.

This 2025 shift is particularly pronounced along the Bug River. Following the construction and reinforcement of the physical barrier along most sections of the Poland–Belarus border (see Chapter Two), irregular crossings increasingly shifted towards river sections where movement remained possible but more dangerous. The Bug is characterised by changing water levels, currents, riverbanks, and riverbed conditions, making crossing conditions unstable and difficult to predict. Rather than functioning as a natural hazard in itself, the river became operationally incorporated into the pushback regime by channelling movement into an environment where drowning, prolonged exposure, delayed body recovery, and contested institutional responsibility across the international boundary became increasingly likely. The concentration of deaths along the Bug therefore reflects not only the environmental characteristics of the river, but also the reconfiguration of border infrastructure, enforcement, and available crossing routes.

The distance-to-border analysis should be interpreted alongside this process of threshold compression. It does not show a simple linear movement of deaths across the landscape. Rather, it shows that mapped body-recovery locations remained situated within the wider borderland while the modelled exposure burden intensified as bordering practices imposed additional time on the body. In 2025, the spatial expression of lethality became more visibly river-centred and border-adjacent, particularly along the Bug, reflecting the reconfiguration of crossing routes following the reinforcement of border infrastructure.

This is what we describe as threshold compression. In earlier scenarios, severe cold exposure is primarily associated with movement through the landscape: the farther a person travels, the greater the cumulative physiological burden. In later scenarios, the additional time imposed by bordering practices alters this relationship. Dangerous exposure begins to accumulate already near the border, before substantial movement has

taken place. The contour lines therefore move closer to the border not because environmental conditions have changed, but because bordering practices compress dangerous physiological exposure towards the border by prolonging the time people remain exposed.

The geostatistical analyses support our findings concerning the mechanisms of deaths reconstructed through the ten counter-investigations into specific incidents without replacing them. The spatial analysis shows that mapped body-recovery locations cluster in forests, wetlands, river environments, protected areas, and other low-access landscapes. The comparison with requests for humanitarian assistance shows that body-recovery locations occur within the same geography of exposure in which civil society organisations repeatedly documented requests for humanitarian, medical, and legal assistance, while often appearing where communication, traceability, and access to rescue had already begun to break down. The cold-stress model adds a physiological and temporal dimension by showing how these same spatial conditions become progressively more dangerous when bordering practices transform exposure time into cumulative cold burden.

Taken together, the counter-investigations of specific incidents and geostatistical analyses demonstrate that deaths at the Poland–Belarus border cannot be understood as isolated environmental accidents. Rather, they are the recurrent outcome of bordering practices that systematically reorganise movement, communication, exposure, rescue, and body recovery, transforming ordinary environmental conditions into predictable mechanisms of death.

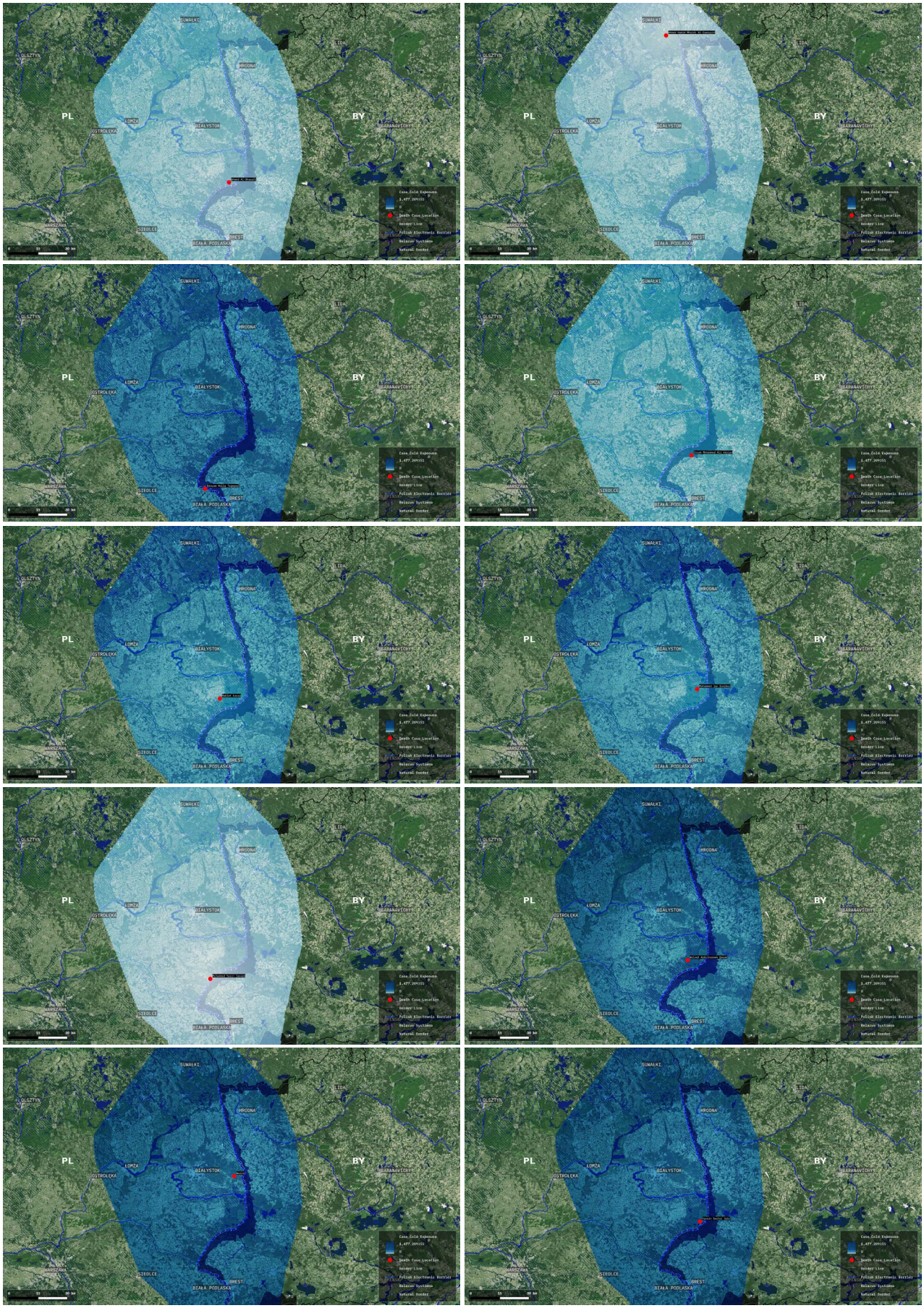


Figure 4.31. Cold-stress scenarios, documented deaths, and distance to the Belarus border. The maps compare the locations of the ten documented deaths examined above in this chapter with cumulative cold-exposure contours under successive bordering scenarios. The contour values are used as an exposure index rather than as literal core-body temperature loss. Across scenarios, added delay compresses dangerous exposure thresholds toward the border. The distance-to-border analysis shows that the mapped body-recovery locations remain situated within the wider borderland, with a particularly marked concentration near the legal border and along river-border sections in 2025. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Year	Deaths	Median distance to Belarus border	Deaths within 5 km	Deaths within 10 km
2021	16	1.5 km	13	14
2022	17	0.7 km	16	16
2023	34	4.6 km	17	23
2024	16	0.6 km	12	13
2025	14	0.1 km	12	14

Table 4.2. The table shows the median distance from the Belarus border at which deaths occurred, along with the number of deaths recorded within 5 km and within 10 km of the border, illustrating how closely fatalities are clustered around the border zone.

Policy phases and the temporal distribution of deaths

The final step of the analysis examines how successive political, legal, and infrastructural transformations reorganised the mechanisms reconstructed in the previous sections. Rather than asking simply whether the number of documented deaths increased or decreased over time, we examine how changes in the pushback regime altered the conditions under which forced displacement, infrastructural channelling, environmental exposure, non-assistance, and disappearance operated. The temporal distribution of documented deaths is therefore interpreted alongside successive transformations in bordering practices, allowing us to examine how policy changes reshaped the geography and conditions of lethal exposure.

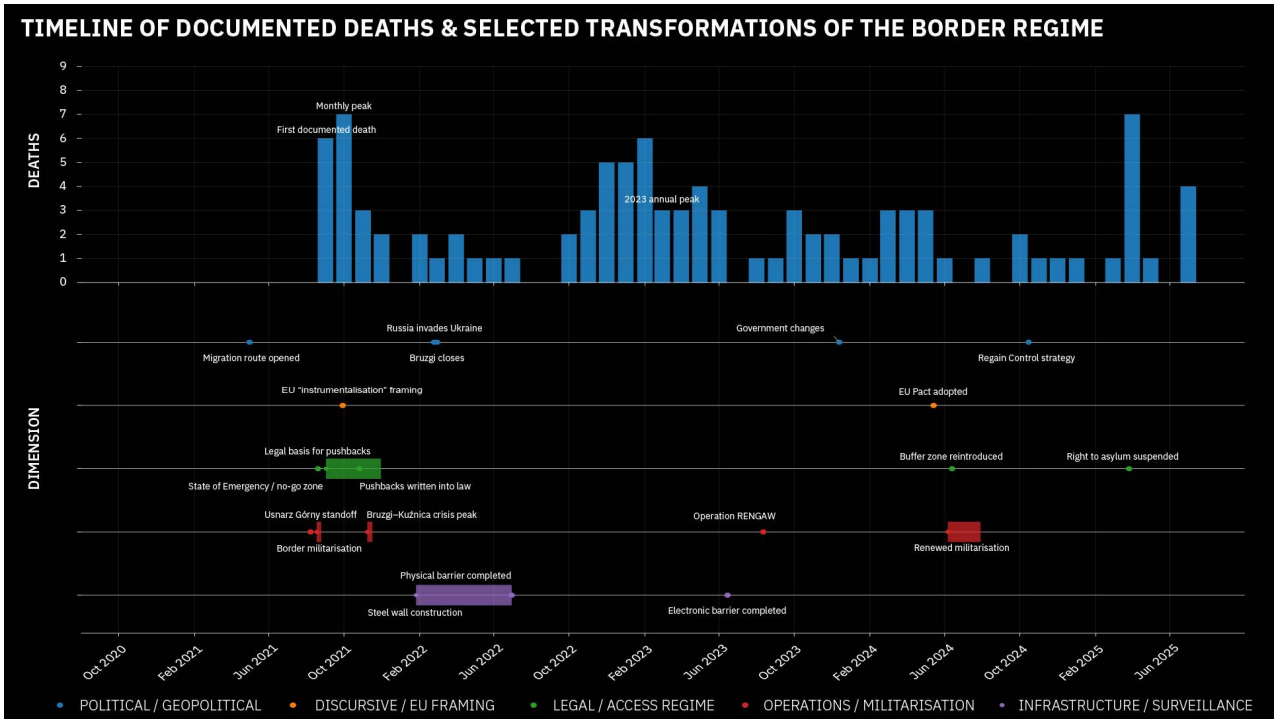


Figure 4.32. Temporal distribution of documented deaths alongside successive legal, political, operational, infrastructural, and environmental transformations of the pushback regime. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

Monthly distribution of documented deaths (top panel) shown alongside major legal, political, operational, infrastructural, discursive, and environmental transformations of the Polish–Belarusian border regime (bottom panel). The figure is intended to contextualise the temporal distribution of documented deaths within successive phases of the border regime rather than to imply direct causal relationships between individual policy decisions and individual deaths

The first major phase begins in autumn 2021, when the border was officially reframed as a site of "hybrid warfare," legitimising extraordinary legal and operational measures (see Chapter One). The declaration of the state of emergency, the creation of the exclusion zone, the deployment of military and police forces, and the institutionalisation of systematic pushbacks fundamentally transformed the conditions under which people moved through the borderland. These measures did not simply restrict access for journalists, researchers, and humanitarian organisations. Together, they produced conditions in which migrants became trapped between repeated pushbacks, prolonged environmental exposure, and the absence of independent assistance and documentation.

Deaths continued throughout 2022, but the mechanisms through which lethal exposure was produced were substantially reorganised. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine fundamentally altered the political context of the border. In March 2022, Belarusian authorities closed the Bremino–Bruzgi Transport and Logistics Centre, where hundreds of migrants – including families with children, elderly people, and persons with disabilities – had spent the winter after becoming trapped between

the two states. Rather than providing a durable solution, the closure of Bruzgi confronted many migrants with a choice between deportation and renewed attempts to cross the border through increasingly hazardous environments. At the same time, the organised visa-and-travel system characteristic of the initial phase of the crisis largely collapsed, while movement increasingly shifted towards fragmented routes facilitated by smugglers and other intermediaries. These changes coincided with the construction of the physical border barrier and the continuation of systematic pushbacks on the Polish side. Rather than eliminating lethal exposure, they reorganised the mechanism of infrastructural channelling by redirecting movement towards the limited routes that remained practicable despite the new border infrastructure. The wall should therefore not be understood as infrastructure that removed risk, but as one that slowed movement, prolonged exposure, redirected migration routes, and redistributed lethal risk across the border landscape.

The highest annual number of documented deaths falls in 2023. This peak follows the construction of the physical barrier and the expansion of electronic surveillance, and marks an important reorganisation of the pushback regime. Increased detection capacity did not necessarily translate into rescue, access to asylum, or protection. Instead, detection frequently led to interception and pushbacks. In other words, the state's growing capacity to identify people in the border zone was not accompanied by a corresponding obligation to provide protection or assistance.

Spatially, the 2023 data show that this peak was not concentrated directly on the legal border. On the contrary, 2023 is the year in which mapped body-recovery locations are, on median, farthest from the legal border. The thirty-four mapped point records from 2023 have a median distance of 4.63 kilometres from the legal border; when broad Grade E proxy records are excluded, the median distance among measured A–D records rises to 7.77 kilometres. Seventeen of the thirty-four mapped point records fall within 5 kilometres of the border, and twenty-three within 10 kilometres, but a substantial share are located deeper inside the forested borderland. The principal change in 2023 is therefore not a concentration of deaths at the border line, but the production of lethal exposure within low-access forested environments beyond the immediate border line, particularly around Białowieża, Hajnówka, Czerlonka, Narewka, and the Świsłocz–Istoczanka river system.

This pattern is consistent with the consolidation of the post-barrier regime. The physical barrier and electronic surveillance did not eliminate

crossings or lethal exposure. Rather, they reorganised movement by making crossing slower, more detectable, and more dependent on concealed routes. People who crossed or attempted to cross were pushed into forested and wetland environments where movement was harder, communication less reliable, rescue access more obstructed, and concealment more necessary. The 2023 peak therefore reflects the inland displacement of lethal exposure into the wider borderland, rather than a simple concentration of deaths at the legal border.

The pattern in 2025 is different. Whereas 2023 marks the inland consolidation of lethal exposure within the forested borderland, 2025 shows a sharper concentration at the river-border itself. None of the fourteen mapped point records from 2025 are Grade E proxy records, and the median distance to the legal border falls to approximately 0.04 kilometres. Twelve of the fourteen mapped body-recovery locations are within 5 kilometres of the border, and all fourteen are within 10 kilometres. This shift reflects the increasing concentration of crossings along the Bug River, where the legal border, the crossing environment, and the site of body recovery often converge.

The change of government in late 2023 did not produce a clear rupture in the temporal pattern of documented deaths. While the new administration adopted a different political discourse – emphasising the restoration of the rule of law while maintaining border security – pushbacks continued and were presented as compatible with humanitarian standards. This position was reflected, for example, in public attempts to present pushbacks as compatible with humanitarian standards, including statements by Deputy Minister of the Interior Maciej Duszczyk.[357] Despite this shift in political rhetoric, the evidence presented throughout this report indicates that the principal mechanisms through which lethal exposure was produced remained largely unchanged. Pushbacks continued, access to the border area remained restricted through successive legal regimes, and migrants continued to be exposed to the same conditions of forced displacement, environmental exposure, and delayed or obstructed assistance reconstructed in the counter-investigations.

During 2024, border controls were further reinforced through renewed militarisation, the strengthening of the physical barrier, the reintroduction of a buffer zone, legislative changes expanding the powers of security forces, and Operation Safe Podlasie. Although several of these measures had already been planned or initiated, the fatal stabbing of a Polish soldier at the border in June 2024 became an important political justification

357 See different public statements by Deputy Minister of the Interior Maciej Duszczyk describing the continuation of pushbacks as compatible with humanitarian standards (including the characterisation of pushbacks as "humanitarian"). OKO.press, "Wiceminister Duszczyk: Nie skończymy z 'zawróceniami'. Ale to będą wywózki 'etyczne'," January 15, 2024, https://oko.press/wiceminister-duszczyk-nie-skonczymy-z-zawroceniami-ale-to-beda-wywozki-etyczne.

for accelerating and legitimising their implementation.[358]

From the perspective of this analysis, the continuity of documented deaths across changing governments is more significant than changes in political rhetoric. The findings suggest that lethality cannot be attributed to a single administration alone. Rather, it reflects the consolidation of a stabilised pushback regime whose underlying mechanisms persisted despite changes in political leadership, public discourse, and individual policy instruments. The evidence presented throughout this report indicates that successive governments modified the legal, political, and operational organisation of the border, but did not fundamentally alter the mechanisms through which lethal exposure was produced.

358 The reinforcement of border infrastructure and border-control measures did not begin only after the fatal stabbing of a Polish soldier in June 2024. Plans to strengthen the physical barrier and expand border security had already been announced and were being implemented. The incident nevertheless became a powerful political justification for accelerating these measures and introducing additional legal and operational changes, including the re-establishment of a buffer zone, Operation *Safe Podlasie*, and legislative amendments expanding the powers of security personnel, including the use of firearms under specified circumstances.

Seasonality and temporal reorganisation of lethal exposure

The temporal distribution of documented deaths and body recoveries also exhibits a clear seasonal pattern, with cases clustering during late autumn, winter, and early spring. This pattern is consistent with both the physiological mechanisms reconstructed through the counter-investigations and the cold-stress scenarios presented above. During these seasons, prolonged exposure to low temperatures, wet clothing, exhaustion, malnutrition, dehydration, and immobilisation substantially increase the risk of hypothermia and other forms of cold-related physiological failure. Cold therefore represents the immediate physiological cause in many cases, while the preceding analyses demonstrate how bordering practices create the conditions under which such exposure becomes lethal.

At the same time, recovery dates require careful interpretation. In many cases, the recorded date refers to the recovery or documentation of a body rather than the actual moment of death. Bodies discovered during spring may therefore correspond to deaths that occurred weeks or even months earlier during the winter, with snow cover, seasonal flooding, dense vegetation, decomposition, or animal activity delaying recovery and identification. The temporal pattern therefore links environmental exposure not only to death but also to disappearance: the same environmental conditions that contribute to fatal outcomes simultaneously conceal bodies, delay their recovery, complicate identification, and obstruct the reconstruction of causal chains.

Taken together, the temporal analysis demonstrates that successive political, legal, and operational transformations did not merely accompany deaths at the border. Rather, they progressively reorganised the

mechanisms through which lethal exposure was produced by shaping how people moved, where they crossed, how long they remained exposed, whether they were able to communicate requests for humanitarian, medical, or legal assistance, and whether rescue or subsequent body recovery became possible. Political decisions should therefore not be understood as background events. They actively reorganised the conditions under which the mechanisms reconstructed throughout this report operated.

The temporal analysis completes the movement from individual counter-investigations to geostatistical patterns. Rather than treating successive policy changes as isolated political events, it shows how each phase of the border regime reorganised specific mechanisms of harm. The state of emergency and subsequent legal restrictions on access to the border area intensified non-assistance and disappearance by excluding independent observers, journalists, researchers, and humanitarian organisations from the borderland. The construction of the physical barrier, followed by electronic surveillance, reconfigured infrastructural channelling by concentrating movement along increasingly limited routes while expanding the state's capacity to detect movement without providing a corresponding obligation to rescue or protect. The later reinforcement of the border further displaced crossings towards river-border sections, particularly along the Bug, concentrating lethal exposure within the few environments through which movement remained possible. Across these transformations, the mechanisms themselves remained recognisable even as their spatial expression evolved.

Read together, the counter-investigations of particular incidents, geostatistical analyses, and temporal reconstruction demonstrate that deaths at the Poland–Belarus border cannot be understood as isolated environmental accidents or as the unintended effects of difficult terrain. They are the recurrent outcome of bordering practices that systematically reorganise movement, communication, exposure, rescue, and body recovery. Environmental conditions become lethal not in isolation, but through the ways successive political, legal, and infrastructural interventions force people to move, wait, hide, remain exposed, lose communication, disappear, and die.

Trajectories of disappearance and uncertainty

Five of the lethal incidents we have reconstructed above were initially cases of disappearance which were then confirmed as deaths. In this section, we turn to the relation between deaths and disappearances. We first analyse a particular process of search for a missing person, and reveal that disappearances have their own distinct dynamics, and constitute a form of harm in their own right for families. In turn, we analyse a broader corpus of 214 fragmentary records relating to potential border-related disappearances reported between 2021 and 2024. Through their analysis we identify recurring spatial and environmental conditions in the geography of disappearances. We then compare this geography of potential disappearances to that which has emerged from our analysis of confirmed deaths, and assess the extent to which there may be more deaths than have been recorded.

The institutional production of untraceability

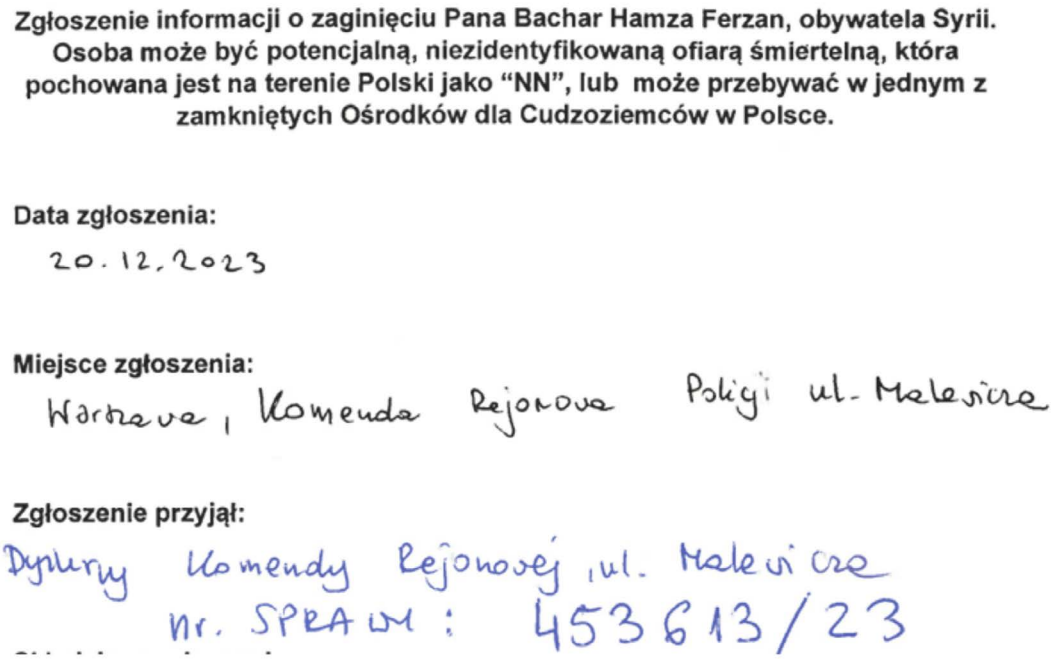
The first comprehensive report documenting the scale of disappearances at the Poland–Belarus border was published by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR) in 2024. It established disappearances as a distinct humanitarian and legal phenomenon requiring systematic documentation. Drawing on information provided by families, humanitarian organisations, lawyers, and human rights defenders, it documented disappearance cases and their outcomes, identified the principal legal and institutional barriers encountered by families searching for missing relatives, and demonstrated the absence of a coordinated institutional framework for responding to disappearances.

The disappearance of Bachar Hamza Ferzan in November 2021 and the tireless search for him by his wife which HFHR has supported provides a telling example both of the circumstances that lead to disappearances at the Poland–Belarus border and of the barriers encountered in the search for missing relatives by families and civil society actors supporting them.

Bachar Hamza Ferzan was last in contact with his wife on 2 November 2021 while attempting to cross the Poland–Belarus border. Information provided by one of his travel companions indicated that he became physically exhausted after several days without adequate food or drinking water, collapsed in the forest, and was unable to continue the journey. Because communication was intermittent and the group was unfamiliar with the terrain, the precise location could not be established. The last

information available to the family indicated that Bachar Hamza Ferzan remained behind in the forest on the Polish side of the border. No verified information concerning his fate or whereabouts has been obtained since, and he remains missing at the time of writing.

In 2023, the wife of Bachar Hamza Ferzan sought assistance through the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights' project documenting disappearances at the Poland–Belarus border. Acting under a power of attorney granted by the family, one of the co-authors of this report submitted a formal disappearance report to the Warsaw Metropolitan Police on 20 December 2023. The disappearance report requested that the police determine whether Bachar Hamza Ferzan had been admitted to hospital, transferred to a guarded detention centre for foreigners, registered by the Border Guard, or buried in Poland as an unidentified person ("NN"). It further informed the authorities that the family was prepared to provide DNA samples for the identification of unidentified human remains.



Zgłoszenie informacji o zaginięciu Pana Bachar Hamza Ferzan, obywatela Syrii. Osoba może być potencjalną, niezidentyfikowaną ofiarą śmiertelną, która pochowana jest na terenie Polski jako "NN", lub może przebywać w jednym z zamkniętych Ośrodków dla Cudzoziemców w Polsce.

Data zgłoszenia:

20.12.2023

Miejsce zgłoszenia:

Warszawa, Komenda Rejonowa Policji ul. Malevicza

Zgłoszenie przyjął:

Dyżurny Komendy Rejonowej ul. Malevicza

Nr. SPRAWY: 453613/23

Figure 4.33. Copy of part of the missing-person report concerning Bachar Hamza Ferzan, a Syrian national, filed with the District Police Headquarters in Warsaw on 20 December 2023 by a representative of the Hamza family. The report notes that he may be an unidentified deceased person buried in Poland or an unidentified ("NN") person held in one of the country's closed centres for foreigners.

The police refused to accept the disappearance report and register the case in the National Police Information System. Following this decision, the family's lawyer requested a written explanation. In its response, the

police concluded that there was insufficient evidence that Bachar Hamza Ferzan had disappeared on Polish territory and therefore found no legal grounds to initiate a disappearance investigation:

> *There is no evidence that the above-mentioned foreign nationals disappeared on Polish territory, which excludes the possibility of applying the procedure provided for in Order No. 48 of the Commander-in-Chief of Police.*

This response establishes the evidentiary threshold applied to the registration of disappearances. Rather than treating a missing-person investigation as the means through which a person's whereabouts and the circumstances of disappearance could be established, the police required prior evidence that Bachar Hamza Ferzan had disappeared on Polish territory before the search could begin. The absence of such evidence therefore became the reason for refusing to generate it.

The police further questioned both the procedural admissibility of the report and the evidentiary value of the material submitted:

> *The described circumstances are based only on assumptions. There are no direct witnesses. The submitted material raises significant doubts as to the credibility of the events and of the persons reporting the disappearance.*

The response therefore challenged not only the disappearance itself but also the legitimacy of those attempting to report it. Yet in disappearances occurring across the Polish–Belarusian borderland, information provided by relatives, travelling companions and humanitarian organisations often constitutes the only surviving evidence after contact has been lost. The absence of direct witnesses is not exceptional but characteristic of disappearances occurring during clandestine border crossings, repeated pushbacks, prolonged movement through remote forested areas, and the breakdown of communication.

The police further advised that the disappearance should instead be reported through the competent authorities in Syria:
Family members have the right to submit a disappearance report in their country of origin... The channel for international exchange of information concerning missing persons is INTERPOL.

This recommendation shifts responsibility for initiating the search outside Poland despite the report alleging that the disappearance occurred on Polish territory. It also assumes that families can safely approach the authorities of the countries from which their relatives fled. In practice, several families participating in this investigation originated from countries affected by armed conflict or political persecution, where contacting state authorities may expose relatives to significant risks. Moreover, INTERPOL is not an institution through which families can directly report disappearances; it functions as a mechanism for cooperation between national police authorities. The recommendation therefore did not resolve the initial question of which authority was responsible for registering and investigating the disappearance.

Taken together, these arguments establish the institutional threshold through which disappearances may fail to enter the official search system. The response reveals an institutional evidentiary paradox: evidence that Bachar Hamza Ferzanhad disappeared in Poland was treated as a prerequisite for opening an investigation, although the investigation itself was the mechanism through which this question could have been examined.

At the Poland–Belarus border, however, the movements of individual migrants – including interceptions and unlawful pushbacks – have frequently not been documented by the state institutions responsible for border control. In the absence of comprehensive records identifying who crossed the border, who was intercepted, or who was subsequently pushed back to Belarus, families may be required to produce precisely the institutional evidence that the pushback regime itself often fails to generate.

The absence of a police or Border Guard record therefore cannot be interpreted as evidence that Bachar Hamza Ferzan was never present in Poland. It establishes only the absence of a documented institutional encounter. When this absence becomes the basis for refusing to register a disappearance, the evidentiary gap becomes self-reinforcing: no search is initiated because there is insufficient evidence, and no further evidence is produced because no search is initiated.

The case of Bachar Hamza Ferzan is examined here because the entire institutional trajectory – from the loss of contact, through the formal disappearance report, to the police refusal and subsequent legal correspondence – is fully documented. More importantly, the arguments advanced by the police recur in the remaining documented refusals analysed during

this investigation, indicating that the case reflects a broader institutional practice rather than an isolated administrative decision.

More than three years after contact was lost, Bachar Hamza Ferzan's wife continues to search for him. As she explained: "We have been looking for him for a very long time. We don't know what happened to him. We keep sending emails, but we receive no answers." Despite her tireless efforts, because the disappearance report was never accepted for registration, Bachar Hamza Ferzan does not exist as an officially registered missing person within the Polish search system. The case therefore demonstrates how institutional decisions shape not only the possibility of searching for missing persons, but also the administrative production of disappearance statistics. The absence of officially registered disappearances should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that disappearances did not occur, but as an institutional outcome that itself requires investigation.

As a result of the lack of effective search mechanisms, Bachar Hamza Ferzan's wife has not been able to establish the ultimate fare of her husband. "We lost contact with him, and we think about him every day, she explained. It's very difficult when you don't know what happened." As so many other family members of disappeared migrants, she remains with a haunting uncertainty, a liminal condition in which she can neither re-establish contact and her relation with her husband, or mourn his loss which has not been established.

Analysing the spatial conditions of border-related disappearances

Beyond the documentation of individual cases of disappearance and support to families in searching for their loves ones, the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR) has documented 214 unverifiable loss-of-traceability records reported between 2021 and 2024, which constitute potential border-related disappearances reported. We first analysis the conditions and geographies that emerge from the fragmented information associated with these reports, before comparing this geography of potential disappearances to that which has emerged from our analysis of confirmed deaths. Ultimately we show that deaths and disappearances should not be understood as separate phenomena but as different outcomes produced through the same conditions and operational sequences at work in the pushback regime.

The analysis of 214 unverifiable loss-of-traceability records draws on a separate evidentiary corpus. Unlike the formally submitted disappearance

reports examined above, these records originated from requests for humanitarian, medical, and legal assistance, and were never reconstructed as individual disappearance cases because the available evidence was insufficient.

The following excerpts offer a few examples of the information recorded in the database and illustrate the types of disappearance cases documented by civil society actors:

> *"Other migrants reported that one person from the group died (earlier, not now). There were 7 of them, one person died. They asked for food and drink, cigarettes, power banks and sims, they arrived close to the border by BY cars – 4 'taxi' cars with 13 people. In the meantime, for unknown reasons (cold?) one of these people died – from Irak. It is not known why he died – they said maybe from the cold, maybe after being beaten by BY dogs)." Anonymised data, Bug River area, 2021.*
>
> *"From January 16 one person from the group of 13 people from Syria is missing. The day before they were close to the fence, on the BY side. Then they crossed over to Poland across a river – it was probably the Narew, in swampy area. Poles caught them, beat them up, took their things and told them to go back across the river. One of them, M. could not swim and did not leave with the rest of the group – he probably drowned" Anonymised data, no exact location, 2022.*
>
> *"My father, a 55-year-old man from Yemen, went missing at the Polish–Belarusian border in January. He was last seen near [location in sistema]. According to the people who were travelling with him, last time when they saw him – they heard Belarusian military dogs barking, followed by my father shouting. The group fled, leaving him behind. Since that moment, we have received no information about him."*
>
> Anonymised data, last location: on the Belarusian side of the border fence, within territory under Polish jurisdiction, 2024.

In the similar reports contained in the database, what is preserved is the final recoverable traces of communication and location before a person's trajectory became untraceable. The available information often consisted only of a first name, an approximate location, a last telephone contact, location coordinates or a location pin, or fragmentary information provided by relatives or travel companions. While these records do not

permit the reconstruction of individual disappearance cases, they make it possible to analyse the recurrent conditions under which communicative and spatial traceability breaks down, and people progressively disappear from systems of observation, assistance, and institutional knowledge.

359 The destruction or theft of migrants' mobile phones has been documented by CSOs as a practice carried out by both Belarusian and Polish state authorities. As discussed in detail earlier in this investigation, this functions as a mechanism of violence and, as we show here, it also feeds directly into the disappearance of migrants at this border.

Quantitative patterns in the breakdown of traceability

Across the 214 records, eighty-one documented the loss of telephone contact. The mobile phone should therefore be understood as an infrastructure of traceability: it enabled communication and navigation, the transmission of coordinates and requests for assistance, the documentation of events, and the preservation of information about a person's trajectory.[359]

Indicators of increasing dependence on external assistance appeared in twenty-eight records, including illness, injury, diabetes, exhaustion, poor physical condition, or the presence of children. A further twelve records referred to anticipated transfer, requested medical assistance, or transport towards medical care; these entries do not confirm that medical assistance was ultimately received or that hospital admission occurred. Seventeen records associated the loss of traceability with pushbacks, including nine involving rivers, wetlands, flooded terrain, or water crossings.

Environmental references were recorded in forty-nine records and included forests, wetlands, rivers, protected areas, and the Siemianówka Reservoir. Reports were concentrated in October, November, February, and March, corresponding to periods characterised by low temperatures and adverse environmental conditions. These environmental features should not be understood as independent causes of disappearance. Rather, they formed part of the conditions under which communication, observation, rescue, body recovery, and the preservation of identifiable traces became progressively more difficult.

Spatial information remained limited. Ninety-eight records placed the last known trace on Polish territory, while twenty-nine could only be classified broadly as PL/BY. Thirty-one records contained geographic coordinates, of which twenty-six could be verified within 50 kilometres of the Belarusian border. This subset is too small to represent the full dataset and should therefore be interpreted as documenting the last recoverable spatial traces rather than disappearance locations.

Analytical dimension	Evidence in the 214 records	Interpretation and caution
Dataset status	214 unverifiable loss-of-traceability records, 2021–2024	The records do not establish individual disappearance cases; they preserve the final recoverable communicative, spatial or institutional traces.
Communicative traceability	81 records followed loss of telephone contact	Phone, battery, GSM coverage, companions and coordinates function as an infrastructure of traceability, not merely communication.
Dependence on external assistance	28 vulnerability indicators; 12 references to expected or requested medical contact	Signals increasing dependence on outside assistance. The 12 records do not verify hospital admission.
Disruption of trajectories	17 records linked to pushbacks; 9 involved water, wetlands or flooded terrain	Indicates group fragmentation, repeated directional changes and interruption of communication rather than isolated events.
Environmental and seasonal limits	49 environmental references; concentration in Oct., Nov., Feb. and Mar.	Forests, wetlands, rivers, protected areas and the Siemianówka Reservoir reduce observation, rescue, recovery and preservation of traces; they are not independent causes.
Last known spatial traces	98 PL; 29 PL/BY; 31 with coordinates; 26 verified within 50 km of the border	The map must show the last location from which sufficient information remained available, not a disappearance or death location.
Overall inference	No defensible estimate of undocumented deaths	The categories overlap and reveal a process of progressive loss of traceability. They support risk assessment, not case-level outcome claims.

Table 4.3.

Rather than documenting individual outcomes, the records reconstruct the recurrent processes through which trajectories disappear from systems of observation and documentation, even for civil society actors. Taken together, the records show that contact was repeatedly lost under overlapping conditions of physical vulnerability, forced displacement, disrupted mobility, environmental exposure, and limited institutional documentation. These conditions recur across the counter-investigations of confirmed deaths presented in this report. Although the records do not

permit conclusions regarding individual outcomes, they demonstrate that the absence of a recovered body or an official record cannot be interpreted as evidence that no fatal outcome occurred.

Comparing the geographies of disappearances and deaths

Having traced the conditions and geographies that emerge from the fragmented information associated with these 214 reports of unverifiable loss-of-traceability records reported between 2021 and 2024, which constitute potential border-related disappearances, we can compare this geography of potential disappearances to that which has emerged from our analysis of confirmed deaths.

Spatially, the geolocated subset confirms that at least some disappearances occur in the same immediate border landscape identified in the analysis of deaths. Thirty-one records contain coordinates. After excluding obvious coordinate errors or locations referring to other border contexts, 26 geolocated disappearance records fall within 50 kilometres of the Belarus border.

This subset is too small to represent the full disappearance dataset, but it is analytically important. It shows that locatable disappearances are concentrated in the immediate border zone rather than dispersed randomly across a wider migration route. These locations correspond to the same spatial configuration identified in the death analysis: a narrow border landscape shaped by forests, rivers, wetlands, restricted access, limited communication and delayed rescue.

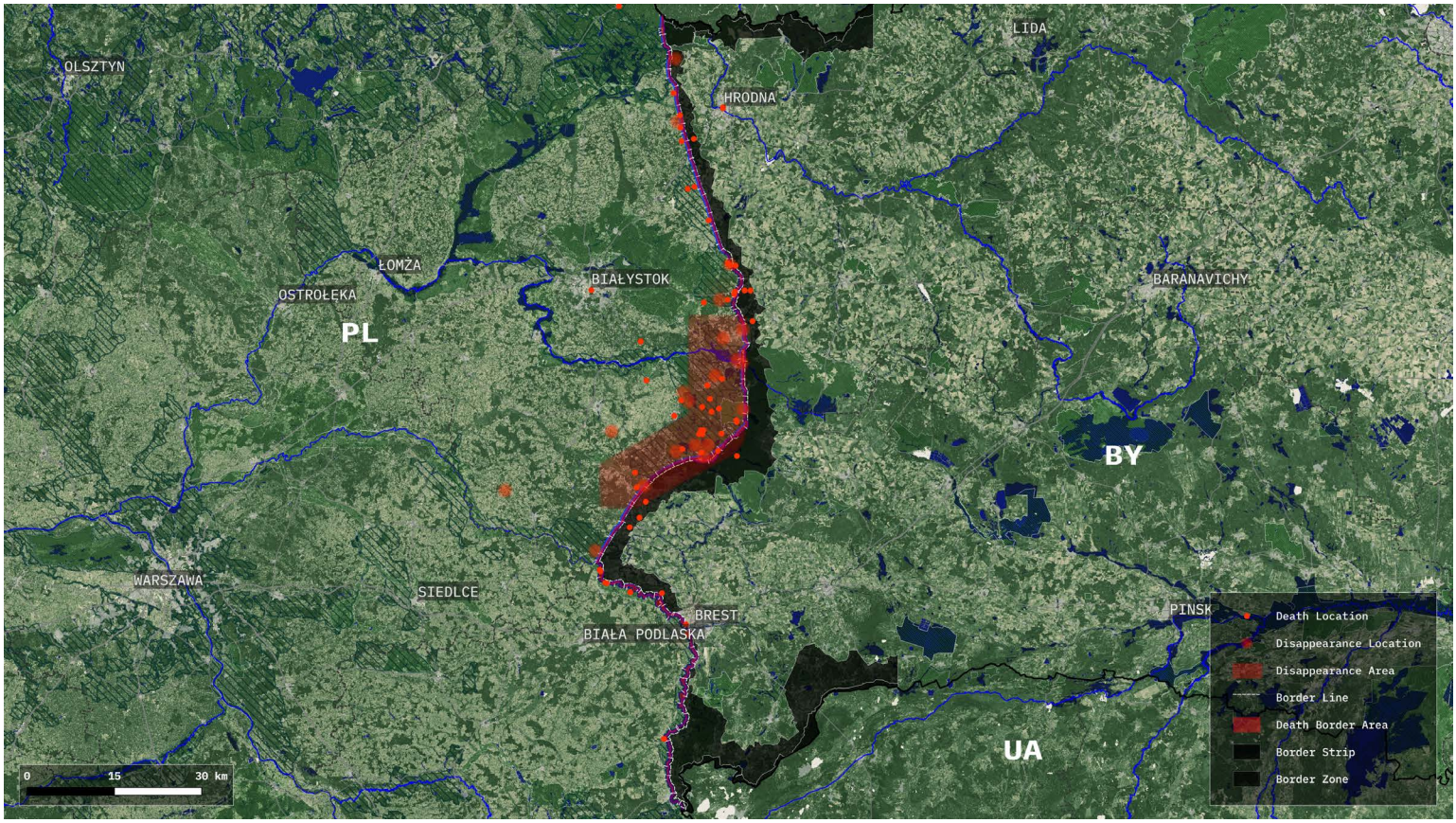


Figure 4.34. Map of deaths and disappearances at the Polish–Belarus border. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

The convergence of these geographies offers another indication that while 102 cases of deaths at the border have been recorded to date, many more cases of death may have occurred without having been recorded. This possibility was already clearly conveyed by the analysis of the ten documented death cases discussed above. These indicate recurring conditions under which deaths at the border may remain undiscovered, unidentified, or institutionally unrecorded. Across the cases examined, forests, wetlands, rivers, protected areas, limited GSM coverage, and restricted access repeatedly reduced the possibilities of localisation, verification, and recovery, while identification often depended on delayed and fragmented processes involving relatives, local residents, humanitarian actors, journalists, or local experts. Patterns of delayed discovery, accidental recovery, burial as unidentified persons (NN), and identification initiated outside state structures suggest that official records do not simply reflect the number of deaths at the border, but also the uneven material conditions under which deaths become recoverable, identifiable, and institutionally documented. The possibility that many more deaths at the border than have been recorded may have occurred is heightened by the convergence of the geographies of disappearance and death that emerges from our spatial analysis.

Conclusion: The state production of deaths and disappearances

This chapter has demonstrated that deaths and disappearances at the Poland–Belarus border are neither isolated humanitarian incidents nor unavoidable consequences of difficult terrain or adverse weather. Rather, they are produced through the cumulative operation of the architecture of enmity (Chapter Two) that has generated pushback regime that organises mobility, exposure, rescue, documentation, and institutional response. Environmental conditions matter, but they do not act independently. Forests, rivers, wetlands, cold, and snow become lethal through their incorporation into a border regime that repeatedly channels people into hazardous environments, restricts assistance, obstructs documentation, and fragments responsibility. The absence of visible injuries therefore does not indicate the absence of violence. Instead, it reveals a form of violence whose causality is distributed across terrain, infrastructure, institutional decisions, omissions, and time.

Counter-investigations makes it possible to reconstruct these cumulative causal chains. Prosecutorial findings identifying hypothermia, drowning, exhaustion, or acute circulatory-respiratory failure describe only the terminal physiological mechanisms through which life ended. They do not explain how people were repeatedly displaced through pushbacks, exposed to prolonged environmental hazards, prevented from leaving dangerous environments, denied or delayed access to rescue, and ultimately placed in conditions in which survival became progressively less possible. Counter-investigations therefore shifts the causal question from how the body died to how the conditions making death foreseeable and, in many cases, preventable were produced.

This distinction has direct implications for accountability. Prosecutorial investigations that isolate the immediate physiological cause of death from the preceding sequence of state practices transform politically and institutionally produced deaths into apparently self-contained medical events. In doing so, they separate the final medical event from the cumulative chain that produced it and limit the possibility of identifying institutional responsibility or measures capable of preventing similar deaths. Through our methodological approach, we have demonstrated that understanding the circumstances leading to border deaths requires reconstructing the sequence of institutional decisions and omissions preceding the fatal outcome, rather than treating death itself as the beginning and end of legal inquiry.

The disappearance analysis has extended the same analytical framework beyond recovered bodies. Whether a person is ultimately found, remains missing, or never becomes an officially registered missing person is shaped not only by what occurred in the border zone but also by subsequent institutional decisions. The case of Bachar Hamza Ferzan demonstrates this clearly. More than three years after contact was lost, his wife continues to search for him. Yet because the police refused to register his disappearance, he does not exist within the Polish missing-person system despite a formal disappearance report submitted on the family's behalf. At an earlier evidentiary threshold, the 214 loss-of-traceability records similarly show how communicative and spatial traces frequently disappear precisely when physical vulnerability and dependence on external assistance are increasing. These records cannot determine individual outcomes, but they demonstrate that the absence of a recovered body, an official record or a registered disappearance cannot be interpreted as evidence that no disappearance – or fatal outcome – occurred.

The spatial analysis of this database highlights that deaths and disappearances should not be understood as separate phenomena but as different outcomes produced through the same conditions and operational sequences at work in the pushback regime. Some people are eventually found and identified; others remain missing; still others disappear before entering any official system of registration or investigation. In each case, families, migrants, journalists, humanitarian organisations, lawyers, scientists, and local residents have repeatedly reconstructed trajectories, recovered bodies, restored identities, and preserved evidence that official institutions failed to establish. Counter-investigation is therefore not only a method of reconstructing events; it is also a practice of reappearance. It reconnects bodies to trajectories, physiological collapse to imposed exposure, disappearances to the destruction or refusal of institutional traces, and individual cases to the wider pushback regime through which they became possible.

As Mahlet Kassa's uncle reflected after years of unsuccessful efforts to obtain accountability:

> *Even though Mahlet is no longer alive, we still cannot accept the lack of accountability. For us, this case is not closed. We are emotionally exhausted. Mahlet died because she was denied assistance. For me, that is unimaginable. We continue to demand at least a measure of justice. I think about her every day. We are worn down by helplessness. It cannot be right that she lost her life, that we know why it*

happened, and yet no one does anything about it.

His words capture what this chapter has demonstrated empirically. The central question is no longer whether deaths and disappearances occurred at the Poland–Belarus border. It is how a border regime whose lethal and disappearing effects have been repeatedly documented – and whose institutional failures are now beginning to be recognised by the courts – has nevertheless remained politically, legally, and operationally protected. The next chapter turns to precisely this question. It examines how a regime with repeatedly documented, foreseeable, and, in many cases, preventable consequences has been legally authorised, politically legitimised, and operationally reproduced.

CHAPTER 5. THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE LETHAL PUSHBACK REGIME

At precisely 9:15 am, a bell rang, and the court officer's voice broke the silence of the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights. Seventeen judges entered the courtroom as everyone rose. Representatives of Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, the applicants, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, and several intervening states took their seats. More than three years had passed since the spectacular standoff that began in August 2021 and saw thirty-two Afghan nationals remain stranded for several weeks in harsh conditions between Polish and Belarusian forces near the village of Usnarz Górny, and ultimately lead them to be pushed back towards Belarus.

The hearing opened with a dispute over maps, jurisdiction, and the precise location of the migrant's makeshift camp. The Polish government argued that the applicants had remained exclusively on Belarusian territory, challenged the reliability of evidence produced by journalists, humanitarian organisations, and other non-state actors, and maintained that responsibility rested with Belarus. The discussion quickly expanded beyond the circumstances of the events of Usnarz Górny themselves.

Throughout the hearing, representatives of several governments repeatedly invoked the instrumentalisation of migration, hybrid warfare, European security, and European values, arguing that the exceptional circumstances created by Belarus required the Court to interpret states' obligations under the Convention in light of this new geopolitical reality. The Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe acknowledged the challenges posed by Belarus's actions while insisting that such circumstances could not justify weakening protections that the Convention recognises as absolute. The question before the Court, he reminded the judges, was ultimately whether the applicants' rights under the Convention had been respected.

As the hearing progressed, it became clear that far more was at stake than the events at Usnarz Górny in August 2021. The Grand Chamber was being asked to determine whether the deliberate instrumentalisation of migrants by an authoritarian regime permits Europe's purportedly liberal and democratic states

> to reinterpret the scope of their obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights.
>
> Around, 11:45 am, the President of the Court, announced, that the court would now deliberate on the admissibility and merits of the case; judgment would be delivered at a later date. "I therefore declare the hearing closed," he said, and struck the desk once with a small wooden hammer. A bell rang. The judges rose, and, one by one, left the room.
>
> Fieldnote, European Court of Human Rights, Strasbourg, February 2025

This vignette shows that what the Grand Chamber was examining with regard to the Usnarz Górny events went beyond the legality of one border operation. At stake was a broader question: whether the crossing across Europe's external borders of migrants from different countries of the Global South who have long been framed as a threat, facilitated by a third country in a context of heightened geopolitical tension, justifies altering the legal guarantees upon which the Convention itself is founded. At the time of writing, the Court has not yet spoken, though more than thirty applications concerning practices at the Belarusian border remain pending, and the forthcoming judgment is widely expected to offer authoritative guidance for their resolution. Its answer will shape not only the applicants' case, but also the legal boundaries within which European states may respond to migration at their external borders. Yet while the Court deliberates concerning events in 2021, the pushback regime it will eventually judge has only entrenched itself further.

The previous chapters traced the emergence of the lethal pushback regime imposed on migrants crossing the Polish–Belarusian borderlands and analysed how violence is produced through the interplay of state policy, border enforcement practices and infrastructure, and the environment itself. While our research sheds new light on how violence is inflicted, including in its most tragic outcomes of deaths and prolonged disappearance, we are far from being the first to have documented, analysed, and denounced these violent outcomes and their human cost. In fact, our research is founded upon the tireless work of documentation and analysis led by Polish civil society actors since the crisification of the border in 2021, to which we have repeatedly pointed. Furthermore, as the vignette exemplifies, beyond the production and publication of analysis

and documentation, civil society actors have been persistent in seeking accountability for the violence and violations documented at the border, and this in front of both domestic and EU courts. This raises the question that is at the centre of this chapter:

> *How has this lethal pushback regime been perpetuated and consolidated despite its documented violent and lethal outcomes, and repeated attempts to seek accountability for them?*

If the previous chapters analysed the emergence of the discourses, laws, policies, infrastructures, and practices that have constituted the lethal pushback regime since its emergence in 2021, this chapter focuses on the discursive, legal, and political processes at work in Poland and in the EU. These different elements, as we will argue in this chapter, have allowed this regime to be consolidated over time, and, in several different respects, *normalised*. We understand *normalisation* as the combination of two processes related to the different meanings of this term. On one hand, it involves a particular event or practice that was rare and exceptional becoming so recurrent and frequent that it becomes the average – the *normal* in statistical terms. On the other hand, normalisation involves the same event or practice that appeared to transgress the limits of the social and legal *norms* of a given society becoming increasingly accepted, and even attributed positive meaning.[360] The normalisation of the lethal pushback regime operating at the Poland–Belarusian border has occurred in both these respects over the course of the last five years, and this has been an essential dimension of its consolidation. We will show that this process of consolidation and normalisation has occurred despite the change in the government in Poland from the right-wing populist, PiS-led government in power in 2021, which played a central role in the crisification of the border, to the centrist coalition government elected in 2023, and whose leader Donald Tusk had pledged during his electoral campaign to bring an end to the violations of migrants' rights and deaths at the border.

To answer the question at the heart of this chapter, our analysis starts from practices observed at the border and seeks to connect them to discursive, legal, and political processes at the national level. We further analyse the impact of the policies of EU member states and European institutions on the Polish pushback regime, and how Poland has sought to transform European laws and institutions in turn. What we trace here is a series of non-linear feedback loops between the initial discourses,

360 T. Hendriks. "On the surprising queerness of norms: Anthropology with Canguilhem, Foucault, and Butler". *Anthropological Theory*, 23(3), (2023): 235-254; M. Amir & H. Kotef. "In-secure identities: On the securitization of abnormality". *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 36(2) (2018): 236-254.

policies, and legislation that emerged with the crisification of the border in 2021, and the actual practices of different actors at the border – particularly law enforcement agents, migrants, and those who support them – that have been implemented since. Furthermore, we examine the transformations of discourses, policies, and legislation over the last five years that have enabled the perpetuation of violence and violations of rights over time.

We first trace shifts in the discursive construction of migrants over time through a discourse analysis. While in Chapter One we demonstrated how migrants have been constructed as a threat and weapon at the intersection of racial and geopolitical logics of enmity, which legitimised exceptional policies and violent practices, in this chapter, our interest lies in how the militarised response to migration at the border has, in turn, shaped the discursive framing and perception of migrants.[361] Our discourse analysis focuses on particularly salient events at the border over the last five years – thus both during the PiS-led government and during the Tusk-led government. What we reveal is that the construction of threat did not recede after the initial crisification of the border in 2021. Rather, the representation of migrants as a danger to social order and cultural norms, national security, and territorial sovereignty has been repeatedly reactivated around key events at the border or in political spaces. At the same time, our analysis reveals a progressive normalisation of violence. While negative framings of migrants remained high, the violence produced by the border regime became increasingly unrecognisable as violence in public discourse. By comparing the evolution of threat discourse with documented deaths and references to violence, death, suffering, and bodily harm, we identify a growing bifurcation between the material violence documented at the border and its visibility in public discourse. In other words, as violence became recurrent and normal in statistical terms, it also progressively became accepted as something that was no longer transgressive of social norms, and silence became an indicator of this growing acceptance. This process was not only related to the repetition of violence over time, but also to the consolidation of the threat construction of migrants. Indeed, the dehumanisation of migrants in threat narratives entails that the different forms of harm they are exposed to have come to be accepted as necessary outcomes of securitised responses to their transgressive mobility.

Second, through legal analysis, we assess the outcomes of one of the essential avenues for Polish civil society to challenge the practices of pushback and violence: seeking accountability before both Polish and

361 N. De Genova, "Spectacles of Migrant 'Illegality': The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion," Ethnic and Racial Studies 36, no. 7 (2013): 1180–98.

362

European courts. We show that, both at the national and regional levels, the outcome has been mixed – some state practices have been sanctioned by courts while others have not – which has given the impression of a degree of accountability and respect for the rule of law. However, since even judgments that upheld migrants' rights have not been implemented, while other cases have been pending for years, accountability has mostly been an illusion. Furthermore, we highlight the limits of the language of the law in relation to the forms of violence we have documented in this report. Indeed, while courts are generally called upon to assess particular actions and omissions and the forms of harm that ensued as a direct consequence, the fragmented chains of causality we have reconstructed, involving multiple human actors and non-human actants, make the legal attribution of responsibility elusive. Together, this has led to impunity despite the simulacrum of procedural accountability. As a result, the law and legal processes have failed to act as a limitation on state practices that have violated migrants' lives, dignity, and rights. Impunity for violence and violations has played an essential role in allowing violence across the Polish–Belarusian borderland to be perpetuated over time. It has reinforced the exceptional power of law enforcement agents and the stripping of migrants' rights, which, as we demonstrated in previous chapters, had already been encoded into law.

Third, through policy analysis, we demonstrate that, far from acknowledging the harmful outcomes of the pushback regime and reversing course, over time Poland has consolidated anti-migrant legislations and policies deployed in support of its counter-instrumentalisation governance. We trace this evolution in Poland, which culminated in the suspension of asylum in 2025. Once again, this shift has occurred despite the change from a far-right-led to a centre-right-led Polish government. We further demonstrate that EU neighbouring states and EU institutions have largely supported Poland's hardline policy, and that the latter has partly served as the model for EU policies, particularly the Crisis Regulation included in the EU's Pact on Migration. What emerges from our analysis is that, to manage the contradictions and tensions generated by Poland's contravention of national, EU, and international law, the Polish government has actively sought to remodel national and EU legislation upon Poland's violent counter-instrumentalisation policy. In turn, the European Commission and European Council appear to have seen the 2021 crisis as an opportunity to demonstrate to Poland and other Eurosceptic member states the relevance of EU migration governance frameworks, and sought to accommodate their demands within the EU's Pact on Migration. What we observe is thus neither simply the re-nationalisation of Polish

migration policies in a way that would disregard EU frameworks, nor their full re-Europeanisation, but a conflictual and dialectical process out of which both Poland and EU norms have been transformed and illiberalism further entrenched.[363] While Poland's attempts to remodel national and EU law still leave important contradictions between its pushback regime and fundamental international legal norms, this process of legislative change has played an essential role in consolidating and normalising the violation of the fundamental rights of migrants in the name of border security.

The analysis offered in this chapter points to actors and institutions – such as Polish and European prosecutors and judges, media actors, politicians – who, despite being located far from the border, have become *implicated* in the violence and violations of rights migrants are routinely subjected to as they attempt to cross the Polish–Belarusian borderlands.[364] Indeed, the discursive, legal, and political processes we have analysed in Chapter One and in this one have not only created the *conditions of possibility* for the perpetration of violence, but also for the reproduction and consolidation of violent practices over time. Ultimately, what this chapter reveals is a series of feedback loops linking practices at the border with discourses, policies, legislations, and jurisprudence at the national and EU scales, in a way that has been mutually reinforcing and evaded accountability. The result has been the consolidation and normalisation of the lethal pushback regime, and the institutionalisation of rightlessness. It is in relation to this cross-scalar web of interlinked practices and processes that we conclude by reflecting upon what we call the *border-fascisation nexus* – a term we propose to highlight the circular and nonlinear processes through which the fascisation of politics, discourse, and law shapes border violence while border violence feeds back into processes of fascisation.

363 S. Wolff. "The New Pact on Migration: Embedded Illiberalism?". *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 62 (2024): 113–123.

364 M. Rothberg. *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2019).

Consolidating the threat of migration, normalising violence

A first dimension of consolidation and normalisation of the lethal pushback regime we identify operates at the level of discourse. While in the Chapter One we demonstrated that, in 2021, migrants were constructed as a threat and weapon at the intersection of racial and geopolitical logics of enmity, which legitimised exceptional policies and violent practices, here our interest is in understanding how this threat construction has evolved over time. In particular, we explore recursive feedback loops

between threat discourse and the militarised response to migration at the border, which, in turn, shape the discursive framing and perception of migrants in turn. Our approach is informed by the analysis of the "border spectacle" proposed by Nicholas De Genova, who showed that migrants who have been discursively constructed as a threat are made all the more threatening by their securitised treatment through bordering practices and the profusion of similar images of migrants' interceptions by law enforcement agents.[365] In other words, we consider the circularity between state-produced discursive propaganda and the "factual propaganda" of the border spectacle that has materialised on the ground, which reproduces and consolidates the threat that migrants have been framed as constituting.[366] The construction of threat did not recede after the initial crisification of the border in 2021. After discussing the evolution of threat construction, we also assess the discursive presence of violence experienced by migrants in relation to the phenomenon of violence itself, and reveal a high level of normalisation of violence at the discursive level.

365 N. De Genova, "Spectacles of Migrant 'Illegality': The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 7 (2013): 1180–98.

366 We draw the term "factual propaganda" from Hannah Arendt, who, in the context of the Second World War, saw this a strategy involving the brutal reshaping reality to "prove" vicious lies. H. Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (New York: Meridian Books, 1971).

The threat index as political seismograph

To analyse the evolution of the threat construction of migrants over time and assess the degree to which it has been consolidated, we compare our threat index with a timeline we have compiled, containing salient events at the border over the last five years – thus both during the PiS-led government and during the Tusk-led government. In this sense, we seek to read the threat index as a political seismograph of sorts, asking what events and processes, discussed in the previous chapters, may be shaping its oscillations. This articulation between the threat index and the qualitative timeline should, however, not be read mechanically. Not every political, legal, or infrastructural milestone produces an immediate peak in the net threat index. This is because the index measures the relative dominance of threat vocabulary over humanitarian vocabulary. A low or negative value does not necessarily mean that threat discourse is absent; it may also indicate that threat framing coexisted with, or was outweighed by, references to humanitarian harm.

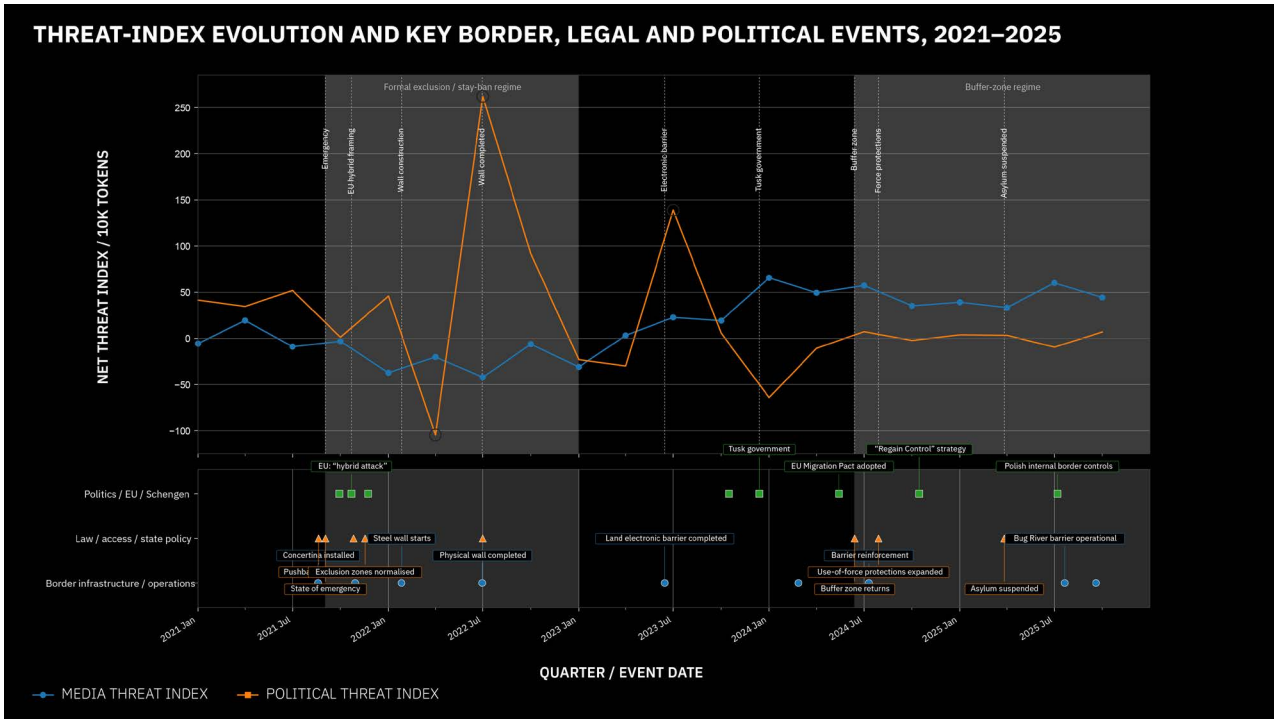


Figure 5.2. Media and political threat-index evolution with event-timeline data points, 2021–2025. The figure plots the media and political net threat indices together with the dated events. The lower panel distinguishes border and operational events, law/election/state-policy milestones, and civil society or regional interventions. The pattern should not be read as a mechanical causal relation between each event and each index value; rather, it shows how different moments contributed to the consolidation of the border regime: initial crisiification in 2021, infrastructural sedimentation in 2022, electoral and security reactivation in 2023, and routinised media threat framing around border incidents and legal hardening in 2024–2025. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

This is particularly important for interpreting the initial crisis of 2021. The summer and autumn of 2021 remain the foundational moment of crisification: the Usnarz Górny standoff, the declaration of the state of emergency, the creation of the no-go zone, the adoption of pushback measures, and the scenes at Kuźnica transformed migration into a national security crisis. Yet in the net media threat index, this moment does not appear as a simple peak. The data show why: late 2021 combines very high threat vocabulary with very high humanitarian vocabulary. Migrants were represented as a geopolitical threat, but deaths, children, families, help, hospitalisation, and suffering were also still highly visible. The initial crisis was therefore narrated through both security and humanitarian frames.

The period of wall construction and infrastructural consolidation in 2022 should be interpreted differently. The construction and completion of the physical barrier, the deployment of surveillance systems, and the routinisation of pushbacks mark the infrastructural consolidation of the pushback regime. However, this period does not correspond to a peak in the net threat index. This suggests that the consolidation of the pushback regime did not always require renewed discursive intensification. By this stage, earlier threat narratives had already been sedimented into material infrastructures, surveillance systems, and administrative routines. The wall should therefore be read less as a moment of discursive reactivation than as a moment when previous threat construction became embedded

in the physical and technological architecture of the border.

Media reactivation becomes clearer in 2023, not simply because the border itself changed at a single point, but because several registers converged: the completion of the electronic barrier, the launch of Operation Rengaw under the shadow of Wagner's presence in Belarus, the visa-corruption scandal, and the parliamentary election campaign. The campaign also intensified inter-party competition over migration, as the main parties sought to present themselves as better able to oppose EU migration policies and respond forcefully to Belarusian and Russian pressure. These events provided news hooks through which migration could again be narrated as a question of hybrid warfare, threats to sovereignty, disorder, and state protection. The index therefore does not show a mechanical reaction to each event; it shows how border events and electoral competition periodically reactivated an already sedimented threat frame.

The 2024 values require a similar reading. The Q1 media peak precedes the densest cluster of border events in the timeline, so it should not be attributed to one punctual incident. It is better understood as a moment in which the threat frame was already routinised in media coverage during the first months of the Tusk government. The subsequent persistence of high media values in Q2 and Q3 is more directly articulated with the border events listed in the timeline: the launch of East Shield, the stabbing and death of a Polish soldier, the reintroduction of a buffer zone, the law extending protection for soldiers using firearms, and the announcement of Safe Podlasie. These events gave the media repeated scenes and institutional cues through which the border could be narrated as a site of attack, pressure, and defence.

A further media peak appears in 2025 Q3, following the March 2025 suspension of access to asylum and during a period of continued legal and political hardening. This peak is driven by terms such as "problem," "war," "deportation," "threat," "attack," "smuggling," "crisis," and "aggression." Here again, the significance of the peak lies not only in the presence of threat vocabulary, but in the relative weakness of harm-related vocabulary. Threat framing becomes dominant not because violence has disappeared, but because the public narration of the border increasingly privileges security, pressure, and instrumentalisation over death, suffering, and bodily vulnerability.

The political corpus complicates this picture and should be treated

with caution. Some political peaks, especially 2022 Q3, are amplified by very small token totals and should not be overinterpreted. However, the 2023 Q3 political peak is more substantively meaningful: it is driven by terms such as “hybrid,” “deportation,” “problem,” “pressure,” “war,” “aggression,” and “provocation,” and coincides with Operation Rengaw, Wagner-related security debates, and the electoral period. After the change of government, political threat mobilisation appears to decrease in the corpus, while the media index remains high. This divergence should be treated as an analytical result rather than an explanation. The present data do not show why media uptake persisted, nor whether this relates to media ownership, editorial routines, or event-driven coverage. What can be said from the present material is narrower: under Tusk, the threat frame was less consistently produced in the political corpus but continued to circulate strongly in media discourse, especially when border incidents and policy measures supplied recurring news events.

Taken together, the index and the timeline reveal not a simple sequence of peaks, but different modes of consolidation. The 2021 crisis produced the foundational articulation of migrants as a geopolitical threat, while still retaining strong humanitarian visibility. The 2022 wall translated this earlier threat construction into infrastructure without producing a new net-index peak. The 2023–25 period then shows the clearer reactivation and dominance of threat framing, especially in the media corpus. Across these phases, the language of protection also broadened: from preventing entry through pushbacks and reinforced border infrastructure to a wider promise to “regain control” through criminalisation and deportation, crystallised in Poland’s 2025–30 migration strategy.

Threat construction therefore did not evolve linearly, nor did it recede after the initial crisification of the border in 2021. It was periodically reactivated when border events, political competition, legal reform, and infrastructural change converged. In this sense, the threat index captures the discursive work through which migration was repeatedly framed as a security problem, and through which increasingly restrictive policies could be narrated as reasonable, necessary, and protective.

This dynamic of consolidation can also be observed in the changing relationship between threat construction, documented deaths, and the visibility of harm in public discourse. Rather than the disappearance of references to violence from public discourse, the data point to a changing balance between two ways of narrating the border: one centred on harm, death, suffering, and bodily vulnerability; the other centred on threat,

pressure, attack, aggression, and instrumentalisation. Over time, references to violence decrease while references to threat increase.

To examine this shift, we compare three elements: documented deaths at the Poland–Belarus border; a threat-vocabulary rate derived from media references to security, attack, pressure, crisis, and aggression; and a harm-vocabulary rate derived from media references to death, bodies, victims, hypothermia, drowning, disappearance, and suffering. These are lexical rates: they measure the frequency of selected words per 10,000 tokens in the media corpus. They should therefore be read as indicators of relative visibility within public discourse, not as direct measures of public opinion or as a full qualitative coding of media frames.

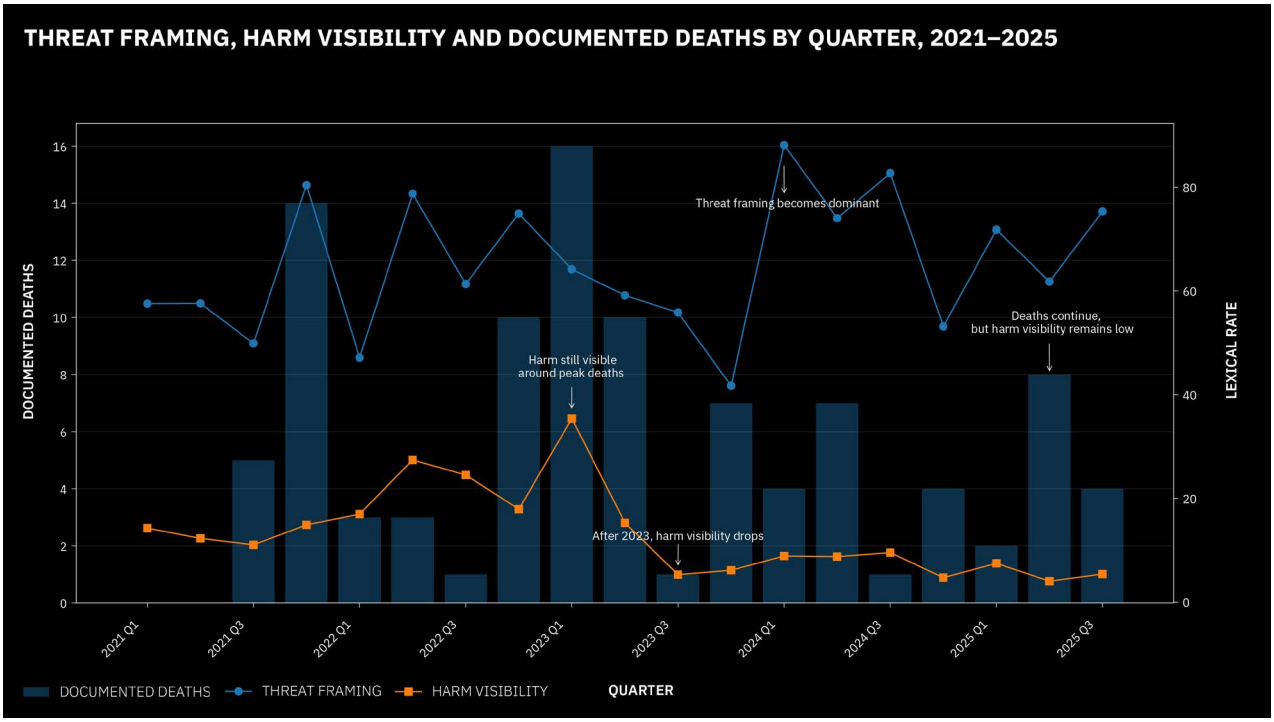


Figure 5.3. Threat vocabulary, harm vocabulary and documented deaths by quarter, 2021–2025. The figure compares quarterly documented deaths at the Poland–Belarus border with two lexical rates in the media corpus: threat vocabulary and harm vocabulary. Threat vocabulary refers to words associated with security, attack, pressure, crisis, aggression and instrumentalisation. Harm vocabulary refers to words associated with death, bodies, victims, hypothermia, drowning, disappearance and suffering. Both are normalised per 10,000 tokens. The figure does not show that violence entirely disappears from public discourse; rather, it shows a shift in balance: from late 2023 onwards, harm vocabulary becomes less visible while threat vocabulary remains high, even as deaths continue to be documented. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

During the initial phase of the crisification, especially between late 2021 and early 2023, deaths and harm-related vocabulary remain relatively visible together. The border is framed as both a site of threat and as a site of humanitarian harm. The violence of the border regime is therefore not only occurring materially; it is also, at least partly, recognisable as

violence within public discourse.

From late 2023 onwards, however, this balance shifts. Harm vocabulary declines sharply, while threat vocabulary remains high and later rises again. At the same time, deaths continue to be documented. This does not mean that violence disappears from discourse altogether, nor that every increase in deaths corresponds to a decrease in harm-related vocabulary. The shift is instead relative: the border remains lethal, but the language through which it is publicly made intelligible increasingly privileges threat over harm.

This displacement is crucial for understanding the normalisation of the pushback regime. Violence becomes more acceptable not only because migrants are represented as threatening, but also because the violence they experience becomes less central to the mainstream public narration of the border. Pushbacks, injuries, deaths, disappearances, and environmental exposure become incorporated into the ordinary functioning of the border regime. They are no longer systematically narrated as consequences of policy, nor as evidence of the regime's brutality. Instead, they become background conditions against which renewed claims of threat, attack, pressure, and hybrid warfare can continue to be made.

In this sense, threat construction does not merely justify violence after the fact. It helps produce the conditions under which violence can be repeated, tolerated, and normalised. Migrants are made threatening by their securitised treatment at the border, and that treatment is then justified by their supposed threatening character. Discursive propaganda and the factual propaganda of the border spectacle thus enter a mutually reinforcing loop.

The impact of the threat construction of migration can also be analysed in the evolution of public perceptions of migrants in Poland, which have hardened over time. Available CBOS trend data suggest that restrictive attitudes towards refugees from Africa and the Middle East, and later toward migrants more generally, were already high before the 2021 border crisis. This means that, as we have noted, the border crisis did not invent anti-migrant hostility. Rather, it activated and redirected an already hostile public imaginary toward a specific border site and consolidated it over time. In the July 2024 survey, 84% of respondents also supported increasing the permissibility of weapon use by soldiers, police officers, and Border Guard officers guarding the border. These data show the consolidation of restrictive attitudes around this specific border regime.

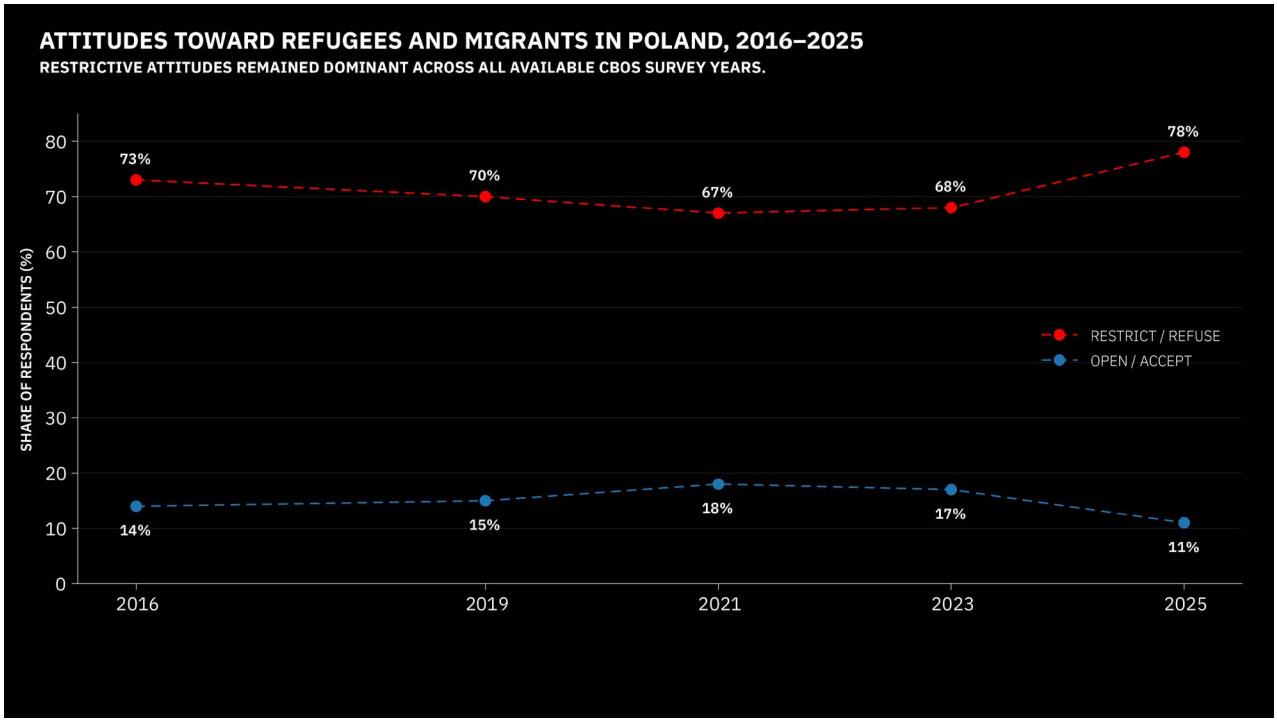


Figure 5.4. Share of respondents favouring restriction or refusal versus openness or acceptance toward refugees and migrants, for the available survey years. The blue line represents the share favouring restriction/refusal; the orange line represents the share favouring openness/acceptance. This figure should be used as contextual evidence, not as a direct measure of media discourse. It shows that refusal/restriction was already high before 2021, so the crisis should be read as an activation and redirection of an existing hostile imaginary, rather than its sudden creation. Data source: CBOS. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

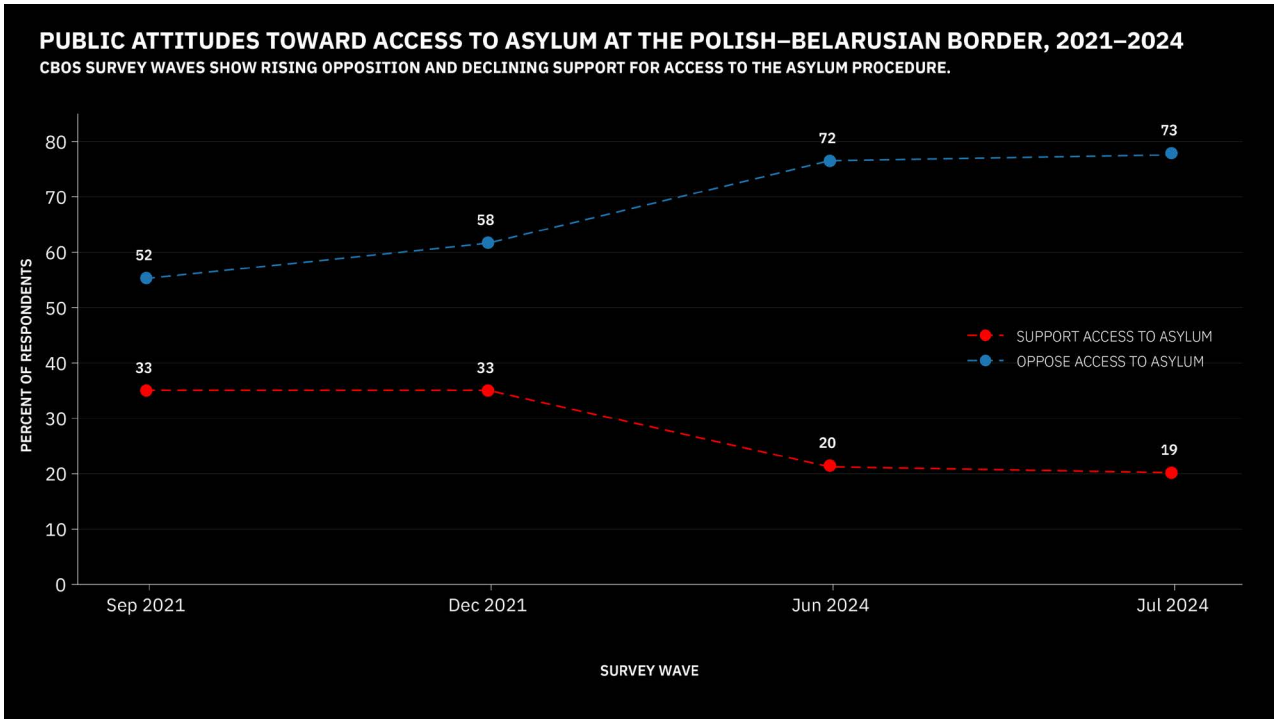


Figure 5.5. Public attitudes toward access to asylum at the Poland–Belarus border, 2021–2024. The figure shows the share of respondents supporting or opposing access to the asylum procedure for migrants staying at the border. Opposition rose from 52% in September 2021 to 73% in July 2024, while support fell from 33% to 19%. Data source: CBOS, Report No. 81/2024. Graph by Border Forensics, 2026.

The CBOS data help situate these discursive shifts within a broader social and political context. Because restrictive attitudes were already high before 2021, the consolidation of threat discourse should not be understood as the creation of anti-migrant hostility from nothing. Rather, the border crisis gave an already available hostile imaginary a concrete site, a repeated set of images, and a political vocabulary. This matters for our argument because it shows how threat construction could resonate beyond government statements or media coverage: the Poland–Belarus border became connected to wider anxieties about migration, sovereignty, security, and the protection of the national community.

This is why the relationship between the threat index, harm visibility, documented deaths, and the event timeline is politically significant. The figures do not demonstrate a direct causal relation between discourse and violence. They show something more specific: a changing discursive balance in which lethal and harmful outcomes continue to be documented, while the vocabulary through which the border is publicly made intelligible increasingly privileges threat over harm. Usnarz, Kuźnica, the wall, Operation Rengaw, the death of the Polish soldier, the buffer zone, Safe Podlasie, and the suspension of asylum each provided occasions through which the threat frame could be repeated, updated, and routinised.

Ultimately, the corpus shows a hardening of the discursive conditions within which migration is publicly made intelligible. While establishing direct causality remains difficult, the temporal convergence between threat discourse, restrictive policy developments, and the normalisation of border violence suggest a broader shift in the political common sense around migration. Migrants are increasingly represented not as rights-bearing subjects exposed to state violence, but as vectors of insecurity whose exclusion can be framed as a matter of collective protection. In this sense, threat construction did not merely legitimise specific border measures. It helped produce a political environment in which increasingly exclusionary approaches to migration became conceivable, acceptable, and eventually desirable.

This shift has occurred regardless of the change in government in 2023. Positions that were once associated with the far right became increasingly absorbed into the language of state responsibility, border protection and European security. This helps explain how the pushback regime could be consolidated not only under the far-right PiS government, but also under the subsequent centrist coalition led by Tusk's party. By repeatedly constructing migration as an existential challenge to the nation and the

state, threat discourse has contributed to a wider rightward movement of the political field.

The discursive normalisation analysed in this section is therefore one of the mechanisms through which the lethal pushback regime has been consolidated over time. The next section turns to a different arena in which this consolidation has been challenged: attempts to seek accountability before Polish and European courts. As we will see however these attempts have not proven successful, and the law has contributed to the perpetuation of the pushback regime in different ways.

The illusion of accountability in front of Polish and European courts

If a process of normalisation of violence has taken place, it has been far from complete and uncontested. Civil society actors have continued to refuse to accept the denial of migrants' rights and the violence they have been subjected to, and have expressed their opposition through a range of practices, ranging from direct support at the border to advocacy and strategic litigation. In this section, we analyse the outcomes of one of the essential avenues for Polish civil society to challenge the practices of pushbacks and violence: seeking accountability in front of both Polish and European courts. To what extent have these attempts succeeded in securing justice for third-country nationals and in preventing further violations of migrants' rights? To explore this question, we have drawn on national, EU, and international law and jurisprudence, as well as information provided by state actors, civil society, and media on pending and closed cases, to assess the effectiveness of the main remedial pathways used to challenge pushbacks and violence at the Poland–Belarus border. The analysis is summarised below and has visualised on a timeline that reconstructs the stages in twenty litigation attempts. Before addressing remedial pathways, we first summarise the key streams of violations that emerge from our analysis of bordering practices and locate avenues for accountability in the legal asymmetry between Poland and Belarus.

Legal asymmetry between Poland and Belarus

Although the violence unfolding at the Poland–Belarus border is inherently transnational, and we have demonstrated the violent practices of

both Polish and Belarusian officials, this report focuses its legal analysis on Poland. This reflects a fundamental legal asymmetry between Poland and Belarus. While Poland has been affected by democratic backsliding, it remains a democratic regime. As a member of the EU, Poland is bound by EU law, the European Convention on Human Rights, the Refugee Convention, and a wide range of international human rights obligations. As such, Poland is embedded within a dense network of domestic and supranational accountability mechanisms. Numerous attempts to seek accountability have been made against Poland and Polish actors, and these are our focus in this chapter. By contrast, Belarus has been ruled by an authoritarian dictatorship since 1994, which has severely restricted human rights and repressed all opposition. Belarus is not subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights and has not ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. As a result, legal avenues for accountability in Belarus are inherently limited. Despite the courageous human rights reporting by Belarusian human rights organisations, to our knowledge, no attempt to seek accountability has been brought forwards in Belarus.[367] The only attempt to seek accountability we are aware of is at the international level – the case brought by Lithuania before the International Court of Justice against Belarus, which is ongoing.[368]

The legal asymmetry between Poland and Belarus not only affects differential avenues for accountability, but has also played out in the tensions between both states. Indeed, since 2021, Belarus has sought to exploit Poland's legal obligations in pursuit of its aim of pressuring Poland and the EU. From the outset of the "crisis," Belarus has actively documented, publicised, and sought to politically exploit violations committed by Poland[369] and other EU actors, and has used legal avenues as a means of pressure against them.[370] In the process, Belarusian authorities did not rely solely on their own allegations, but drew upon findings produced by international organisations, human rights bodies, and NGOs to evidence violations and violence by Poland.[371] This practice is deeply cynical and is far from demonstrating a genuine interest in the rights of migrants and accountability for them, which would have demanded that Belarus first account for the grave violations perpetrated by its own law enforcement agents on its territory. However, the fact that Belarus has engaged in a form of lawfare that involves the instrumentalisation of civil society-led claims for accountability against Poland in no way undermines either Poland's responsibility for violations or the legitimacy and importance of claims against these.

367 See Human Constanta, "International Protection in Belarus: Law and Practice," Human Constanta, May 6, 2026, https://humanconstanta.org/en/international-protection-in-belarus-law-and-practice/.

368 D. Schmalz, "Migrant "Instrumentalisation" before the ICJ: The Case of Lithuania v. Belarus", *VerfBlog*, 2025/6/06, https://verfassungsblog.de/migrant-instrumentalisation-before-the-icj/

369 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, The Most Resonant Human Rights Violations in Certain Countries of the World: 2023 (Minsk: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, 2023), 33, https://mfa.gov.by/kcfinder/upload/files/Press_Service/23.06.22_report_hr_eng.pdf. The report explicitly cites the Border Emergency Collective and its video report *Zone of Hidden Violence*, but reproduces only its findings concerning pushbacks and human rights violations by Polish authorities. The original BEC investigation documented violence and coercion on both sides of the Poland–Belarus border. Border Emergency Collective. *Zone of Hidden Violence*. Visual report, 2022. Vimeo video. https://vimeo.com/738396988.

370 See UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Poland*, A/HRC/52/15, January 4, 2023.

371 While there have been different instances, one will suffice to exemplify the Belarusian practices. Following the deaths of migrants at the border and the events in Kuźnica in late 2021, the Belarusian Investigative Committee opened criminal proceedings against Polish authorities and border officers, alleging crimes against humanity, torture, inhuman treatment and responsibility for migrant deaths. These proceedings were presented as a form of accountability for violence committed by European actors and as a counter-narrative to accusations directed at the Belarusian regime. Notably, following the first public press conference in November 2021 – during which HFHR, SIP and Grupa Granica announced that they were exploring the possibility of submitting evidence to the International Criminal Court – Belarus responded by initiating its own proceedings concerning alleged crimes committed by Poland against migrants at the border.

Legal qualification of harmful bordering practices

The violations that emerge from our analysis of bordering practices, and that have served as the basis for attempts to seek accountability for violations by Poland, can be summarised into key streams of violations of migrants' rights.[372]

The first stream of violations relates to pushbacks at the Poland–Belarus border. Pushbacks breach multiple international instruments and numerous provisions of EU law.[373] First, pushbacks violate the principle of non-refoulement (under Article 33(1) of the 1951 Refugee Convention, Article 3 ECHR, Article 3 CAT, Article 19(2) CFR), the right to seek asylum (Article 18 CFR), and the prohibition of collective expulsion (Article 4 of the Protocol no. 4 to the ECHR, Article 19(1) CFR). Those provisions indicate clearly that the individual situation of third-country nationals must be adequately and rigorously assessed before their return to Belarus (including the risks that they may face in Belarus and if deported from Belarus), and that their asylum claims should be registered if they are submitted. This is supported by the EU secondary legislation, including the 2013/32/EU Asylum Procedures Directive applicable at the time (as well as the new Regulation 2024/1348) and the 2008/115/EC Return Directive. Second, pushbacks of asylum seekers are incompatible with the right to seek asylum guaranteed in the Polish Constitution (Article 56). Third, the practice of non-registration of asylum applications had no legal basis in the Polish legal order until March 2025. Furthermore, the Regulation of 20 August 2021 was adopted without a proper legal basis: as such, it is ineffective and should be disapplied. Lastly, the remedies made available against pushbacks are considered ineffective (as also shown in this chapter), thus breaching Article 13 ECHR.

The second stream of violations relates to violence used at the border. Many actions committed by both Polish and Belarusian authorities described in Chapter Three may be qualified as an inhuman and degrading treatment, if not torture, constituting violations of, amongst others, Article 3 ECHR, Article 2 CAT, and Article 40 of the Polish Constitution. In a number of instances the use of force at the Poland–Belarus border was seen by civil society as disproportionate and unnecessary. Under Polish law, causing damage to health is a crime punishable with imprisonment, restriction of freedom, or a fine depending on the seriousness of the damage, (Article 156 and 157 of the Criminal Code). A public official who, exceeding their powers or failing to perform their duties, acts to the detriment of public or private interest is also subject to imprisonment (Article 231 of the Criminal Code). Under international and Polish law,

372 These streams are not exhaustive with regards to violations of rights committed at the border, which would further include the rights of activist and humanitarian actors, which we do not address here. For a discussion of the criminalisation of solidarity, see K. Czarnota, J. Jagura, A. Kula, and Kolektyw Szpila, Criminalizing Solidarity: Report on Anti-Repression Efforts (Warsaw: Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights; Medico International, 2025).

373 Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, "What Rights Are Violated During the Procedure of Pushbacks? HFHR Observations Submitted to ECHR," Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, February 2, 2024, https://hfhr.pl/en/news/what-rights-are-violated-during-the-procedure-of-pushbacks-hfhr-observations-submitted-to-echr

the use of violence by public officials must be thoroughly and adequately investigated by states.

The third stream of violations concerns deaths at the border. Under the right to life guaranteed in, inter alia, Article 2 ECHR, border deaths must be effectively investigated by states. Moreover, states' positive obligations include taking necessary measures to protect the lives of third-country nationals crossing their borders, irrespective of whether a threat to life stems from natural hazards or national authorities' actions or inactions. At the Poland–Belarus border, neither deaths have been properly investigated, nor have the lives of migrants and asylum seekers crossing this border been sufficiently protected. In this context, Article 160 and 162 of the Criminal Code should be mentioned. They concern the crimes of, respectively, exposing a person to the risk of loss of life or serious damage to health, and failure to provide assistance toa person whose life or limb is at risk.

The fourth stream of violations concerns disappearances at the Poland–Belarus border. International and Polish law impose clear obligations on state authorities to search for missing persons, investigate disappearances, maintain adequate records, and ensure families' right to know the fate of missing relatives.

The evidence discussed in this report nevertheless demonstrates that disappearances occurring in the context of undocumented pushbacks have frequently fallen outside these legal protections. Existing missing-person procedures, designed for fundamentally different disappearance scenarios, proved poorly adapted to disappearances linked to migration control and undocumented pushbacks. Moreover, the absence of official records confirming a person's presence on Polish territory – often itself produced through these practices – subsequently became an obstacle to initiating searches and establishing institutional responsibility.

Consequently, search, tracing, and identification efforts increasingly shifted to humanitarian organisations, volunteer rescue groups, and human rights defenders, exposing a significant accountability gap and highlighting the need for new legal and institutional responses, discussed later in this report.

Our empirical analysis indicates *prima facie* violations of several obligations by both Poland and Belarus. In relation to these different streams of violations, Polish civil society actors have been persistent in seeking

accountability before Polish and European courts. We now turn to these efforts and assess their outcomes.

374 Border Forensics, 2026.

Seeking accountability in front of Polish and European courts

The legal measures used in Poland to challenge pushbacks and violence at the Poland–Belarus border have been grounded in national administrative and criminal procedural rules, as well as in international law. We have analysed recent litigation attempts and jurisprudence to assess the effectiveness of the main remedial pathways used to challenge pushbacks and violence at the Poland–Belarus border. The analysis has been visualised in a timeline that reconstructs the stages in twenty litigation attempts, and is summarised below.

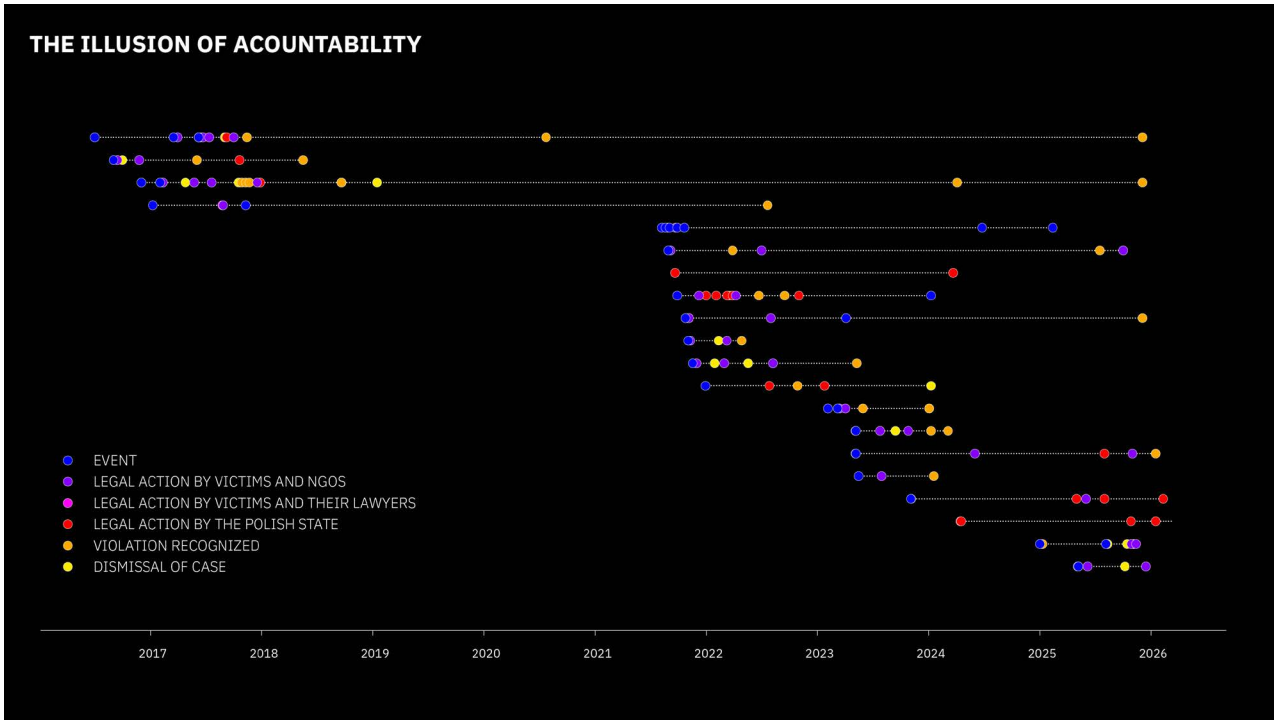


Figure 5.6. Legal cases challenging pushbacks and the border violence procedure. Timeline by Border Forensics, 2026.[374]

We first discuss, summarily, attempts to seek accountability for pushbacks, and then attempts concerning different forms of violence, deaths, and disappearances analysed in this report.

Pushbacks

Individual cases of pushbacks – both those based on the Regulation of 20 August 2021[375] and Article 303b of the Act on Foreigners[376] – were challenged before national administrative courts.[377] They were also indirectly challenged within, and in connection with, immigration detention proceedings concerning pushback victims. The results of these proceedings have been favourable to third-country nationals pushed back to Belarus. Many Polish courts highlighted that pushbacks are contrary to Polish, EU, and international law and pointed to acknowledged procedural mistakes made by the Border Guard in connection with irregular entries. Pushbacks at the border were considered illegal, and therefore ineffective, and decisions legitimising pushbacks were annulled.

Despite these positive outcomes, remedies provided to individuals under administrative law proved overall ineffective. They lacked automatic suspensive effect; thus, they did not prevent the complainants' removal to Belarus. Moreover, even when the contested decisions and actions were considered contrary to the law by the national courts, this did not entail an obligation to allow entry to Poland. In practice, upon the judgment annulling the decision based on Article 303b of the Act on Foreigners, the proceedings were discontinued, as they were considered futile. Furthermore, the appeal proceedings are protracted, taking at least several months, if not years. Lastly, seeking damages following the final administrative court's judgment is possible; however, it is rarely practised due to lengthy and burdensome procedures.[378]

Pushback victims also sought justice before the European Court of Human Rights. Multiple applications were submitted to this court invoking violations of Articles 2, 3, 5, and 13 ECHR and Article 4 of the Protocol No. 4. As of June 2026, twenty-four applications concerning eighty-five third-country nationals who were pushed back at the Poland–Belarus border were communicated to the Polish government, including *R.A.* and *Others v. Poland*, eventually relinquished to the Grand Chamber.[379] Numerous requests for interim measures were also submitted to the ECtHR with the aim of preventing the applicants' removal to Belarus, especially over 2021–22 and in 2025. These requests were predominantly accepted by the Court and mostly respected by Poland.

Thus, thanks to interim measures indicated by the ECtHR, many asylum seekers were allowed to enter Poland and seek asylum therein. Moreover, some of the applicants have already received non-pecuniary damages

375 Rozporządzenie Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji z dnia 20 sierpnia 2021 r. zmieniające rozporządzenie w sprawie czasowego zawieszenia lub ograniczenia ruchu granicznego na określonych przejściach granicznych, Dz.U. 2021, poz. 1536.

376 Ustawa z dnia 12 grudnia 2013 r. o cudzoziemcach.

377 No right to appeal has been provided in the Regulation. Pushbacks based on the Regulation were then challenged before the administrative courts (first PAC, next SAC) under the general provisions enabling litigation in case of any action of public authorities implementing administrative law. As regards removals based on Article 303b of the Act on Foreigners, the right to a remedy has been directly provided by the law. The person concerned can submit an appeal to the BG Chief Commander, however, it does not prevent their removal to Belarus which is executed immediately upon the issuance of the decision. The decision of the BG Chief Commander can be challenged before the administrative courts: first before the Provincial Administrative Court (PAC) and next before the Supreme Administrative Court (SAC).

378 Only in 2026, first civil lawsuit over a pushback at the Polish-Belarusian border was submitted with regard a third-country national who was pushed several times back to Belarus. His pushbacks based on the Regulation of 20 August 2021 has been already considered illegal by the administrative court, and decision on his removal based on Article 303b of the Act on Foreigners was annulled. For more details see: Association for Legal Intervention, "First Civil Lawsuit over a Pushback at the Polish-Belarusian Border," June 2, 2026, https://interwencjaprawna.pl/en/first-civil-lawsuit-over-a-pushback-at-the-polish-belarusian-border/.

379 Poland has been already condemned by the ECtHR for its pushback practices in 2016-2017, see e.g. ECtHR, Judgment of 23 July 2020, M.K. and others v. Poland, no. 40503/17, 42902/17 and 43643/17.

through the friendly-settlement procedure. Nonetheless, the fact that, at present, as of June 2026, the ECtHR has not reached a judgment in any of the pending cases concerning pushbacks at the Poland–Belarus border, while most of them concern events in 2021–22, indicates that the very temporality of the assessment of complaints constitutes a limit to accountability.

Moreover, pushbacks were also challenged within criminal proceedings. Numerous notifications of suspected criminal conduct have been submitted by individuals and civil society organisations with the aim of prompting the criminal investigation into the actions of the border guards and soldiers involved in pushbacks at the Poland–Belarus border. However, most of the criminal proceedings were discontinued or never initiated. Prosecutors refused to investigate the lawfulness of pushbacks, taking the position that they were based in the recently modified Polish law and thus lawful – a process of legalising illegality by changing the law, to which we return further on.

Lastly, the pushbacks of asylum seekers who were not allowed to seek asylum, due to the suspension of the right to asylum at the Poland–Belarus border, were challenged before domestic courts, but theses courts disagreed on their lawfulness. In this context, on the one hand, the suspension was considered by the lower-level administrative courts to be in accordance with the Polish Constitution (which guarantees a right to asylum), the 1951 Refugee Convention, the ECHR, and EU law. Courts concluded that, considering the security situation at the Poland–Belarus border, the suspension constituted a proportionate measure and was allowed under Article 33(2) of the 1951 Refugee Convention and general principles of EU law. These findings were challenged by civil society organisations providing legal assistance to pushback victims before the Supreme Administrative Court and are currently pending. On the other hand, arguments concerning the illegality of the suspension of the right to asylum were considered within immigration-detention proceedings. In several judgments, national criminal courts ruled in individual cases that third-country nationals, who crossed the Poland–Belarus border and were subsequently detained could not be deprived of liberty for the purpose of conducting return proceedings, as they had applied for asylum. The courts highlighted that the suspension of the right to asylum, as applied to detainees, was incompatible with Polish, EU, and international law. The asylum seekers were thus released from detention.[380]

The multiplicity of the legal remedies used to challenge pushbacks in

380 Association for Legal Intervention, "The Regional Court in Olsztyn: Suspension of the Right to Asylum Is Unlawful,", February 17, 2026, https://interwencjaprawna.pl/en/the-regional-court-in-olsztyn-suspension-of-the-right-to-asylum-is-unlawful/.

Poland gives an impression of a well-functioning domestic system that protects the right to an effective remedy and guarantees access to justice. It is, however, only an illusion of accountability. None of the administrative measures analysed in this section can be considered effective within the meaning of Article 13 ECHR, as they are lacking suspensive effect.[381] Moreover, none of the notifications of suspected criminal conduct submitted to national authorities led to a comprehensive criminal investigation by prosecutors and an indictment of the pushback perpetrators. The protracted ongoing proceedings before the ECtHR indirectly contribute to allowing pushbacks to continue.

381 Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Rome, 4 December 1950.

Importantly, so far, neither national nor international legal measures have led to a change in law and practice concerning pushbacks in Poland. Asylum seekers are still pushed back to Belarus upon "irregular entry" to Poland. The right to an effective remedy is not guaranteed in law regarding these violations of human rights. The Polish government reiterates that the security situation at the Poland–Belarus border justifies these actions. It remains unwavering in its approach, despite the rising number of judgments condemning the Polish response to the crisis at the Poland–Belarus border. Instead of repealing or at least amending laws and practices in question, Polish authorities have only tightened the regulations, as we will discuss further on. Accordingly, Polish law and practice applied at the Poland–Belarus border have become even more in breach of national, EU, and international law over time.

Our analysis of attempts to seek accountability for pushbacks and to prevent their continuation thus indicates that these attempts were not effective, despite the illusion of accountability conveyed by legal processes before national and European courts. This has contributed to the perpetuation and consolidation of the pushback regime.

Since our report focuses particularly on the forms of violence that result from the pushback regime, we now describe in more detail attempts to seek accountability for these practices. Our analysis reveals that attempts to seek accountability for incidents of violence, deaths, and disappearances have been even less successful than those concerning pushbacks.

Physical violence

As we have demonstrated throughout this report, physical violence is routinely used at the Poland–Belarus border; however, it is rarely investigated or prosecuted. Several Polish NGOs informed domestic authorities

of cases of violence at the border, aiming to prompt the initiation of criminal proceedings against the border guards and soldiers. These proceedings were mostly discontinued (or their initiation was refused) on grounds of alleged lack of evidence that the law was violated. Only in a few – the most horrific or well-documented – cases of border violence were investigations initiated, and perpetrators prosecuted.

This tendency is exemplified by the case of an Afghan national who claimed to have been beaten by Polish officers in June 2024. He contacted the HFHR during his hospitalisation in Poland, declaring his willingness to initiate criminal proceedings against the perpetrators. However, he was pushed back to Belarus upon his release from hospital. Subsequently, a prosecutor concluded that the evidence gathered did not indicate that a crime had been committed and refused to initiate criminal proceedings.[382]

This pattern is also visible in the operation of the special team of prosecutors in Siedlce, who were ordered to investigate the events at the Poland–Belarus border. The investigation was initiated in April 2024 and focused on access to asylum and the putting of migrants' lives and limbs at risk during and after pushbacks. In October 2025, the proceedings concerning most of the events (34 of 38) were discontinued. These decisions were challenged before the courts, which, at least in some cases, ordered the proceedings continued, citing the insufficiency of the evidence gathered in the case. However, the proceedings were often again discontinued following the court's decision. According to the official communication by the Prosecutor's Office in Siedlce, supplemented by the media information, the prosecutorial team decided to press charges in only two cases: one concerning the beating of eight third-country nationals, and one concerning the burning of passports and phones of two third-country nationals apprehended at the border. Both events were documented on video, which may have prompted the prosecutors to charge the perpetrators. In March 2026, the Prosecutor's Office in Siedlce announced that the special team had been dissolved, as the remaining proceedings had been discontinued due to a lack of proof that crimes had been committed at the border. [383][384]

Only in exceptional cases were incidents of violence at the border investigated or prosecuted. For instance, in a case concerning a Syrian national who was seriously wounded while crossing the Polish border, a criminal investigation was initiated. As reported by Grupa Granica in 2023: "On 4 November, a Syrian citizen was shot in the back at the border. Fortunately, the bullet missed the spine and the vital organs. According to his account,

382 Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, "Sąd zadecydował, że prokuratura musi zbadać sprawę pushbacku," Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, June 2, 2025, https://hfhr.pl/aktualnosci/pushback-prokuratura-musi-zbadac-sprawe. Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, "Sąd zadecydował, że prokuratura musi zbadać sprawę pushbacku," Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, June 2, 2025, https://hfhr.pl/aktualnosci/pushback-prokuratura-musi-zbadac-sprawe.

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384 Prokuratura Okręgowa w Siedlcach, "Komunikat dot. rozwiązania zespołu prokuratorów do prowadzenia śledztwa w sprawie przekroczenia uprawnień przez funkcjonariuszy Straży Granicznej," Prokuratura Okręgowa w Siedlcach, 2026, https://www.gov.pl/web/po-siedlce/komunikat-dot-rozwiazania-zespolu-prokuratorow-do-prowadzenia-sledztwa-w-sprawie-przekroczenia-uprawnien-przez-funkcjonariuszy-strazy-granicznej.

he crossed the border with his group through a hole in the fence. They walked a few kilometres into Polish territory where they heard the Polish services. They broke off to flee, the man was shot in the back. (...) The man underwent more than six hours of surgery at the University Clinical Hospital in Bialystok."[385] Criminal court proceedings against the soldier who shot the third-country national were ongoing as of June 2026. According to the media, the soldier was accused of careless handling of the weapon. The Syrian national requested compensation of PLN 50,000.[386] The Polish Ministry of National Defence provided the soldier with legal assistance and explicitly stated that it disagreed with the criminal charges brought by the prosecutor's office, and that any conviction would be challenged.[387] Thus, a final judgment in this case should not be expected any time soon.

385 Grupa Granica, November 2023 Report from the Polish-Belarusian Border, Grupa Granica, 2024, https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2311-ST-CM-November-2023-ENG-GG.pdf.

386 Rp.pl, Zolnierz postrzelil na granicy nielegalnego migranta z Syrii. Uslyszal zarzuty, Rp.pl, 2026, https://www.rp.pl/wojsko/art43727161-zolnierz-postrzelil-na-granicy-nielegalnego-migranta-z-syrii-uslyszal-zarzuty.

387 Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej, "Komunikat MON," Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej, January 30, 2026, https://www.gov.pl/web/obrona-narodowa/komunikat-mon31.

388 Border Forensics, 2026.

389 See Fakt.pl, Zolnierze broniacy granicy na celowniku prokuratury. Znamy szczegoly, 2024, https://www.fakt.pl/polityka/zolnierze-broniacy-granicy-na-celowniku-prokuratury-znamy-szczegoly/vbjnqhq.

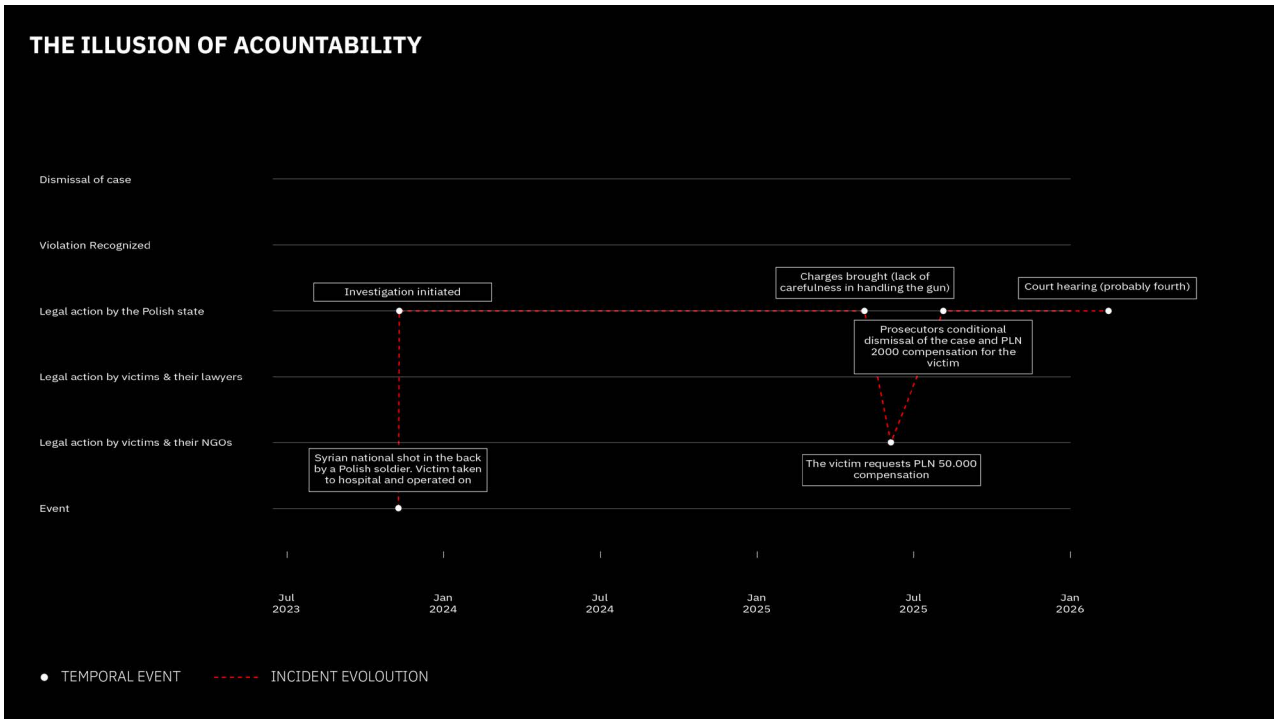


Figure 5.7. Legal timeline of criminal proceedings concerning a Syrian national shot in the back. Timeline by Border Forensics, 2026.[388]

The above case is not the only incident involving soldiers that led to a criminal investigation. In 2024, media reports indicated that, in total, ten investigations were conducted regarding abuse of power or exceeding of duties by soldiers at the Belarusian border.[389] One of the cases concerned a soldier who – based on the camera recordings – shot at migrants crossing the border. The soldier was indicted for misusing his weapon and putting migrants' and other officers' lives at risk, [390] but, in May 2026, he

390 Prokuratura Krajowa, Informacja o sledztwie w sprawie podejrzenia przekroczenia uprawnien przez zolnierzy pelniacych sluzbe patrolowa na granicy polsko-bialoruskiej, 2024, https://www.gov.pl/web/prokuratura-krajowa/informacja-o-sledztwie-w-sprawie-podejrzenia-przekroczenia-uprawnien-przez-zolnierzy-pelniacych-sluzbe-patrolowa-na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej; Prokuratura Okregowa w Warszawie, Akt oskarzenia za naruszenie zasad uzycia broni palnej oraz oddanie strzalow w kierunku migrantow, funkcjonariuszy Strazy Granicznej i zolnierzy Wojska Polskiego, 2025, https://www.gov.pl/web/po-warszawa/akt-oskarzenia-za-naruszenie-zasad-uzycia-broni-palnej-oraz-oddanie-strzalow-w-kierunku-migrantow-funkcjonariuszy-strazy-granicznej-i-zolnierzy-wojska-polskiego.

was acquitted.[391] This ruling was challenged by the prosecutor's office.

The above examples show that, in only a few cases of violence used at the border, investigations were conducted, and in even fewer cases, perpetrators of violence were charged before the courts. In most cases of violence, the proceedings were discontinued (or never even initiated). In cases that had reached courts, the proceedings remained ongoing as of the time of writing. However, in one case, the soldier who had shot at migrants was acquitted by the first-instance court.

391 K. Garbicz, Sad uniewinnil zolnierza, ktory strzelal w strone migrantow na granicy z Bialorusia, OKO.press, May 27, 2026, https://oko.press/na-zywo/na-zywo-relacja/sad-uniewinnil-zolnierza-ktory-strzelal-do-migrantow-na-granicy-z-bialorusia.

392 Ocalenie Foundation, No Safe Passage: Migrants' Deaths at the European Union-Belarusian Border (2024), 5, https://ocalenie.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/eng_no-safe-passage.-migrants-deaths-at-the-european-union-belarusian-border-1.pdf.

393 Border Death Monitoring Group. (2026). *List of border deaths*. Last updated 23 February 2026. https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/en/list-of-the-deceased/

Deaths

As we discussed in depth in the previous chapter, civil society actors have documented many deaths and disappearances at the Poland–Belarus border. According to the Ocalenie Foundation, "By the end of March 2024, 116 border deaths had been documented in four countries (Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland) and at least another 26 cases had been reported by migrants in testimonies."[392] According to the list of deceased maintained by the Border Death Monitoring Group (BDMG) and published on the We Are Monitoring website, as of June 2026, 107 migrants had been found dead in Poland and Belarus.[393] While the probable direct causes of death were mostly drowning or hypothermia, as demonstrated in this report, many of cases of death have been the outcome of different forms of in/actions by Polish law enforcement agents. Indeed, some of these deaths happened after pushbacks from Poland, irrespective of the victims' health, clothing, and weather conditions, making the involved officers responsible for the loss of life. Moreover, as several of the cases we reconstructed reveal, direct calls for medical help were ignored by the authorities.[26] Despite this, criminal proceedings concerning deaths at the Poland–Belarus border have generally been ineffective.

The information we have been able to access concerning the (lack of) legal proceedings regarding migrant deaths on Polish territory is not exhaustive, in relation to all cases of death that have been recorded by civil society actors. What emerges from available information is that in many of those cases, investigations aimed at establishing identity of the deceased and causes of their death were conducted by the authorities (mostly by the Prosecutor's Office in Suwałki where these cases were consolidated for a joint investigation[27]), but they were based on Article 155 (involuntary manslaughter) of the Penal Code, while other crimes should also have been also considered (e.g. Article 162 of the Penal Code; failure to provide assistance in danger[28]). Moreover, irrespective of their

basis, the initiated proceedings were later discontinued.

The specific reasons for the discontinuation are generally not publicly announced; however, according to media and civil society reports, the main reason has been that prosecutors reached the conclusion that the persons concerned died from hypothermia or drowned without the involvement of third parties. For example, one of the prosecutors from the Prosecutor's Office in Suwałki, investigating several death cases concluded: "The experts state that the cause of death was circulatory and respiratory failure, most likely caused by hypothermia, as we have not disclosed any other signs that could indicate the involvement of third parties or any other circumstances or causes of death."[29] This focus on the immediate physiological cause of death has tended to exclude the role of law enforcement agents. Accordingly, as of June 2026, it does not seem that any of border guards or soldiers whose actions (e.g. a push-back) or inactions (e.g. ignoring calls for medical help) contributed to the migrants' deaths at the border have been prosecuted. As such, the deaths of migrants across the Polish-Belarusian borderlands have been met with de facto impunity.

The ten cases of death we have reconstructed for our report have allowed us to analyse in more detail the recurring legal framings leading to impunity. In particular, it is worth discussing in more detail the paradigmatic legal process concerning the death of Mahlet Kassa Asfaw, a 28-year-old Ethiopian woman who was found dead in 2023 in a forest near the Polish border city of Hajnówka, approximately 3 kilometres from a local school. As we have shown in our reconstruction in the previous chapter, Mahlet Kassa crossed the border into Poland during the early morning hours of 3 February 2023. When her physical condition deteriorated and she became unable to continue, two of her travel companions went to seek assistance. After they encounters Polish law enforcement agents, they were returned to Belarus through pushback, while no coordinated search-and-rescue operation was initiated despite information concerning Mahlet's critical condition and reported location. Mahlet's body was located nine days later.

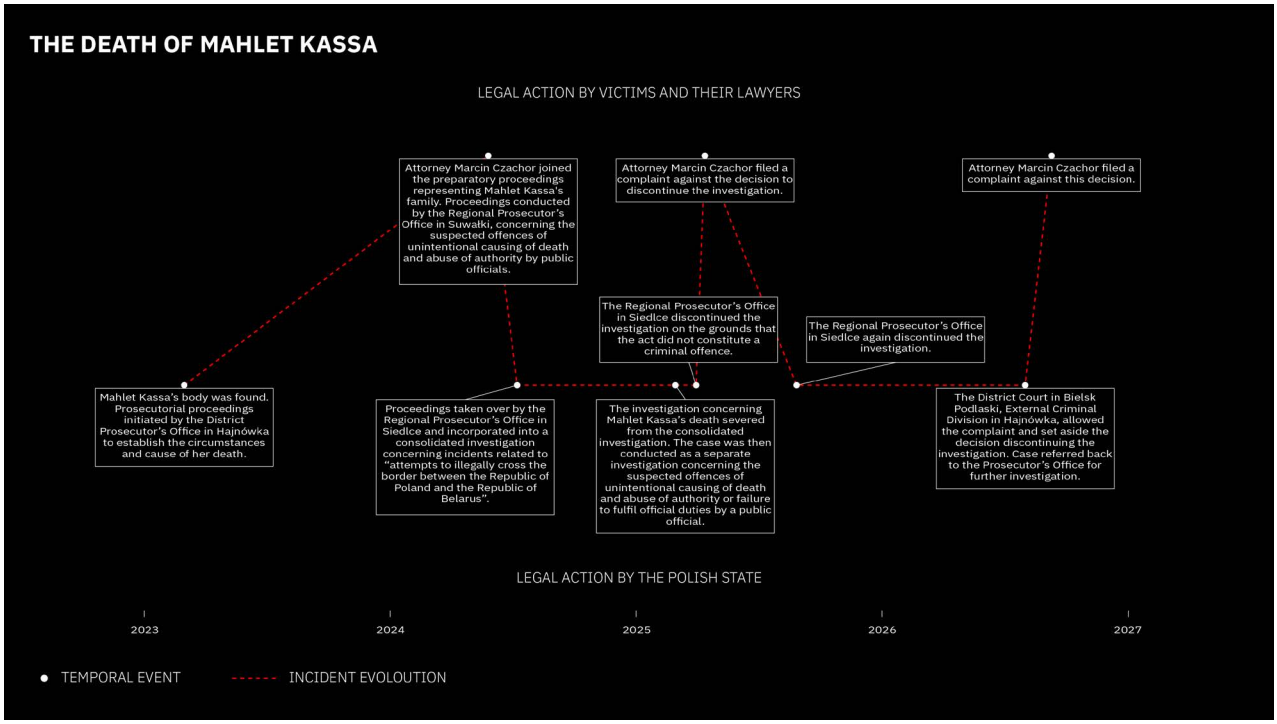


Figure 5.8. Timeline of the case of Mahlet Kassa. Timeline by Border Forensics, 2026.[394]

394 Border Forensics, 2026.

Although criminal proceedings into Mahlet Kassa Asfaw's death were initiated by the prosecutor's office, much of the evidence analysed in this reconstruction was independently gathered by civil society actors, particularly Piotr Czaban and other civil society actors. The investigation was first opened by the District Prosecutor's Office in Hajnówka, subsequently transferred to the Regional Prosecutor's Office in Suwałki, and finally taken over by the Regional Prosecutor's Office in Siedlce, to be conducted as part of a consolidated investigation concerning "incidents related to attempts to illegally cross the border between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Belarus" (in which Mahlet's case was assigned Case No. 6).

The investigation concerned events occurring between 4 February 2023, when Polish authorities received information that Mahlet Kassa Asfaw was alive and in need of urgent assistance, and 12 February 2023, when her body was discovered near Hajnówka. The prosecution pursued the investigation along two principal lines. First, it examined the possibility of involuntary manslaughter under Article 155 of the Polish Criminal Code. Second, it investigated whether public officials had failed to fulfil their duties under Article 231 §1 of the Criminal Code. After more than two years of investigation, the proceedings were discontinued in March 2025, on the grounds that the act did not contain the elements of a criminal offence.

In relation to Article 155 of the Criminal Code, the prosecution concluded that there were no grounds to find that state agents had "contributed in any way" to Mahlet Kassa Asfaw's death. Instead, her death was

described as the result of hypothermia occurring without the involvement of third parties. Yet this formulation obscures the central issue. As we have demonstrated in the previous chapter, hypothermia is not simply a "natural" cause of death. Rather, within the context of the border, it is the outcome of forced exposure to the cold produced through institutional practices. In Mahlet's case, these practices took the form of leaving her without access to timely medical assistance. Mahlet's fatal exposure to cold did not result from environmental conditions alone, but from a cumulative sequence of political and institutional practices, including the failure of effective rescue interventions. Although Mahlet's companions informed the Border Guard and police of her location and requested urgent assistance, no coordinated search-and-rescue operation was initiated. The officers did not accompany the group back to the site where Mahlet had been left waiting for help, nor did they deploy an effective search despite having information that a person in life-threatening condition remained in the forest. Instead, Mahlet's companions were pushed back to Belarus, while Mahlet was left behind and subsequently died alone.

In relation to Article 231 §1 of the Criminal Code, the prosecution constructed a narrative at odds with the facts of the case. It argued that police officers and Border Guard officers "undertook search activities to the extent that was possible under the circumstances," and that the actions of the authorities were sufficient. This narrative omits the fact that the state actors pushed back Mahlet Kassa Asfaw's travelling companions while simultaneously failing to provide her with urgently needed medical assistance, thereby cutting themselves off from the very people who could have helped locate her (we return to this issue when analysing the court's overruling of the prosecutor's order discontinuing the investigation).

Beyond the prosecution's assessment of the aforementioned crimes, it is striking that some possible legal qualifications were *not* considered by the prosecutors. In particular, Article 162 of the Criminal Code should have been considered, namely the failure to provide assistance to a person facing an immediate threat to life or serious bodily harm. By considering Article 231 without Article 162 of the Criminal Code, the prosecution shifted attention away from the obligation to provide assistance and towards the formal framework governing the actions of state services.[30] As a result, the central question – why state actors failed to reach Mahlet in a timely manner that might have averted her death – was omitted. The legal assessment focused on whether state officials had undertaken

any action, rather than whether that action was adequate to the known risk to life. The prosecutor concluded that no criminal liability could be attributed to the officers because they had undertaken a limited search of the surrounding area after receiving information about Mahlet's condition. However, the investigation did not examine whether this response was capable of protecting her life. In particular, it did not address why the officers failed to accompany Mahlet's fellow travellers – who knew her exact location – back into the forest, initiate a professional search-and-rescue operation, or suspend the pushback procedure until her whereabouts had been verified. Instead, her companions were returned to Belarus while Mahlet remained alone in the forest, where she subsequently died.

The result was that the existence of minimal institutional activity became sufficient to exclude state responsibility, without assessing whether the actions taken were proportionate to the imminent risk to life or whether a different course of action could reasonably have prevented her death. Consequently, the investigation shifted the central legal question from whether Mahlet's life could still have been saved to whether the authorities had done enough to avoid criminal liability.

The public communications issued by the prosecutor's office in the Mahlet Kassa Asfaw case reveal a broader pattern through which responsibility for border deaths is displaced.[31] By reducing death to its immediate physiological mechanism and treating limited institutional action as sufficient to discharge the state's obligations, these official accounts frame death as an unfortunate consequence of environmental exposure rather than the outcome of cumulative state practices. They also treat the pushback of her companions (while she was still alive) as analytically and legally separate from Mahlet's subsequent death, without examining whether the pushback itself – the forced return of her companions to Belarus from the location where they encountered state actors, despite their ability to guide the officers directly to her location in the forest – formed part of the causal chain that ultimately made her rescue impossible. As a result, the pushback and the lost opportunity to locate and rescue Mahlet were excluded from the assessment of responsibility, despite their being integral to the sequence of events that led to her death. Together, these official accounts contribute to the naturalisation of death, the securitisation of evidentiary assessment, the privileging of official testimony over evidence produced by other actors, the marginalisation of evidence gathered by civil society, the medicalisation of death, and the separation of unlawful administrative practices led by state actors (pushbacks) from criminal accountability. This is not the absence

of law. Rather, it is law operating as a technology of non-responsibility.

This legal (lack of) response to deaths at the border can be recurrently observed across several of the cases we have reconstructed in this report. Investigations have generally focused on establishing the immediate physiological cause of death while paying limited attention to the chain of decisions, actions, and omissions that placed individuals in life-threatening situations. Proceedings have predominantly relied on Article 155 of the Criminal Code (involuntary manslaughter), while provisions such as Article 160 (exposure to an immediate risk of loss of life or serious injury) and Article 162 (failure to provide assistance) have not even been considered. As a consequence, deaths have been treated as isolated events caused by hypothermia, drowning, or exhaustion, rather than as foreseeable outcomes of broader border-control practices carried out by state actors, including the police, the armed forces, and the Border Guard. This approach overlooks the role of institutional abandonment, criminalising migrants seeking assistance and the criminalisation of civil society rescue efforts,[32] despite the state's failure to initiate timely rescue operations – or, in some cases, to initiate them at all.

State authorities have also generally failed to initiate systematic searches of difficult-to-access areas, including wetlands, riverbanks, and areas without mobile-phone coverage, using the specialised equipment available to them. These are precisely the locations where migrants are most likely to become stranded, die without assistance, and remain undiscovered, further increasing the likelihood that fatal cases never enter official statistics or criminal investigations. Taken together, these factors reveal a significant gap between the legal obligations arising under both national law and Article 2 of the ECHR, on the one hand, and their implementation in practice, on the other. The right to life requires both the protection of life and effective investigation into death; existing procedures have largely focused on documenting death rather than examining whether state actions or omissions contributed to it.

As we finalise this report, we have been informed by the legal representative acting on behalf of Mahlet's family a series of new legal developments. On 16 July 2026, the District Court in Bielsk Podlaski, External Criminal Division in Hajnówka, allowed the complaint, set aside the decision discontinuing the investigation, and referred the case back to the Prosecutor's Office for further investigation. The court expressly found that the police officers had breached the legal provisions governing search-and-rescue operations. In particular, it held that the officers had

failed to initiate the mandatory procedure for searching for a person whose life was in immediate danger. On 10 August 2026, the Regional Prosecutor's Office in Siedlce again discontinued the investigation. On 24 August 2026, the Attorney Marcin Czachor filed a complaint against this decision. More than three years after the death of Mahlet Kassa Asfaw, her family's demand for truth and justice has still not been answered.



Figure 5.9. People at the funeral of Mahlet Kassa carry banners reading "We need justice from Poland and border guard" and "We feel so unjust that someone had to die in cold weather in dark forest with no help, we need justice." Screengrab from a video by Piotr Czaban, Czaban robi raban, YouTube. [395]

395 Piotr Czaban, "Pogrzeb Mahlet Kassy i 'Chcemy sprawiedliwości dla Straży Granicznej'" [Funeral of Mahlet Kassy and "We Want Justice from the Border Guard"], YouTube video, Czaban robi raban, accessed September 2, 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2XvQ-TgZZs.

Disappearances

Unlike pushbacks and border deaths, disappearances at the Poland–Belarus border have not yet generated strategic litigation in Poland, and internationally. This should not be understood as reflecting the legal insignificance of disappearances. Rather, it reflects the novelty of the phenomenon itself. While disappearances have long been addressed within the Polish legal system in relation to conventional missing-person cases, disappearances occurring in the context of migration control, undocumented pushbacks, and border violence present a fundamentally different legal and institutional challenge. Existing mechanisms were not designed to address situations in which a person's disappearance may be linked to the actions and interactions of multiple state actors exercising different – and at times conflicting – legal responsibilities, such as the police and Border Guard.

Against this background, the first systematic legal response took the form of a diagnostic project conducted by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights in 2024. Rather than pursuing strategic litigation, the project sought to establish the empirical and institutional foundations upon which future accountability efforts could be built. It documented

administrative practices, supported families attempting to report disappearances, engaged with police units responsible for missing persons, assisted in the identification of recovered bodies, and analysed the legal and operational barriers preventing effective searches and accountability. In doing so, it produced the first systematic body of evidence concerning disappearances associated with migration and pushback practices in Poland.[396]

The project revealed that institutional responses to disappearances remained largely structured around conventional missing-person scenarios and were poorly equipped to address disappearances resulting from undocumented pushbacks. In particular, the absence of official records documenting migrants' presence in Poland – often itself a consequence of undocumented pushback practices – subsequently became an obstacle to initiating search procedures and establishing institutional responsibility. In this way, the administrative invisibility produced through one set of state practices undermined the operation of another set of legal obligations intended to protect missing persons.

The absence of strategic litigation should therefore not be interpreted as the absence of potential legal responsibility. On the contrary, disappearances connected to documented pushbacks, failures to provide assistance, and subsequent deaths are likely to constitute one of the most significant areas for future accountability efforts under both domestic and international law. This development is particularly significant following Poland's ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance in 2024, which strengthens the legal framework governing prevention, search obligations, investigation, and the rights of families, while simultaneously highlighting the need to adapt existing institutional practices to disappearances arising in the context of migration control.[397]

Accordingly, one of the purposes of this report is to contribute to that emerging field of accountability. By reconstructing cumulative chains of responsibility linking pushbacks, organised abandonment, failed rescue efforts, disappearances, and deaths, it seeks not only to document past violations but also to provide an evidentiary foundation upon which future strategic litigation and other accountability efforts can be built.

397 Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Poland, Poland Ratifies the UN Convention on Enforced Disappearances, October 28, 2024, https://www.gov.pl/web/sprawiedliwosc/polska-ratyfiku-je-konwencje-onz-o-wymuszonych-zaginieciach.

396 G. Baranowska, K. Czarnota, M. Czachor, M. Sośniak, and O. Wanicka, *Disappearances on the Polish–Belarusian Border: Pushbacks as a Factor in Enforced Disappearances in Poland* (Warsaw: Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 2024), project coordinated by Katarzyna Czarnota, https://hfhr.pl/upload/2024/12/disappearances-on-the-polish-belarusian-border-report-hfhr.pdf.

Accountimpunity before the law

Our analysis of litigation efforts in relation to the forms of violence and deaths that result from the pushback regime reveals that these have been even less successful than demands for accountability concerning pushbacks.

As of June 2026, no border guards or soldiers have been held accountable for their actions, such as engaging in pushbacks and using violence, or inactions, such as ignoring emergency calls for assistance leading to death at the Poland–Belarus border. In most cases, the respective criminal proceedings were discontinued or not even initiated by the prosecutors. While the courts annulled some of those decisions due to the insufficiency and inaccuracy of the evidentiary material, the proceedings were often again discontinued following the court's decision. Only in a few cases of violence have the perpetrators been indicted. However, as of June 2026, most of these cases were still pending before the courts. In one case, the soldier who shot at migrants was acquitted.

This outcome of impunity despite a multiplicity of avenues for legal remedies and legal proceedings leads to the condition we call *accountimpunity*. Here, the simulacrum of procedural accountability serves to hide a form of institutionalised, de facto impunity. Beyond the impunity resulting from legal misinterpretations and factual misconstruction, another essential factor relates to the limits of the law itself. Indeed, in many of the harmful incidents we have analysed in the previous chapters, the interrelation between multiple human and non-human entities leading to them generates a fragmentation and dispersal of responsibility. As a result, when legal proceedings have been initiated, the responsibility of law enforcement agents has been evaded. Finally, a further challenge concerns the capacity of the law to account for forms of border violence and violations of migrants' rights which are, as we have demonstrated in this report, not isolated, but systematic and widespread across the Polish–Belarusian borderlands.[398] What emerges is thus a condition of impunity with both *de facto* dimensions – relating to the failure to apply existing laws – and *de jure* dimensions – relating to the structure of the law which tolerates and facilitates border violence.[399] While there may yet be unexplored legal avenues that could help respond to these challenges, to date the law and legal processes have failed to act as a limitation on state practices that have violated migrants' lives, dignity, and rights as they attempted to cross the Polish-Belarusian borderland. This has played an essential role in allowing violence and violations to be perpetuated over time. Impunity for violence and violations reinforces

398 In a different time, facing the reality of the Nazi extermination camps, Hannah Arendt asked: "What meaning has the concept of murder when we are confronted with the mass production of corpses?". We may ask today what kind of legal category could account for border crimes when pushbacks and violence are not aberrant, individual excesses, but constitute a state-sanctioned and systematic practice. See Arendt, Hannah. 1971. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

399 For a discussion of the de facto and dejure distinction in relation to border violence in another context see I. Mann, Maritime Legal Black Holes: Migration and Rightlessness in International Law, The European Journal of International Law 29, no. 2 (2018). For a broader discussion of the challenges of accountability in relation to border violence see C. Costello and I. Mann, Border Justice: Migration and Accountability for Human Rights Violations, German Law Journal 21 (2020): 311-334.

the exceptional power of law enforcement agents and the stripping of migrants' rights, which, as we demonstrated in previous chapters, had already been encoded into law.

Enshrining rightlessness in Polish and EU laws

The previous section has shown that impunity for violence and violations of rights has been consolidated despite civil society's efforts to seek accountability. None the less, from the perspective of the Polish state, the contradiction between its counter-instrumentalisation governance and other legal norms in force generates tensions that are costly to manage. Thus, from the very beginning of the crisification of the border, the Polish government has pursued another strategy: remodelling national and EU law to legalise its practices. Legitimised by the continued construction of migrants as a threat discussed above, Polish anti-migrant legislation and policies have been consolidated over time, a process we trace up to its culmination in the suspension of asylum in 2025. Furthermore, we demonstrate that EU neighbouring states such as Germany and EU institutions have largely supported Poland's hardline policy, and that the latter has partly served as the model for EU policies, in particular the Crisis Regulation included in the EU's Pact on Migration. This section addresses national and EU developments in turn, highlighting their interrelation. Ultimately what emerges is the institutionalisation of Poland's violent counter-instrumentalisation policy.

The erosion of migrants' rights within Polish law

As we have shown in the Chapter One, the rights of migrants, and of asylum seekers specifically, have been eroded over an extensive period. Since the early 2000s, Poland has implemented a highly restrictive interpretation of refugee law, resulting in one of the lowest recognition rates in Europe. Further restrictions on migrants' access to the Polish territory were implemented in 2015. At that time, requests for protection at the official border crossings were intentionally not heard by the border guards, who systematically issued decisions of refusal of entry. The COVID-19 pandemic served to legitimise further limitations on asylum seekers' rights. Thus, already before 2021, the limitations of the right to asylum in Poland had been established, both in law and practice, and perpetuated over time. The heightening of Poland's pushback regime in 2021 was thus

consolidated long after this earlier erosion had already begun.

In 2021, under the far-right PiS-led government, the threat discourse targeting migrants served to justify the swift passing of further legal restrictions, which aimed to ground the pushback policy in national law. First, in August 2021, the law was changed to enable immediate returns of third-country nationals who crossed the border irregularly (Regulation of 20 August 2021[400]). Next, in October 2021, another amendment aimed at legitimising pushbacks was adopted (Article 303b of the Act on Foreigners). Since then, border guards can issue an immediately enforceable removal order upon the apprehension of a third-country national following his irregular entry to Poland via the EU external border.

The laws adopted in 2021 did not explicitly mention asylum seekers. At that time, under the Polish law (as well as EU and international law) asylum applications should have been accepted and registered even if a person concerned crossed the border irregularly. However, in practice, requests for asylum from third-country nationals intercepted at the Poland–Belarus border were ignored. The implementation of the pushback policy was prioritised over the right to asylum and the principle of non-refoulement. Moreover, the Law on International Protection was amended in October 2021 to enable the Head of the Office for Foreigners not to consider the asylum applications of irregular entrants. The rule remained in force until March 2025.

While the early phase of the crisification of the border under the PiS government thus led to rapid legislative change, aiming to legalise Poland's unlawful policy and practice, a further, and even more drastic, remodelling of the law was implemented under the Tusk led coalition government. Indeed, in 2025, the law was once again changed, this time introducing the temporary suspension of the right to asylum. The reform formed part of the government's broader migration strategy, which framed migration orchestrated by Belarus and Russia as a form of hybrid aggression and the instrumentalisation of migration against Poland and the European Union. The temporary suspension of access to the asylum procedure was presented as an exceptional security measure intended to prevent the misuse of international protection mechanisms and strengthen border control in response to this perceived threat. According to Article 33a of the Law on International Protection added in March 2025, the right to seek asylum can be suspended in the face of instrumentalisation (broadly understood) that constitutes a serious and real threat to the security of the state or society, provided that the introduction of this restriction is

400 Rozporządzenie Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji z dnia 20 sierpnia 2021 r. zmieniające rozporządzenie w sprawie czasowego zawieszenia lub ograniczenia ruchu granicznego na określonych przejściach granicznych.

necessary to eliminate that threat, as other measures are not sufficient. The suspension should be temporary, limited to 120 days, with the possible extensions of sixty days. In practice, it has been in force for over one and a half year, with no clear end in sight. While the law was also meant to be territorially limited, in practice it has been applied not only to persons apprehended at the Poland–Belarus border but to all persons who crossed that border, even if they applied for asylum far from that border. Moreover, despite the exceptions to the suspension of the right to asylum (unaccompanied minors, pregnant women, specified vulnerable persons, etc., can apply for asylum, according to the law), they are applied restrictively in practice.

Thus, at the Poland–Belarus border, the right to asylum has been restricted – step by step, piece by piece – since 2015, and then by leaps and bounds in 2021 and 2025. The restrictions imposed through changed practices and amended legal rules violate human rights standards embedded in international, EU, and domestic law. As we saw above, the state's anti-asylum policy was challenged both in legislative proceedings and before national and international courts; however, it has been consolidated despite these efforts. Poland's remodelling of its national legislation in line with its counter-instrumentalisation governance has been an essential part of the consolidation and normalisation of its lethal pushback regime.

Europeanising Poland's counter-instrumentalisation governance

Since Poland's legislative transformation increasingly put the country's laws and practices at odds with EU laws, one might have expected that EU institutions would have pressured Poland into changing course. This, however, appears to not have been the case. Instead, Poland's hardline has received the full backing of its neighbouring EU member states, in particular Germany, and Poland's counter-instrumentalisation governance has partly served as a model for EU policies, in particular the Crisis Regulation included in the EU's Pact on Migration. In the process, Poland has sought to expand its ambition by remodelling laws at the European level. Before tracing this European dimension of the consolidation and normalisation of Poland's lethal pushback regime, we much sketch the logics of European actors which have been the conditions for Poland's relative success.

European support for Polish pushbacks

Since the EU's external borders are not only the borders of individual member states but of Europe as a whole, so-called "frontline states" – the first EU state located at the EU's external border – play an essential role in "protecting" Europe's borders. As a result of the EU's increasingly restrictive migration policies with regard to the mobility of migrants from the Global South and asylum seekers in particular, and the high level of political tensions their arrivals have generated within EU member states and between them, European member states and institutions have a principled interest in allowing and supporting "frontline" states in preventing crossings into their territory, even when this violates national and European legal norms. This, however, leads to tensions for these actors who formally adhere to these norms. As a result, they engage in careful balancing acts, oscillating between support and condemnation for the hard-line policies and practices of frontline states, such as Poland.[401] In relation to Poland, the balance has clearly tilted towards support.

We can see this support expressed by Germany, with the evident motivation to prevent secondary movements from Poland to its territory. Since 2021, German government officials have condemned Belarus for facilitating migration and promoted the threat narrative around migrants' crossings, while expressing support and solidarity with its eastern neighbours.[403] Despite tensions over continued movements across German borders, this support has been consolidated over the last five years. In July 2025, Interior Minister Alexander Dobrindt visited the Poland–Belarus border with his Polish counterpart Tomasz Siemoniak, and praised Poland's effective external border protection, highlighted its "enormous impact," and accused Russia and Belarus of weaponising migration to destabilise Poland, Germany, and the EU. Germany offered financial, logistical, and technical aid (including AI tools), and called for greater EU funding and recognition for Poland's efforts.[404] Germany's logic is clear: in the name of preventing arrivals across its own borders, crossings at the Poland–Belarus border must be stopped, even if this comes at a high cost for migrants lives, dignity, and rights.

Germany's unflinching support for Poland's hard line has been mirrored by EU institutions. Since the beginning of the crisification of the border in 2021, the EU has offered different expressions of support to Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania counter-instrumentalisation policies, which we described in Chapter One. The European Commission and the European Council both denounced the "instrumentalisation of migration" for

401 While this section is empirically focused on Poland – EU relations, the interpretation of this relation we offer here draws on a broad literature in political science and anthropology. See in particular S. Lavenex. "'Failing Forward' Towards Which Europe? Organized Hypocrisy in the Common European Asylum System". *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 56: (2018) 1195–1212. S. Semeets and N. Zaun. "What is intergovernmental about the EU's '(new) intergovernmentalist' turn? Evidence from the Eurozone and asylum crises". *West European Politics* 44(4) (2020): 852–872. H. Kriesi, Hanspeter, A. Altiparmakis, A. Bojar, and I. Oana. "Debordering and Re-Bordering in the Refugee Crisis: A Case of 'Defensive Integration.'" *Journal of European Public Policy* 28 (3) (2021): 331–49. S. Smeets & D. Beach "'It takes three to tango': new inter- institutional dynamics in managing major crisis reform", *Journal of European Public Policy*, 29:9 (2022): 1414-1432.

402 A. Holányi. "Unpolitics, domestic pressures, or else? The opposition of Visegrád Group countries to the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum", *Journal of European Integration*, 48:4 (2026) : 599-620. B.Kasparek. "Greece's Border, Europe's Shield: Navigating the Racial Border in Evros between Europeanisation and Re-Nationalization". *Citizenship Studies,* 2026, forthcoming.

403 During a 2021 visit to Warsaw, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock within the Scholz led government, condemned Belarus's "cynical game," supported EU sanctions, and called for humanitarian aid for migrants trapped in freezing conditions, describing them as victims of the regime's tactics. Interior Minister Nancy Faeser later praised Poland's role in EU security and advocated for Frontex deployment, including German police support, alongside the implementation of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and improved returns.

404 Euronews, Germany Supports Poland's Measures to Curb Migration from Belarus, Euronews, July 22, 2025, https://www.euronews.com/2025/07/22/germanys-interior-minister-backs-polish-border-measures-during-visit.

political ends and expressed their full support for these countries. The European Commission described Belarus's practice as the "state-sponsored smuggling of migrants into the EU." The European Council stated that it will "not accept any attempt by third countries to instrumentalise migrants for political purposes" and condemned "hybrid attacks" at the EU's borders.

The EU's support has gone beyond rhetoric. It has included the deployment of Frontex Standing Corps officers at strategic crossing points to assist Polish border guards in their response to migrants' crossings and cross-border crime. The agency has also coordinated the return of migrants.[405] Furthermore, already within the first month of the 2021 "crisis," the European Commission worked to operationalise swiftly EU solidarity into financial means. Since then, Poland has received €267 million in support of its counter-instrumentalisation governance.[406] These funds have, in particular, contributed to the digital surveillance apparatus that supplemented the metal fence along the border with Belarus, which we discussed in Chapter Two. Through these means, EU institutions have thus directly contributed to the implementation and material consolidation of Poland's lethal pushback regime. The support of EU institutions to Poland since the 2021 crisification of the border can be understood within the logic described above as aiming to support a "frontline state" to secure its national border, which is also an EU border, and thus contributing to the enforcement of the EU's exclusionary migration regime. At the same time, by locating this support within broader EU–Poland relations and the structural tensions within the EU in relation to migration policies, we can understand the EU's support as constituting a form of political engineering which has aimed to bring Poland back into the EU's flailing architecture of migration governance. It is here that Poland's role in the EU's Pact on Migration becomes central.

Poland's conflictual remodelling of the EU's migration governance

In September 2020, the European Commission proposed the Pact on Migration and Asylum.[407] The Pact can be seen as an attempt to rebuild a functioning architecture for the EU's migration and asylum regime after it had been shaken to its core by the scale of migrant arrivals on European territory that peaked during the 2015 "summer of migration" and the rise to power of the right-wing nationalist – and thus anti-migrant and Eurosceptic – parties to power across Europe.[408] Towards this aim, one of the essential approaches developed by the EU Commission in

405 Frontex, "Frontex Executive Director and Chief of Polish Border Guard Visit EU's Eastern Border with Belarus," Frontex, November 21, 2025, https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-executive-director-and-chief-of-polish-border-guard-visit-eu-s-eastern-border-with-belarus-r2ZFoz.

406 This figure combines the funding specifically mobilised in response to the counter-instrumentalisation rather than Poland's baseline 2021–2027 allocations. It comprises: (i) Poland's share of the €200 million BMVI top-up made available to Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland for 2021–2022, on top of the €360 million already foreseen for the three states under BMVI for the full financial period; and (ii) the €67.3 million in EU co-financing for Poland's BMVI specific actions addressing the border with Belarus (BMVI/2021/SA/1.5.8 and related interoperability and detection projects), against a total project cost of €74.8 million. It excludes Poland's 2021–2027 AMIF, ISF and BMVI national programme allocations (a further ~€568 million combined), which fund general migration and border management rather than the instrumentalisation response specifically.

407 European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a New Pact on Migration and Asylum, COM(2020) 609 final (Brussels, September 23, 2020), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0609.

408 See C. Heller et B. Kasparek, "The EU's pact against migration, Part One", *Open Democracy*, 2020. P. De Bruycker, Genealogy of and Futurology on the Pact on Migration and Asylum, Odysseus Blog on the Pact on Migration & Asylum, 2024, https://eumigrationlawblog.eu/genealogy-of-and-futurology-on-the-pact-on-migration-and-asylum/.

the formulation of the Pact has entailed finding the minimum common denominator between the positions of EU member states – thus starting from the position of the most reluctant EU states, in particular the Visegrád Group (V4) which consists of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia – and Europeanising it.

The Commission's minimum common denominator, however, was still not enough to achieve a consensus with the most reluctant states, including Poland. In December 2020, thus only a few months after the Pact's process was launched, Poland – along with other V4 states, as well as Estonia, and Slovenia – signed a common position on the Pact in which they indicated that the solidarity mechanism should be discretionary and that increased control over the states' borders should be guaranteed. They highlighted that "it is indispensable for the European Union to have tools to exert political pressure on third countries that do not cooperate in the field of migration."[409]

As a number of analysts have shown, the negotiations over the Pact were largely in a stalemate in 2021, and none of the major legislative proposals had been approved. The reconstruction of the EU's migration governance architecture was stalled. In this context, the crisification of Belarus–EU borders appear to have been perceived by EU policymakers as an opportunity to frame legislative reform within the Pact as an effective response to yet another migration "crisis."[410] In turn, Poland appears to have seen this as an opportunity to remodel EU legislation to match its counter-instrumentalisation governance. What ensued has been a conflictual negotiation process that has transformed the EU Pact.

Following the expressions of support of the Commission and the Council mentioned above, in October 2021, the European Council invited the Commission "to propose any necessary changes to the EU's legal framework and concrete measures underpinned by adequate financial support to ensure an immediate and appropriate response" to instrumentalisation.[411] This led to a series of proposals by the Commission over the following months.

First, in December 2021, the Commission proposed "The Council Decision on provisional emergency measures for the benefit of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland" that allowed for some derogations from the EU acquis in the face of instrumentalisation of migration.[412] According to the Commission, it responded "to a request by the impacted Member States to be able to rely on provisional measures to address the emergency

409 Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnetrznych i Administracji, Nowy Pakt ws. Migracji i Azylu -- wspolne stanowisko panstw V4 oraz Estonii i Slowenii, December 17, 2020, https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/nowy-pakt-ws-migracji-i-azylu--wspolne-stanowisko-panstw-v4-oraz-estonii-i-slowenii.

410 See M. Gerbaudo, The European Commission's Instrumentalization Strategy: Normalising Border Procedures and De Facto Detention, European Papers 7, no. 2 (2022): 615-626; N. Nielsen, "Commission's New Migration Pact Still Seeking 'Landing Zone'", EU Observer, October 22, 2021.

411 European Council, European Council Meeting (21 and 22 October 2021) -- Conclusions, EUCO 17/21 (Brussels, October 22, 2021), https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/52622/20211022-euco-conclusions-en.pdf.

412 European Commission, Proposal for a Council Decision on Provisional Emergency Measures for the Benefit of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, COM(2021) 752 final, December 1, 2021, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2021%3A752%3AFIN&qid=1638547296962.

migratory situation at the EU's external borders effectively."[413] However, Poland was unsatisfied with the solutions proposed by the Commission. The government expected the right to suspend asylum procedures at the border in the face of instrumentalisation to be included in the proposal.[414] Eventually, the decision was never adopted.

Second, in mid-December 2021, the Commission proposed the "Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council addressing situations of instrumentalisation in the field of migration and asylum"[415] as well as some changes to the Schengen Borders Code. Again, Poland considered the proposed amendments to be insufficient, advocating rather for the full suspension of the right to asylum and the closure of the borders when needed.[416] Not being able to find a majority for the Regulation in the Council,[417] some of the "solutions" proposed therein were introduced into the Crisis and Force Majeure Regulation.[418]

Despite the political change in Poland in 2023 from the PiS-led to the Tusk-led coalition government, the new government strongly opposed the Pact as a whole. According to the official communication published in February 2024, "In the opinion of the Government of the Republic of Poland, the solutions provided for in the Pact on Migration and Asylum do not sufficiently address the specific situation of countries bordering Belarus and Russia, and therefore being under constant and strong pressure within artificially generated migration routes."[419] Thus, while the standards under the Pact have been considered insufficiently human rights-oriented, Poland has sought to push the EU to go "even lower" and "undermine even these insufficient standards."[420]

413 European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joint Communication ... Responding to State-Sponsored Instrumentalisation of Migrants at the EU External Border, JOIN(2021) 32 final, November 23, 2021, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:-52021JC0032.

414 Senat Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, K. S. Z. i. U. E., Zapis stenograficzny (93. posiedzenie), January 11, 2022, https://www.senat.gov.pl/download/gfx/senat/pl/senatkomisjeposiedzenia/9489/stenogram/093szue_2_egz.pdf; M. Szulecka and W. Klaus, Instrumentalisation of Asylum and Pushback at the Border: Poland Pushes Back on the EU Pact, *Border Criminologies* (blog), March 20, 2025, https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/border-criminologies-blog/blog-post/2025/03/instrumentalisation-asylum-and-pushback-border-poland .

415 European Commission, Proposal for a Regulation addressing situations of instrumentalisation in the Field of Migration and Asylum, COM(2021) 890 final, December 14, 2021, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=COM:2021:890:FIN.

416 J. Kohlenberger, P. Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, L. Laube, B. Parusel, and D. Saracino, Instrumentalisation of Migration: Europe Needs a Strong and Lawful Response, Policy Brief, Jacques Delors Centre, July 14, 2025, https://www.delorscentre.eu/en/publications/detail/publication/instrumentalisation-of-migration.

417 Kohlenberger et al., Instrumentalisation of Migration; ECRE, ECRE Reaction: No Majority for Instrumentalisation Regulation, December 8, 2022, https://ecre.org/ecre-reaction-no-majority-for-instrumentalisation-regulation/.

418 A. Radjenovic, Proposal for a Regulation on Situations of Instrumentalisation in the Field of Migration and Asylum, Legislative Train Schedule, European Parliament, n.d., accessed August 3, 2026,https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-promoting-our-european-way-of-life/file-instrumentalisation-in-the-field-of-migration-and-asylum; Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnetrznych i Administracji, Komunikat w sprawie Paktu o Migracji i Azylu, February 8, 2024, https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/komunikat-prasowy-w-sprawie-paktu-o-migracji-i-azylu2.

419 Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji, "Komunikat w sprawie Paktu o Migracji i Azylu," February 8, 2024, https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/komunikat-prasowy-w-sprawie-paktu-o-migracji-i-azylu2; See also Szulecka and Klaus, Instrumentalisation of Asylum., https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/border-criminologies-blog/blog-post/2025/03/instrumentalisation-asylum-and-pushback-border-poland.

420 L. Riemer, Taking Back Control?: The Perils of Poland's New Migration Strategy, VerfBlog, October 18, 2024, https://verfassungsblog.de/taking-back-control/.

Despite Poland's opposition,[421] the Pact, including the Crisis and Force Majeure Regulation with provisions concerning instrumentalisation, was adopted on 14 May 2024. Since then, Poland has continued to actively seek different avenues to oppose the new laws and the Polish government has repeatedly declared that it will not implement the Pact[422] and no national implementation plan has been published so far. The Pact was not implemented in Poland, as required, until mid-2026. Indeed, without seeing enough support (but neither explicit disapproval[423]) from the EU and "without asking the EU for permission,"[424] Poland adopted its own measures to deal with increased irregular migration via the Belarusian border, which we discussed above. Poland's recent legislation go further in several respects than the Pact, and their drafters have argued that the threat of instrumentalisation justifies the derogations from the EU *acquis*. Thus, Poland consciously chose to ignore EU law based on national security-related reasons.

Despite this, what emerges from our analysis is thus not only that the EU supported and contributed to the emergence and consolidation of Poland's lethal pushback regime, but that Poland's policy has partly been Europeanised within the Pact. The negotiations of the Pact demonstrate a dialectical process through which the EU has sought to accommodate the hard line of states such as Poland to keep them within the EU's common architecture of migration and asylum governance, while Poland engaged in a deliberate political effort to remodel EU law on the basis of its practice – an effort which, according to Poland, was not successful enough for the Pact to be acceptable. The uncertainty as to Poland's implementation of the Pact indicates a moment of stalemate in this conflictual and ambivalent process of re-nationalisation and re-Europeanisation of Poland's migration policies. The negotiation of Poland's policy in relation to EU legal norms is also ongoing within the Council of Europe, where Poland has been one of the leading advocates for the flexible and downgraded interpretation of human rights by the European Court of Human Rights so as to enable the securitised governance of migration.[425]

Conclusion: The border-fascisation nexus

Through the sections of this chapter, a clear trajectory of consolidation and normalisation of the pushback regime emerges. This process has occurred across different fields, and we have focused here on the discursive, legal, and political processes at work in Poland and in the

421 A. Holanyi, Unpolitics, Domestic Pressures, or Else? The Opposition of Visegrad Group Countries to the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum, Journal of European Integration 48, no. 4 (2026), https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2025.2519043.

422 Holányi, Ákos. 2026."Unpolitics, Domestic Pressures, or Else? https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2025.2519043

423 M. Grzeskowiak, "The 'Guardian of the Treaties' Is No More?", Refugee Survey Quarterly 42, no. 1 (2023): 81-102, https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdac025; I. Goldner Lang, Instrumentalisation of Migrants: It Is Necessary to Act, but How?, EU Immigration and Asylum Law and Policy (blog), October 15, 2024https://eumigrationlawblog.eu/instrumentalisation-of-migrants-it-is-necessary-to-act-but-how/; A. Bodnar and A. Grzelak, The Polish-Belarusian Border Crisis and the (Lack of) European Union Response, Bialystok Legal Studies 28, no. 1 (2023): 57-86.https://doi.org/10.15290/bsp.2023.28.01.04.

424 Szulecka and Klaus, Instrumentalisation of Asylum.https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/border-criminologies-blog/blog-post/2025/03/instrumentalisation-asylum-and-pushback-border-poland.

425 In May 2025, nine European states – including Poland – published a joint letter in which they demanded starting "a new and open-minded conversation about the interpretation of the European Convention on Human Rights" (ECHR) in the context of migration. They highlighted the challenges that migration brings nowadays, focusing mostly on security issues, and argued for the change in the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights which "has extended the scope of the Convention too far as compared with the original intentions." The states advocated for, *inter alia*, more freedom in reacting to the instrumentalization of migration at the borders. The Polish Prime Minister stated that – if no compromise on the ECHR reform is accomplished – it may be reasonable for Poland to consider leaving the ECHR system. However, this declaration was later withdrawn by the government. Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (Italy) et al., Lettera aperta, May 22, 2025, https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Lettera_aperta_22052025.pdf.

EU. In relation to discourse, we demonstrated the continued discursive construction of migrants as a threat and the relative disappearance of the violence migrants have been subjected to from public visibility. In relation to the role of the law, we demonstrated that despite formal due legal process in response to demands for accountability, the outcome has been one of impunity for the crimes and violence targeting migrants. Finally, in relation to political processes, we showed that the Polish government has engaged in a process of remodelling both Polish and EU legislation to correspond to Poland's counter-instrumentalisation governance and its attempt to legalise the pushback regime. This process of consolidation and normalisation has occurred despite the 2023 change in government from the right-wing PiS government to the centrist coalition government led by Donald Tusk – who had included in his campaign the aim of ending violations of migrants' rights and deaths. In fact, since 2023 the push-back regime have become more entrenched at the national level – as exemplified by the 2025 law suspending asylum – and become a model for current European policy and legal trends, including in the EU's new Pact on Migration's Crisis Regulation

The analysis offered in this chapter thus points to actors and institutions – such as Polish and European prosecutors and judges, media actors, and politicians – who, despite being located far from the border, have become *implicated* in the violence and violations migrants are routinely subjected to as they attempt to cross the Polish–Belarusian borderlands.[426] Indeed, the discursive, legal, and political processes we have analysed in Chapter One and in this one have not only created the *conditions of possibility* for the perpetration of violence, but also for the reproduction and consolidation of violent practices over time. The actors and institutions we identify should be held accountable – legally, politically, and morally – for the consequences of their actions.

Ultimately, what this chapter reveals are a series of feedback loops linking practices at the border with discourses, policies, legislation, and jurisprudence at the national and EU scales in a way that has been mutually reinforcing, resulting in the consolidation and normalisation of the lethal pushback regime, and the institutionalisation of rightlessness. It is in relation to this cross-scalar web of interlinked practices and processes that we reflect upon what we may call the *border-fascissation nexus,* a term we propose to highlight the circular and nonlinear processes through which the fascisation of politics, discourse, and law shape border violence while border violence feeds back into processes of fascisation.[427]

426 M. Rothberg, The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

427 In proposing this tentative formulation, which might be further developed, we bring together different literatures and debates. On the one hand, the term fascisation has been proposed to account for the way tendencies towards authoritarianism, nationalism, racism, heteronormativity, the undermining and hierarchising of rights, political violence and militarisation are currently spreading across societies and political parties, and this far beyond far-right parties that might be labelled as "fascist". See P. Zaoui. On fascization. *Eurozine*, 26 February 2024. On the other hand, recent theorisations of fascism have highlighted the relation of these processes to migration and borders, including through the term "border fascism". See A. Toscano. *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis*. (London: Verso 2023). The circular and nonlinear web of relations linking violence at the border to discursive, legal and political processes extending far beyond it we are seeking to account for here may however be better accounted for by thinking in terms of "nexus". See J. Adam and S. Hess, "Fortified Nationalism: Racializing Infrastructures and the Authoritarian Transformation of the Body Politic. A Field Trip to the Bifurcated Polish/EU Border Regime," *movements: Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies* 7, no. 2 (2023): 65-91

CONCLUSION

Our investigation into the emergence, functioning, harmful effects, and consolidation of the lethal pushback regime across the Polish–Belarusian borderlands over the last five years has demonstrated that Poland and the EU have fallen into a trap of their own making, which the Belarusian government scrupulously activated. The trap was set by politicians and media actors in Poland and the EU prior construction of migrants from the Global South as racial and security threats, the institution of legislations that seek to limit and criminalise their movements across the EU's borders, and the externalisation of border control to non-European states including Belarus. This has led to migrants being perceived as a threat and to Poland and the EU being dependant on Belarus to police it. As many other EU neighbouring states have done in the past, such as Turkey in 2020 and Morocco in 2021, in a time of tension with the EU, the Belarusian regime activated this trap to forward it's political interests and facilitated the movement of migrants towards the EU's borders. In response, neighbouring countries supported by the EU gave an extreme performance of a predictable script: instituting exceptional legislations that strip migrants of their rights, erecting border infrastructure, and enacting violent border control practices to prevent migrants' arrival on EU territory. The lethal pushback regime that has emerged and consolidated across the Polish–Belarusian borderlands in particular since 2021 has acted as a laboratory for, and a paradigmatic example of, the undermining of human rights norms, and specifically the rights of refugees enshrined in the Geneva Convention. If the instrumentalisation of migrants' lives by the Belarusian government is appalling, it could only be effective because of the prior conditions created by Poland and the EU –the construction of migrants as threats, the absence of legal pathways for most migrants of the Global South, and the externalisation of border control to non-European states. Poland and the EU's militarised response to the effects of Belarus' tactics has only heightened the structural conditions that enable such instrumentalisation. In turn, it is Poland and the EU's response to the constructed "threat" of migration that has constituted a real threat to migrants' lives and to the very foundation of democratic societies.

As of 2026, the Polish government has promoted a narrative of the successful closure of its border with Belarus.[428] Although 2026 falls outside the primary scope of our investigation, and it is too early for us to offer a detailed assessment of trends that are still unfolding, crossings of the Polish border have demonstrably decreased. However, this does not

428 Ministry of the Interior and Administration, „Minister Marcin Kierwinski: Zero Illegal Border Crossings from Belarus," Gov.pl, April 27, 2026, https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia-en/minister-marcin-kierwinski-zero-illegal-border-crossings-from-belarus.

mean that the Belarus route has been permanently closed.[429] Civil society actors and border guards have reported to us an increase in movement across the border with Lithuania, from where migrants continue to move into Poland. This suggests a re-routing of migrants' movements, indicating that individuals are seeking alternative entry points into the EU. Beyond empirically assessing Poland's claim to "success" in relation to migration dynamics, we believe the essential question the spectacle border security occludes is: *what has been the cost of five years of policies, infrastructure, and law enforcement practices aiming to impose border closure?*

Our report offers an empirically robust and methodologically rigorous answer to this question. We have demonstrated that the pushback regime imposed by Poland has come at an exorbitant human cost, as the lives and rights of migrants have been systematically violated, and these practices have culminated in 102 recorded deaths and numerous disappearances. State policies, law enforcement practices and infrastructures have combined with the environment to create what migrants have called a "death zone". We further reveal a series of feedback loops linking practices at the border with discourses, policies, legislations, and jurisprudence at the national and EU scales, in a way that has been mutually reinforcing and evaded accountability. The result has been the consolidation and normalisation of the lethal pushback regime, and the institutionalisation of rightlessness. Beyond the cost to migrants and their families, Poland and the EU's policies pose grave risks for their societies and polities. The militarised violence and stripping of fundamental rights targeting migrants may easily spread to other segments of society. While migrants seeking protection do not raise any serious security threat for Poland or the EU, the undermining of fundamental norms of human dignity, rule of law, and human rights does.

On the basis of our analysis, a number of highly specific demands could be formulated so as to mitigate the harm migrants have been subjected to as they cross the Polish-Belarussian borderlands. However, we do not so much wish for this harm to be mitigated than ended. In this spirit, we formulate key recommendations to durably end border violence across the borderlands and respond effectively to the instrumentalisation of migration by non-European states.[430]
In particular, we call on Polish and EU politicians, but also courts of law, media outlets, construction and surveillance technology companies, citizens and non-citizens, according to their different responsibilities, to:

429 We Are Monitoring, "Interactive Dashboards," last accessed 24 June 2026, https://wearemonitoring.org.pl/en/statistics/interactive-dashboards/.

430 Several of the following demands are developed further in C. Heller et B. Kasparek, "Towards a European pact with migrants, Part Two", *Open Democracy*, 2020.

- → End the construction of migrants as threats, cease relating migration to ongoing geopolitical tensions, and adopt bold policies aimed at ending all forms of racism.

- → End all political and economic relations that destabilise the Global South, leading to large-scale involuntary migration, and adopt policies oriented towards global justice.

- → End and reverse legislations and jurisprudence that undermine the rights of migrants and refugees, acknowledge the enduring reality of migration, and offer legal pathways for migrants to safely access EU territory and seek protection.

- → End the extraordinary deployment of law enforcement agents and the militarisation of the borders of the EU, dismantle and cease funding and constructing border infrastructure and surveillance systems that harm migrants, and invest instead in social and redistributive policies for everyone living in Europe.

- → End the impunity for the violations of migrants' rights.

- → End the outsourcing of border control beyond the EU and cease supporting authoritarian regimes.

In turn we call on Belarus to:

- → End the instrumentalisation of migrants and the violations of their lives and rights by law enforcement agents.

These demands are ambitious, and the direction they point to is clearly at odds with the current political tendencies in Poland, in the EU, in Belarus and beyond. However, the dangers of fear as a political affect have long been demonstrated, and in particular the way it's spread can undermine the human capacity for thought and political action.[431] The counter-instrumentalisation governance of Poland and the EU has demonstrated its dire implications for migrants and for democracy, and it's inability to address the conditions that make the instrumentalisation of migrants by non-European states possible. What is demanded today of all actors involved is the demonstration of the *courage* to collectively embark on this challenging path. It alone could lead to durably preventing migrants from being used as "weapons" by malevolent states and being subjected to violence and the violation of their rights. With the implementation of these

431 H. Arendt. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (New York: Meridian Books 1971).

measures, migrants seeking a better life and protection by crossing Europe's border could be seen as what they have never ceased to be: human beings with rights and dignity demanding recognition. While solidarity with Ukrainian refugees in Poland and the EU should not be idealised and appears to be wanning, Poland and the EU's initial response to their plight as they crossed Poland's southern border indicates that such a courageous response is possible.[432]

As a first and essential step in this direction Poland and the EU should start by heeding the demands for accountability repeatedly voiced by the victims of border violence and their families, demands to which Poland and the EU have responded with a deafening silence for too long. Beyond states and European institutions, the actors and institutions – such as Polish and European prosecutors and judges, media actors, politicians – which we have identified as having contributed to creating the conditions of possibility for the violence and violations of rights migrants should also be held accountable – legally, politically, and morally – for the consequences of their actions.

In this spirit, we conclude this Summary with the demand for justice of the uncle of the late Mahlet Kassa, who died in the forest in February 2023 after Polish border guards failed to assist her.

> *"Even though Mahlet Kassa is no longer alive, we still cannot accept the lack of accountability. For us, this case is not closed. We are emotionally exhausted. Mahlet died because she was denied assistance. For me, that is unimaginable. We continue to demand at least a measure of justice. I think about her every day. We are worn down by helplessness. It cannot be right that she lost her life, that we know why it happened, and yet no one does anything about it."*

Uncle of the late Mahlet Kassa, 2025

432 V. Hernes and K. Lukasiewicz, "Restrictive, Liberal, Selective or Universal? A Cross-National Analysis of European Countries' Policy Response to Forced Migrants from Ukraine," Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 52, no. 2 (2026): 343-366, DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2025.2565907.



Figure C.1. Portrait of Mahlet Kassa. Unknown Photographer, date unknown. [6]

433 Photo courtesy of Hope&Humanity Poland/Facebook, as published in Gazeta Wyborcza (Białystok), accessed August 31, 2026, https://bialystok.wyborcza.pl/bialystok/51,35241,29522102.html.

TEAM AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Investigation Team

This report has been authored by the researchers and fellows of the Circumference of Violence (CoV) and Infrastructuring Nature (IN) research projects and the investigative agency Border Forensics (BF). We have further collaborated with a number of Polish researchers who contributed to specific sections of the report and civil society actors who generously shared the knowledge and data they have generated over the years.

Lead Researchers

Director of Research: Charles Heller
Research Coordinator and Lead Researcher: Peter Teunissen
Field Coordinator and Lead Researcher: Katarzyna Czarnota
Lead Researcher: Alessandro Mangione
Geostatistical Analyst: Stanislas Michel

Visual and Spatial Analysis

Spatial analysis and cartography: Nico Alexandroff, Jack Isles, Samuel N. Chambers and Ee-Faye Chong
Remote sensing: Rossana Padeletti

Collaborating Organisations

We Are Monitoring (WAM), Podlasie Volunteer Humanitarian Emergency Service (POPH), Egala Association (Egala), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR), Border Deaths Monitoring Group (BDMG) and Piotr Czaban – investigative journalist and creator of the Czaban Robi Raban channel.

Extended Research and Production Team

Discourse Analysis: Ksnenia Homel, Aleksandra Szkudlarek, and Aleksandra Grzymała-Kazłowska
Legal analysis: Maja Lysienia and Marcin Czachor
Historical analysis: Natalia Judzińska
Supporting fieldwork and analysis: Reem Mussa
Supporting qualitative and qualitative data analysis: Kuba Bieniasz, Nana Ciaston, Marysia Czuchnowska, Ania Migdal, and Clara Zinecker
Supporting the reconstruction and analysis of facts: Aleksandra Chrzanowska, Anna Kolberg, Małgorzata Klemens, Eliza Kowalczyk, Rafał Kowalczyk, Marcin Czachor, Adam Wajrak, Katarzyna Nowak, Beata Siemaszko, and Piotr Czaban
Fieldwork support: Anka Kolber, Małgorzata Klemens, Urszula Wolfram, Łukasz Synowiecki, Mateusz Rybak, Eliza Kowalczyk, and Adam Wajrak
Interactive platform development: Rectangle. Framework originally developed at Forensic Architecture
Report design and layout: Robert Preusse and Tessa Darimont
Web layout and programing: Morad Taleeb
Copy Editing: Matilda Tayler
Translation: Jagoda Dolnska, Yasmeen Alsaqa, and Murielle Jackson
Project Support: Agnès Fiama Papone and Natalina Haller
Strategic Communication: Hope Barker

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DER EINZELFALL ZÄHLT.

ANNEX: IN-DEPTH RECONSTRUCTION OF LETHAL INCIDENTS

Death of Ahmed Hamid Mhaidi Al-Zuwayyin

- Age at the time of death: 29
- Country of origin: Iraq
- Date of the request for help: no request documented by Civil Society Actors
- Date the missing person report was filed: –
- Date the body was found: 19 September 2021
- Exact date of death: 18 or 19 of September 2021
- Location: near the village of Frącki, Poland



Figure A.1. Photo of Ahmed Hamid Mhaidi Al-Zuwayyin from his Facebook account.

Summary

Ahmed Hamid Mhaidi Al-Zuwayyin was a 29-year-old Iraqi Kurd, a husband and father to a young daughter. He died on the 19th of September 2021, becoming one of the first documented deaths at the Polish–Belarusian border following the introduction of the state of emergency and the establishment of the so-called "no-go zone" earlier that month. After being subjected to multiple pushbacks, he was found dead by the Polish Border Guard on the 19th of September 2021 in a forest near Frącki, on the Polish side of the border. According to the testimony of two migrants who had travelled with him, Ahmed experienced severe disorientation, vomiting, and paradoxical undressing before his death.

In the days following Ahmed's death, the Polish government issued an RCB emergency text message to Polish and foreign mobile phone numbers detected near the border. The alert stated: "The Polish border is protected. You are being deceived by the Belarusian authorities. Return to Minsk! Do not take any pills from Belarusian soldiers."[434] Recipients were directed to a government website containing further instructions and warnings.

The public communication surrounding Ahmed's death focused on deception by the Belarusian authorities and alleged substance use, while omitting the cumulative effects of repeated pushbacks, environmental exposure, and the absence of assistance preceding his death[435]. Ahmed's family subsequently encountered prolonged difficulties in obtaining information about his fate and the circumstances of his death. The prosecutor's investigation established hypothermia and exhaustion as the immediate causes of death. Toxicological analysis found no evidence of psychoactive substances.

This reconstruction is based on publicly available information, press and OSINT analysis, prosecutorial responses, Iraqi Embassy documentation, and material collected by journalist Piotr Czaban, who remained in direct contact with Ahmed Hamid Mhaidi Al-Zuwayyin's family and interviewed two Iraqi men who had travelled with Ahmed and who were brothers to each other.

Piotr Czaban established contact with Ahmed's sister on the 12th of October 2021. According to the information she provided to him, by that date the family had not been informed of the location of Ahmed's body, the cause of his death, and procedural details by anyone from the Polish government.

434 Ministry of the Interior and Administration of the Republic of Poland, *Information for Migrants* (official public information for migrants), https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia-en/information-for-migrants (accessed 5 August 2026).

435 In the absence of an institutional mechanism for informing and assisting the family, journalist Piotr Czaban provided practical support by obtaining information and guiding the family through the relevant administrative procedures. This illustrates how functions ordinarily performed by state institutions were instead carried out by individual civil-society actors.

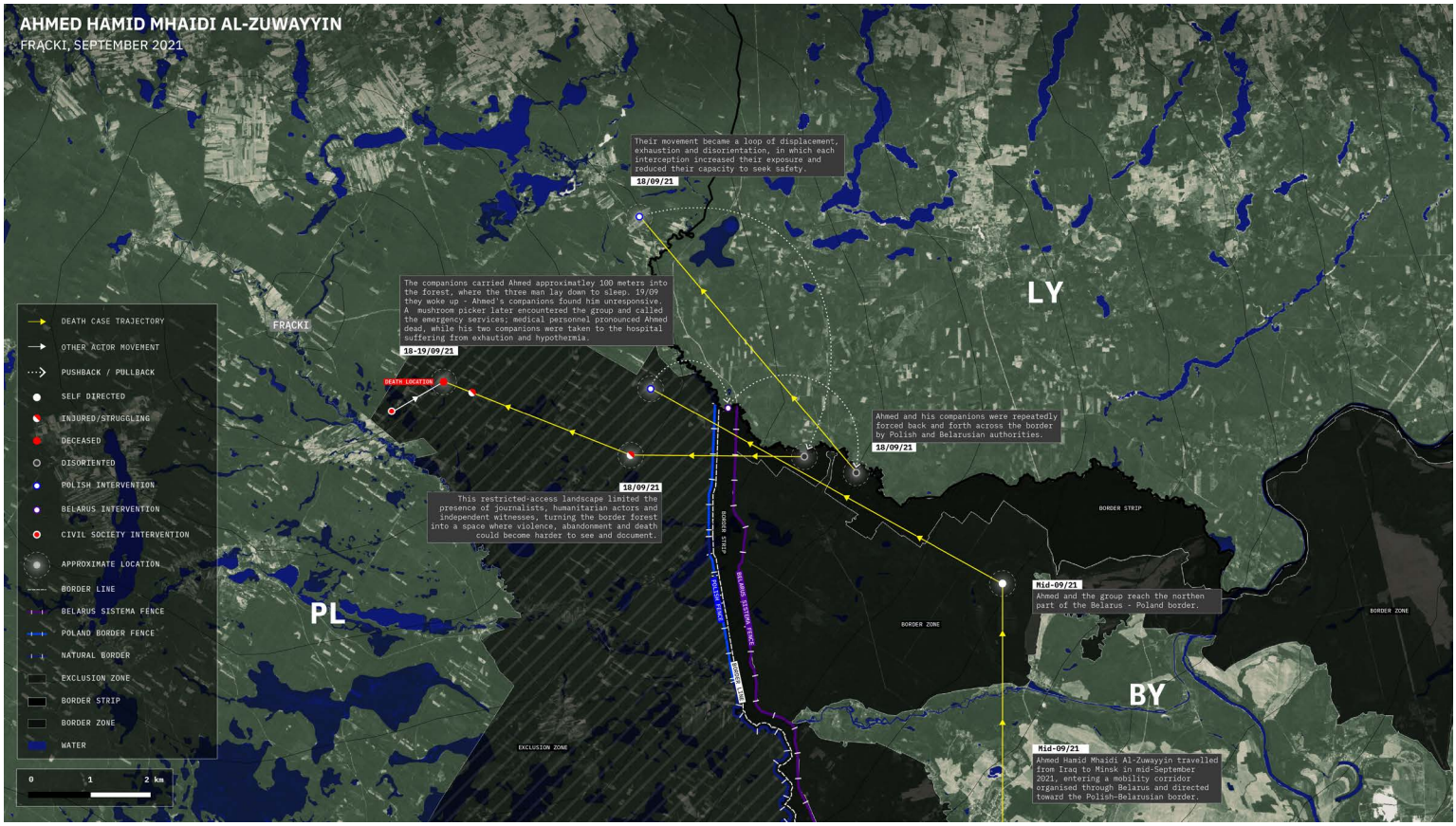


Figure A.2. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Ahmed Hamid Mhaidi Al-Zuwayyin. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

436 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dttF-2WrW_Cg

Chain of events

During his flight from Baghdad to Minsk mid September 2021, Ahmed met two Iraqi men who were brothers and were also travelling towards Europe. According to the accounts they later provided to the journalist Piotr Czaban[436], after arriving in Minsk, the three men stayed in a hotel for approximately three days before travelling towards the Polish–Belarusian border.

According to information provided by Ahmed's family to Piotr Czaban, around 16–17 September, the two men travelling with Ahmed contacted the family using his phone and reported that he was unwell. When the family asked to hear from Ahmed directly, he sent them a voice message. His companions later recalled that all three men were soaking wet, lacked adequate clothing, and were extremely exhausted, while Ahmed's condition was gradually deteriorating. By then, they had run out of food and were drinking water from puddles and marshes.

The accounts of the two men indicate that on the 18th of September, the three men entered Poland at an undetermined location near the Lithuanian–Belarusian–Polish border junction. Several hours later, they reached the area near Frącki. That evening, the family received a photograph from the two men showing Ahmed lying without shoes on a forest road. The photograph is timestamped at 8:00 PM.

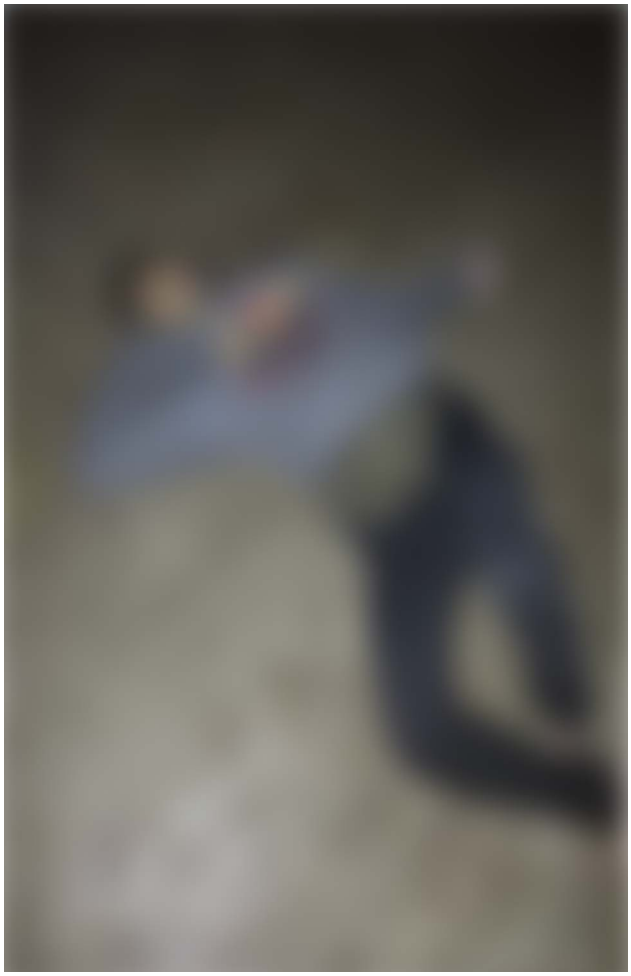


Figure A.3. Blurred photograph of Ahmed Al-Zuwayyin lying barefoot on a forest road on the evening of 18 September 2021. Ahmed was still alive when the photograph was taken. The two men travelling with him later reported that he had begun removing his clothing before his death, a behaviour consistent with paradoxical undressing associated with severe hypothermia. The original photograph was sent by the two men to Ahmed's family and was subsequently provided to this investigation by journalist Piotr Czaban.

The three men remained in the forest near Frącki during the night of 18–19 September. According to the accounts of Ahmed's two companions, they were exhausted and moved approximately 100 meters away from the forest road where the photograph of Ahmed had been taken earlier that evening, carrying Ahmed Al-Zuwayyin with them. They eventually lay down to sleep on the grass beneath the trees.

Weather records for the area indicate that during the night of 18–19 September 2021, when Ahmed died, the air temperature was approximately 5°C, with around 10 mm of precipitation and wind speeds of approximately 25 km/h.

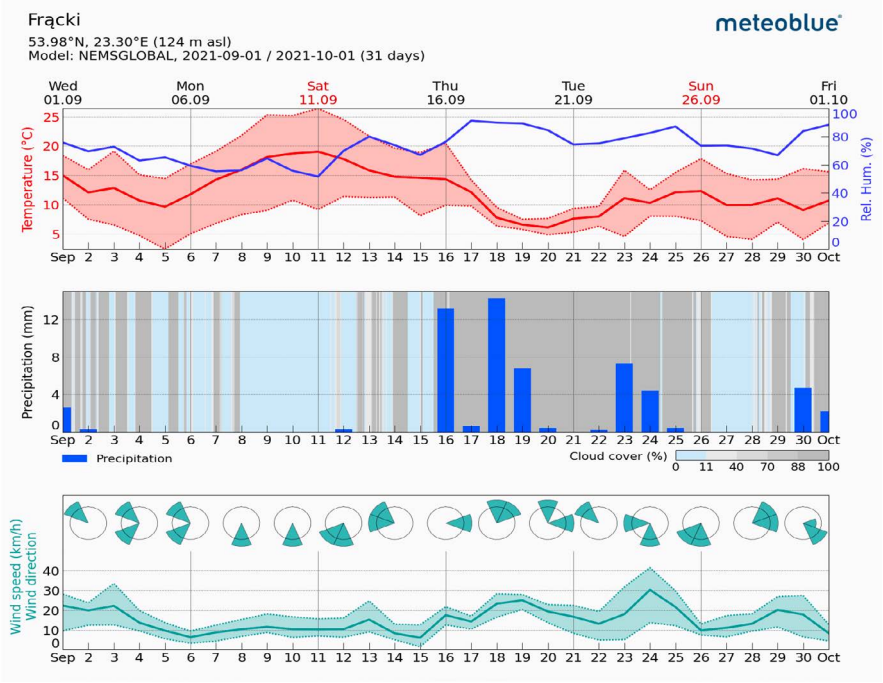


Figure A.4. Modelled historical weather conditions for Frącki, Poland, in September 2021. The graph shows temperature, relative humidity, precipitation, cloud cover, and wind conditions for the area, including the period of 18–19 September, when Ahmed Hamid Mhaidi Al-Zuwayyin died. The data are based on the NEMS Global weather model and represent simulated historical conditions rather than direct measurements at the precise location of his death. Graph: meteoblue, "Historical Weather Data: Frącki, Poland," meteoblue.com.

When the two men woke several hours later, Ahmed showed no signs of life and was found without his clothes. Paradoxical undressing is a well-documented feature of severe hypothermia[437]. According to Ahmed's travel companion, all three men were extremely exhausted, had run out of food, and were drinking water from puddles and marshes[438]. By then, they had been in the forest for eight days and were soaked through from the rain.

437 B. Wedin, L. Vanggaard, and J. Hirvonen, "'Paradoxical Undressing' in Fatal Hypothermia," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 24, no. 3 (1979): 543–553

438 Piotr Czaban, "Ahmed Was the First: An Interview with a Witness to His Death" ["Ahmed był pierwszy. Rozmowa ze świadkiem śmierci"], *Czaban robi raban*, YouTube video, November 2, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dttF-2WrW_Cg

After finding Ahmed unresponsive, his two companions remained at the same location with his lifeless body. Several hours later, at an undetermined time, a mushroom picker encountered the two men and deceased Ahmed in the forest and called emergency services. A paramedic team from Sejny subsequently arrived at the scene. Upon arrival, the medical team assessed Ahmed and found no signs of life. The doctor who attended the scene and pronounced Ahmed dead later told Piotr Czaban that Ahmed was already dead when the team arrived and that his body was found without clothing. Police and the public prosecutor were subsequently called to the site. Ahmed's two companions, both suffering from exhaustion and hypothermia, were transported to hospital for medical treatment. Piotr Czaban subsequently interviewed the doctor who had attended the medical intervention at the site of Ahmed's death.



Figure A.5. Screenshot from a report by TVN24, a Polish commercial television news channel, published on 17 October 2021. The frame shows journalist Piotr Czaban at the location where Ahmed and his two companions lay down to sleep during the night of 18–19 September 2021. The footage documents items left at the site, including packaging from Belarusian snacks, a shampoo sachet from a Belarusian hotel, and part of the medical equipment used by the paramedic team from Sejny to check Ahmed's vital signs. These traces help identify the location shown in the footage as the site where the three men had spent the night and where the medical intervention subsequently took place. Screengrab from TVN24, 17 October 2021.

The day after Ahmed Al-Zuwayyin's death, Mariusz Kamiński, then Minister of the Interior and Administration, publicly addressed the circumstances of the case. Referring to information reportedly provided to Polish authorities by Ahmed's two surviving companions, Kamiński stated

that Ahmed may have taken a pill given to him by a Belarusian soldier, allegedly intended to help him cope with cold and exhaustion. He raised the possibility that the substance could have contributed to Ahmed's death and announced that a detailed post-mortem examination, including toxicological testing, had been ordered.

The same hypothesis was subsequently incorporated into official public messaging at the border. An emergency SMS sent to mobile phones detected in the border area warned recipients, including the sentence: "Do not take any pills from Belarusian soldiers."

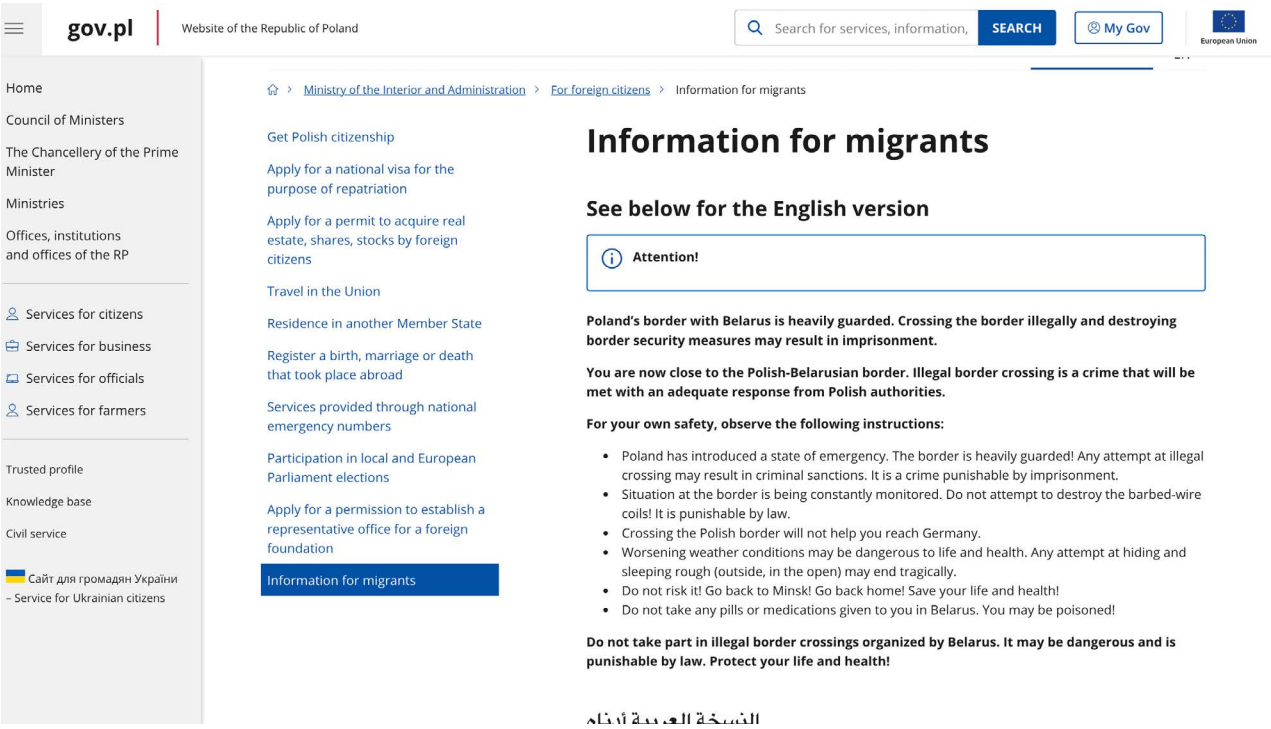


Figure A.6. Screenshot of the online version of the same official message directed at migrants at the Polish–Belarusian border, including a warning not to take pills or medication received in Belarus due to the risk of poisoning. Screenshot from the website of the Ministry of the Interior and Administration of the Republic of Poland, "Information for Migrants," accessed 5 August 2026.

On the 12th of October 2021, Piotr Czaban established contact with Ahmed Al-Zuwayyin's family in Iraq and remained in contact with them thereafter, assisting with administrative procedures concerning Ahmed's death. More than three weeks after his death, the family had still received no information from the Polish authorities about the location of his body, the cause of death, or the proceedings. Czaban also connected the family with Polish lawyer Magdalena Zgłobica, who provided pro bono legal assistance and stated that Ahmed's relatives should have been recognised as injured parties and informed about the investigation.

On the 17th of October 2021, TVN24 broadcast a television report by Piotr Czaban reconstructing the circumstances of Ahmed Al-Zuwayyin's death. The material documented the site where Ahmed and his companions had spent the night and where the medical intervention had taken place and included an interview with the doctor who attended the scene. It also documented Czaban's contact with Ahmed's family in Iraq and their continuing lack of information about the case. In preparing the material, Czaban sought information from the Polish authorities involved in the case; several institutions had not responded to questions submitted by Czaban and the TVN24 newsroom by the time of broadcast.

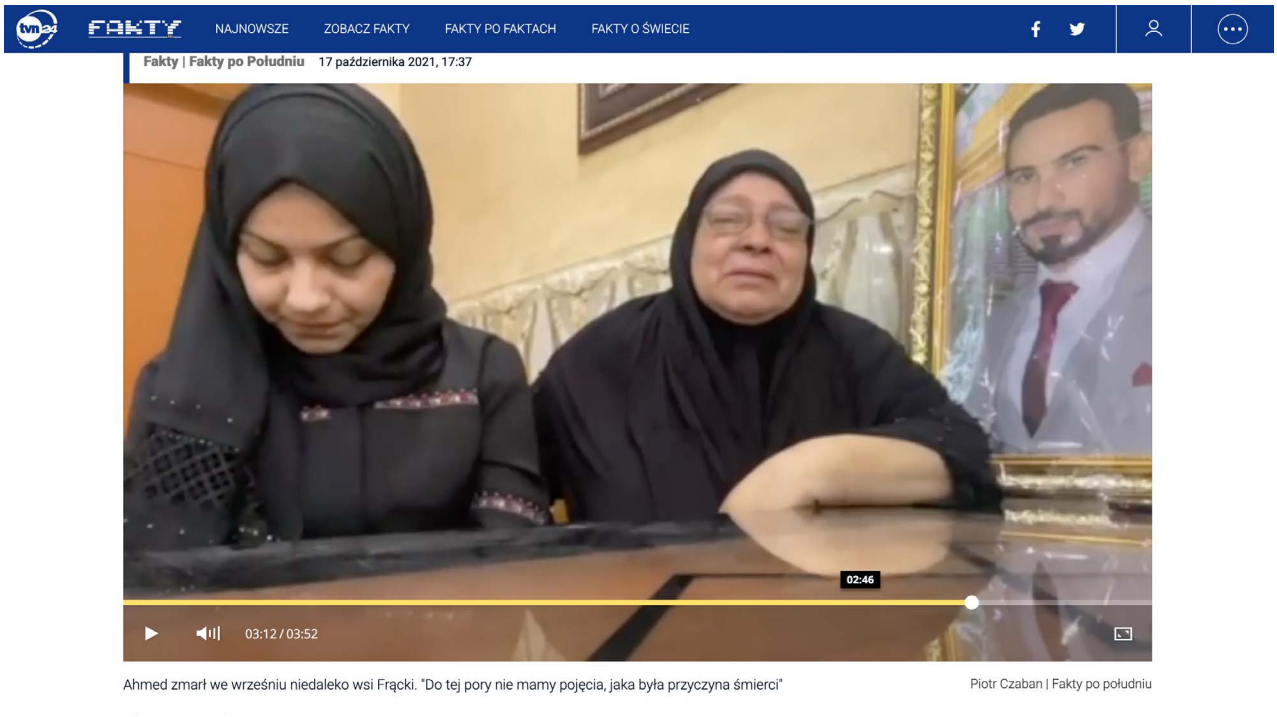


Figure A.7. Screenshot from a television report by Piotr Czaban, broadcast by TVN24 on the 17th *of* October 2021, documenting his contact with Ahmed's family in Iraq. Czaban had established contact with the family on *the* 12th *of October,* more than three weeks after Ahmed's death. At that time, the family reported that they had received no information from the Polish authorities concerning the location of Ahmed's body, the cause of his death, or the proceedings concerning the case. Screengrab from TVN24, 17 October 2021.

Approximately six months after Ahmed Al-Zuwayyin's death, in March 2022, official information concerning the findings of the investigation was transmitted by the Polish National Prosecutor's Office to the Embassy of the Republic of Iraq in Warsaw and reached Ahmed's family. The communication followed a request made by a delegation of the Iraqi Prime Minister's Office and Ministry of Foreign Affairs during a meeting with representatives of the Polish National Prosecutor's Office on the 28th of March 2022. The document was subsequently transmitted to Ahmed's family, who later provided it to Piotr Czaban.

According to the document, the forensic examination established the cause of Ahmed's death as acute circulatory and respiratory failure resulting from a decrease in body temperature. The document also states that it had been confirmed that Ahmed had not consumed any narcotic substances.

These findings did not substantiate the hypothesis concerning narcotic substances that had been publicly raised by Minister Mariusz Kamiński on the 20th of September 2021 and subsequently incorporated into official government messaging directed at migrants at the border.

Ahmed Al-Zuwayyin's body was repatriated to Iraq and buried on the 22nd of November 2022. The repatriation cost more than €5,000. According to information provided by Ahmed's family to Piotr Czaban, the family was required to cover this cost. The expense was ultimately covered through a public fundraiser organised in Poland by the Światło dla Syrii Foundation.

439 Al-Hirah Today (قناة الحيرة اليوم), "Funeral of Ahmed Hamed Al-Dhabhawi," Facebook video, 4:32, 22 November 2021, https://www.facebook.com/Alherraa/videos/1572744366398550, accessed June 6, 2026.



Figure A.8. Screenshot from a social media post documenting Ahmed's funeral in Iraq, provided to Piotr Czaban by Ahmed's family. In the post, Ahmed is referred to as Ahmed Hamed Al-Dhabhawi (احمد حامد الذبحاوي), while his identity documents record his name as Ahmed Hamed Mahdi Al-Zuwayyin (احمد حامد مهدي الزويين). Such differences can reflect the use of family, lineage, or tribal names alongside names recorded in official identity documents. The available evidence does not allow us to determine the precise relationship between the two forms. The description accompanying the funeral video states that Ahmed's body was returned from Belarus "after considerable hardship and effort" and that he was buried among his family and loved ones. Screenshot from Al-Hirah Today (قناة الحيرة اليوم), Facebook video, 22 November 2021.[439]

Conclusion

Ahmed Hamed Mahdi Al-Zuwayyin's death demonstrates how environmental exposure at the border cannot be separated from the conditions under which movement through the border zone was organised and constrained. By the night of 18–19 September 2021, Ahmed and his two companions had spent approximately eight days moving through forests and border areas. According to the surviving companions' account, they were exhausted, had run out of food, drank water from puddles and marshes, were soaked through by rain, and lacked adequate clothing. Ahmed's condition had progressively deteriorated. These conditions became increasingly dangerous through prolonged exposure. During the night Ahmed died, the three men lay down to sleep on wet grass beneath trees near Frącki. Weather records indicate low temperatures, rainfall, and strong wind. Ahmed's two companions survived the same night suffering from exhaustion and hypothermia and required hospitalisation. The later forensic assessment concluded that Ahmed's death was most likely caused by cardiorespiratory failure resulting from a significant decrease in body temperature. The environmental conditions were therefore not simply the background to Ahmed's death. Their effects accumulated through the trajectory that preceded it. The evidence reconstructed in this investigation documents repeated encounters with Polish and Belarusian state officials, including military and Border Guard personnel, and a sequence of pushbacks and push-forwards across the border. These practices repeatedly returned the three men to forests and border areas while their physical condition deteriorated, ultimately exposing them to environmental conditions that led to Ahmed's death. Ahmed's death can therefore be understood not as an isolated consequence of adverse weather, but as the endpoint of an accumulated process in which pushbacks and push-forwards, exhaustion, hunger, thirst, rain, cold, inadequate clothing, and prolonged exposure interacted to produce fatal harm.

Death of Muhammad Yasin Jassem

- Age at the time of death: 31
- Country of origin: Syria
- Date of the request for help: 9 November 2021
- Date the body was found: 12 November 2021
- Date of identification: May 2022
- Exact date of death: Unknown
- Location: Near Wólka Terechowska, Poland.



Figure A.9. Photograph of Muhammad, provided by his family. Photograph shared of Piotr Czaban.

Summary

Between the 9th and the 12th of November 2021, Muhammad Yasin Jassem, a 31-year-old Syrian national, died in the Polish–Belarusian border area after becoming unable to continue his journey through the forest. On the 9th ofNovember, Muhammad crossed into Poland with his 21-year-old brother, Bashar. As Muhammad's health rapidly deteriorated, he became unable to continue. Bashar left him with medication, food,

and water and went to seek assistance from the Polish Border Guard, taking Muhammad's passport with him. He informed the officers about his brother's condition and location and requested urgent assistance. Despite the reported medical emergency and cold weather conditions, no rescue operation followed.

Instead, Bashar was pushed back to Belarus, preventing him from returning to Muhammad. During the encounter, Border Guard officers retained Muhammad's passport. The Border Guard thus possessed both his identity document and information that he had been left in the border area in a condition requiring urgent assistance.

On the 12th of November, Muhammad's body was found by a forest guard near Wólka Terechowska and subsequently buried as an unidentified person (NN). The procedures undertaken by the prosecutor's office and police did not establish a connection between the unidentified body and Muhammad, whose passport had previously been retained by the Border Guard. Muhammad's family continued searching for him without knowing that his body had already been found and buried in Poland. In May 2022, investigative journalist Piotr Czaban traced Muhammad's burial site and initiated the process that led to his identification and the correction of the official records.

The subsequent investigation about Muhammad's death was discontinued on the grounds that the act did not contain the elements of a criminal offence.

This reconstruction is based primarily on investigative material published by journalist Piotr Czaban. His reporting was cross-referenced with additional publicly available sources and independently verified, where possible, using OSINT methods.

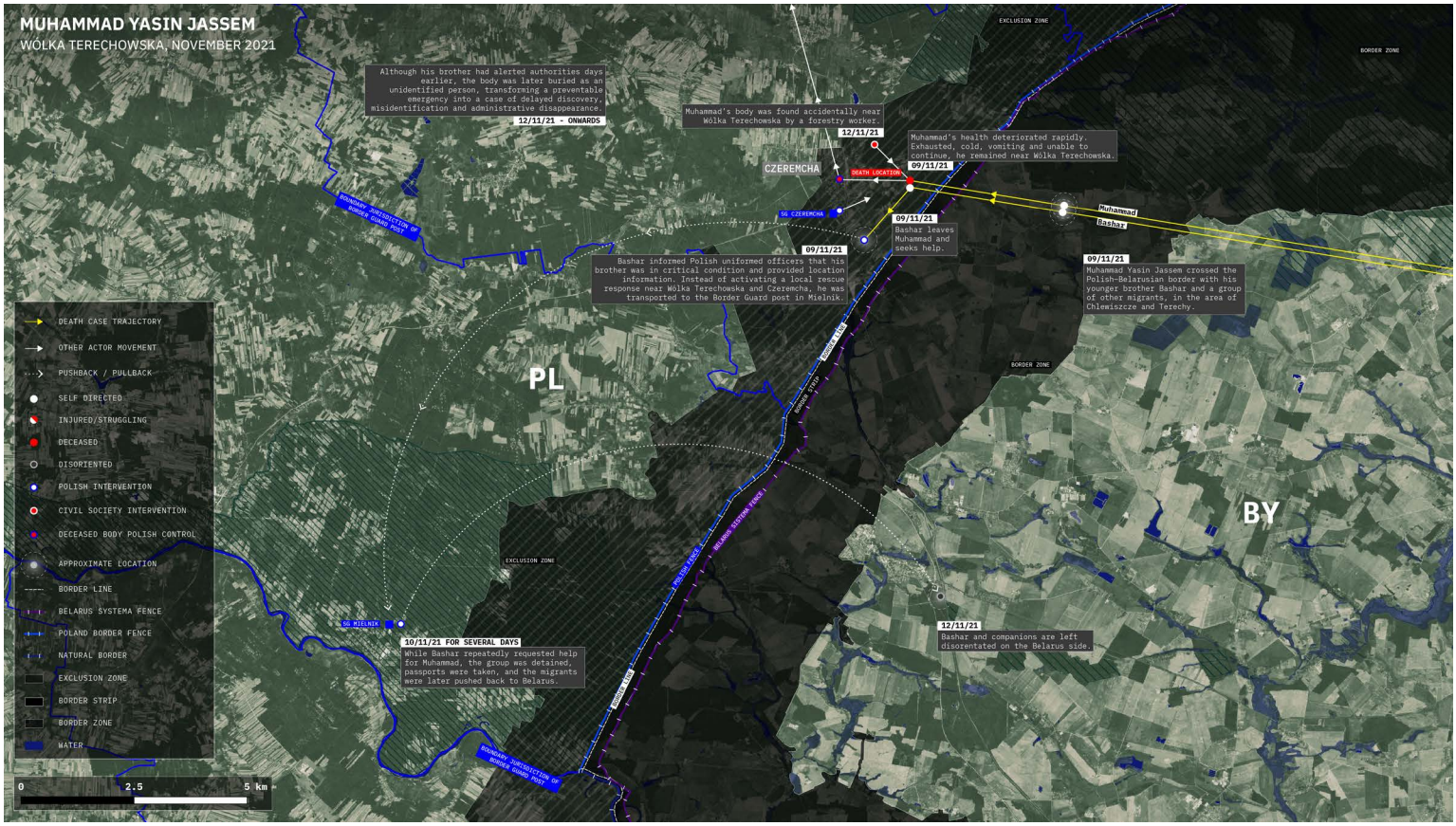


Figure A.10. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Muhammad Yasin Jassem. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Chain of events

On the 9th of November 2021, Muhammad Yasin Jassem, a 31-year-old Syrian national born in 1990, crossed the Polish–Belarusian border together with his younger brother, Bashar, and approximately ten other people. The group crossed through the area of the Polish villages of Chlewiszcze and Terechy.

Based on interviews conducted by investigative journalist Piotr Czaban and his subsequent findings, the group travelled approximately 10 kilometres from the border before Muhammad's condition deteriorated in a forested area near Wólka Terechowska. He was exhausted, had been exposed to low temperatures and limited access to food, and had begun vomiting. He was no longer able to continue at the group's pace. Muhammad remained behind with Bashar, while the other ten members of the group continued onward. According to Bashar's account, Muhammad initially asked the group to continue without him and intended to wait for assistance, but Bashar refused to leave his brother alone.

About two hours later, Muhammad's condition deteriorated further: he continued vomiting and reported feeling extremely cold. Assessing that his brother required urgent medical assistance, Bashar decided to seek help. He left Muhammad with a backpack containing food, water,

medication, and Bashar's identification document. Bashar took another backpack containing two passports: his own and Muhammad's. He then left alone in search of assistance.

Meteorological data for the Czeremcha area shows that on the 9th of November 2021, when Bashar sought assistance, air temperatures were close to 0°C and periodically fell below freezing. Over the following days, temperatures dropped sharply, reaching approximately −8°C to −13°C around 11–12 November, while Muhammad remained missing in the forest.

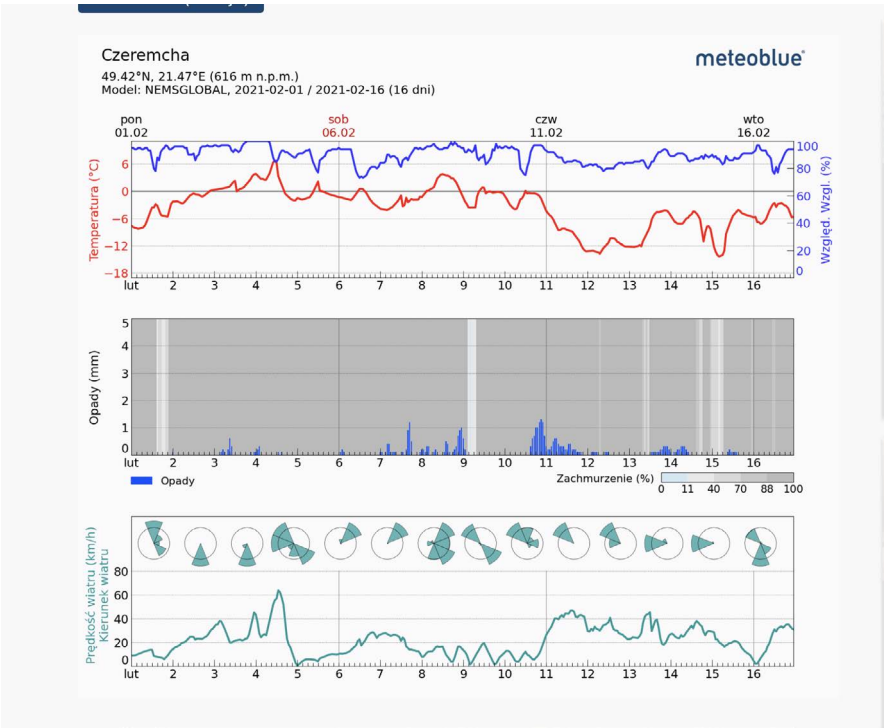


Figure A.11. Weather forecast for Czeremcha, 9 November 2021. Source: meteoblue, "Historical Weather Data: Czeremcha, Poland," meteoblue.com.

According to Bashar's account to Czaban, after leaving Muhammad he reached a road and attempted to stop a vehicle driving nearby. He was apprehended by uniformed officers and transported approximately 40 kilometres to the Border Guard post in Mielnik. The ten people who had earlier continued without the brothers were also in the same Border Guard post.

At the facility, Bashar repeatedly requested assistance for Muhammad and provided information about his location. Another member of the group who spoke English also attempted to communicate Muhammad's

situation to the officers. According to Bashar, these requests did not result in assistance being sent to his brother. The Border Guard collected the passports of the group. There were eleven people at the facility but twelve passports: Bashar was carrying both his own and Muhammad's. Before the group was returned to Belarus, eleven passports were returned. According to Bashar, the Border Guard retained Muhammad's passport.

At an undetermined time after Bashar was taken to the Border Guard facility, he and the other members of the group were pushed back to Belarus. The precise time of the pushback could not be established. According to Bashar, Border Guard officers told him that the area was being patrolled by the Border Guard and military, and that, if anyone had remained behind, they would be found. No search-and-rescue operation for Muhammad was launched.

After the pushback, Bashar found himself in a forested area in Belarus without knowing his precise location. Two or three days later, he crossed into Poland again and continued his journey. He believed that the information he had provided had led to assistance being sent to Muhammad and that his brother had been found and taken to a hospital.



Figure A.12. Identification document belonging to Bashar, found on Muhammad's body. A photograph of the document was subsequently provided for verification. Photograph shared by Piotr Czaban.

On the 12th of November 2021, three days after Bashar had left Muhammad and sought assistance, a forestry worker came across Muhammad's body near Wólka Terechowska while carrying out his routine duties and notified the police. Muhammad was therefore not located as a result of a search-and-rescue operation initiated following Bashar's requests for assistance. A prosecutor and physician attended the scene, which was photographically documented, and the body was subsequently transferred to the Department of Forensic Medicine in Białystok. The cause of death was determined to be hypothermia.

An identification document was found with the body. It belonged not to Muhammad, but to his younger brother, Bashar, who had left it in the backpack with Muhammad before going to seek assistance. At this stage, however, investigators did not know that the document belonged to the deceased man's brother and initially associated the identity indicated by the document with the deceased.

On the 13th of November 2021, information about the death became publicly available. The Podlaskie Police reported that the body of a young Syrian man had been found the previous day in a forest near Wólka Terechowska. Polish media also reported the death, citing preliminary findings indicating hypothermia as the probable cause.



Figure A.13. Screenshot of a social media post by the Podlaskie Police, published 13 November 2021, reporting that the body of a young Syrian man had been found the previous day in a forest near Wólka Terechowska. The date, location, nationality, and circumstances reported in this post were among the elements subsequently used by investigative journalist Piotr Czaban to connect the unidentified death with Muhammad's disappearance. Screenshot from Podlaskie Police, X (formerly Twitter), 13 November 2021.

In the following weeks, however, the identification based on the document found with the body became uncertain. On the 9th of December, the online news platform Onet reported that the prosecutor's office in Hajnówka was attempting to establish the identity of the deceased after encountering contradictory information. The identification document found with the body indicated the identity of a 21-year-old Syrian man. Border Guard records, however, indicated that a person corresponding to the same identity had been apprehended at the Border Guard post in Mielnik and had subsequently left Polish territory. According to the information reported at the time, this intervention had taken place on the 15th of November, three days after the body had been found.

Czaban's subsequent investigation provided an explanation for this apparent contradiction. Bashar told him that the identification document found with Muhammad's body was his own: he had left it with Muhammad on 9 November when he went to seek assistance. Bashar himself had carried his passport and Muhammad's passport to the Border Guard post in Mielnik. According to his account, his own passport was returned before the pushback, while Muhammad's passport was retained by the Border Guard. The document found with the deceased, the Border Guard record concerning a living person bearing the same identity, and Muhammad's passport retained during the intervention therefore constituted separate documentary traces relating to the two brothers.

The investigation into the unidentified death was transferred from the District Prosecutor's Office in Hajnówka to the District Prosecutor's Office in Suwałki. With the identity of the deceased still unresolved, Muhammad was eventually buried as an unidentified person (NN) in the Orthodox cemetery in Wólka Terechowska.

Throughout this period, Muhammad's family continued searching for him without knowing that his body had already been found and buried in Poland. Through legal representatives, they submitted inquiries to Polish institutions, initially considering the possibility that Muhammad had been transferred to one of Poland's guarded centres for foreigners. These inquiries did not establish his whereabouts.

Bashar eventually reached Germany. Through Kasim, a Syrian physician working in Poland, Czaban established contact with him and learned what had happened to the brothers on 9 November. Drawing on Bashar's account and information provided by Muhammad's family, Czaban began comparing Muhammad's disappearance with publicly available

information concerning unidentified deaths in the border area.

In May 2022, Czaban contacted the Municipal Social Welfare Centre in Czeremcha to establish whether an unidentified person had been buried in the municipality following the deaths reported in autumn 2021. He was informed that, at the request of the District Prosecutor's Office in Suwałki, an unidentified man had been buried as NN in the Orthodox cemetery in Wólka Terechowska. This provided a further connection between Muhammad's disappearance and the unidentified body found there on the 12th of November 2021.

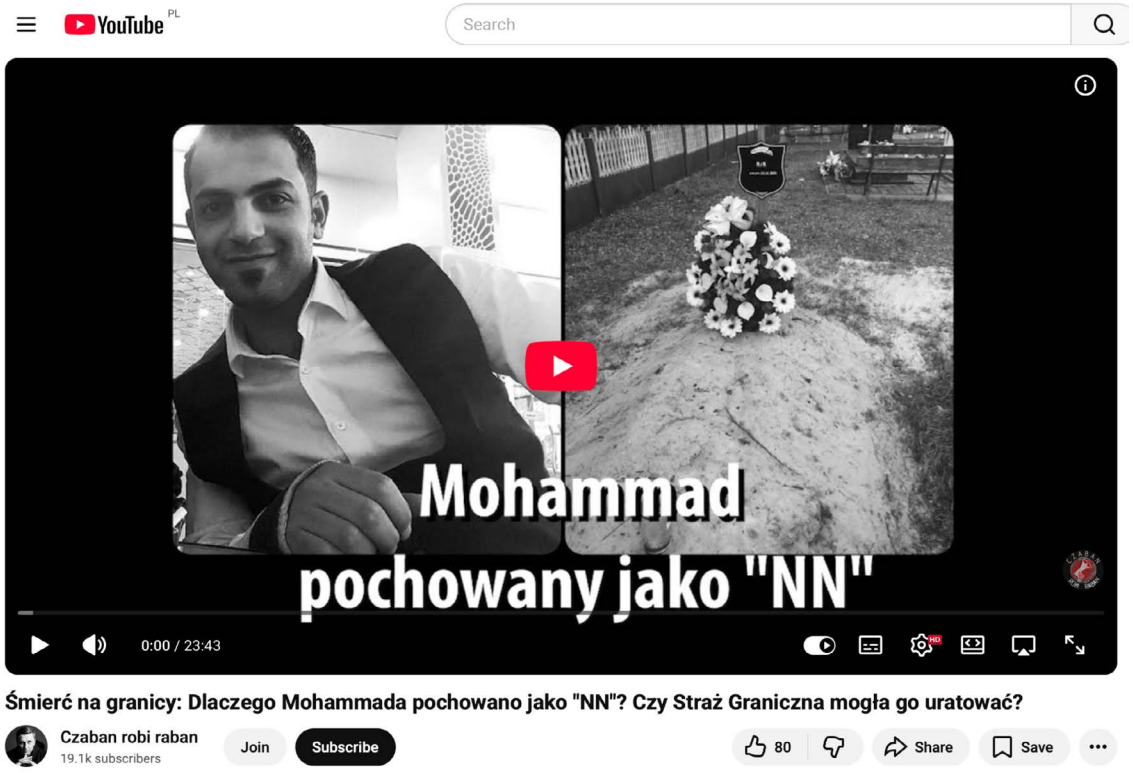
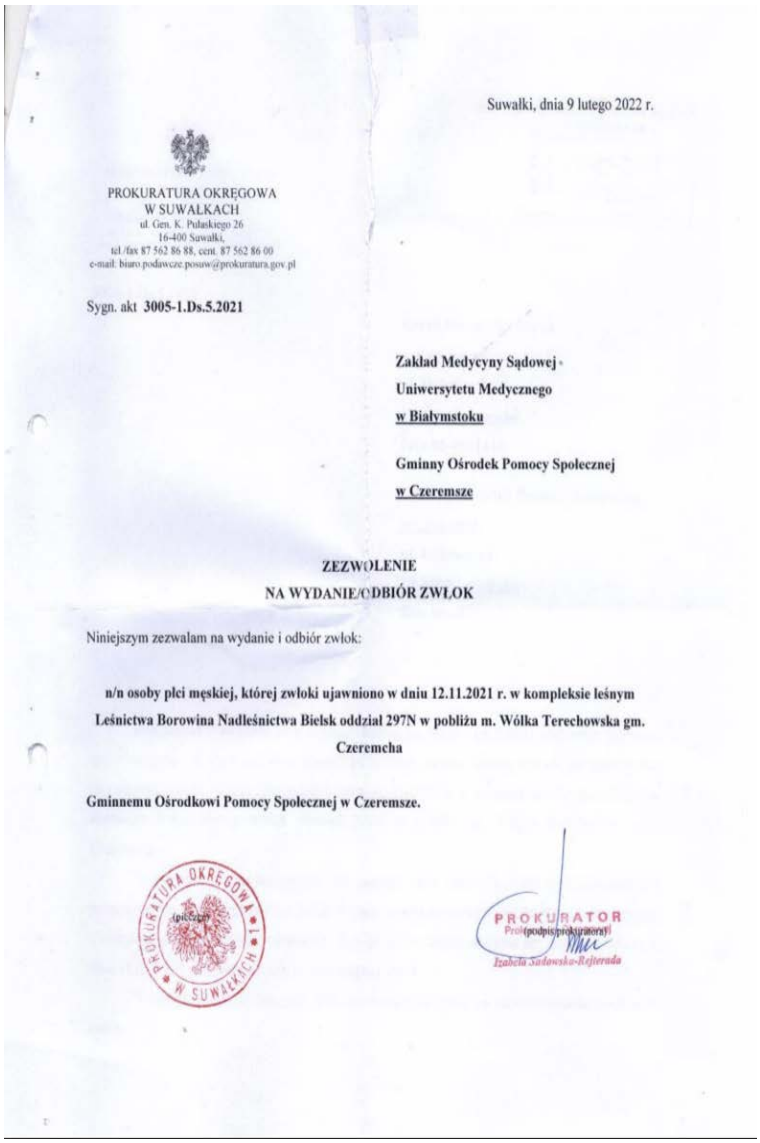


Figure A.14. Screengrab from a video report by Piotr Czaban, "Death at the Border – Why Was Muhammad Buried as 'NN'? Could the Border Guard Have Saved Him?," published on Czaban robi raban, 14 May 2022.

On the 14th of May 2022, Czaban published the findings of his investigation on his YouTube channel, *Czaban robi raban*. According to Czaban, approximately one hour after the publication, the Syrian Embassy in Poland sent Muhammad's family a photograph of the deceased taken after his body had been found on the 12th of November 2021. His family recognised Muhammad in the photograph. Czaban subsequently reported his findings to the police and provided the information he had assembled during his investigation. A relative of Muhammad also contacted Czaban and confirmed Muhammad's Facebook profile.

The investigation into the unidentified death was subsequently transferred from the District Prosecutor's Office in Hajnówka to the District Prosecutor's Office in Suwałki. As the identity of the deceased had not been established, the body was buried as an unidentified person (NN) in Wólka Terechowska. Information about the burial was not made public, and no effective contact with Muhammad's family was established by the Polish state actors. During this period, his family continued searching for him through a legal representative.



Suwałki, dnia 9 lutego 2022 r.

PROKURATURA OKRĘGOWA
W SUWAŁKACH
ul. Gen. K. Pułaskiego 26
16-400 Suwałki
tel./fax 87 562 86 88, cent. 87 562 86 00
e-mail: biuro.podawcze.posuw@prokuratura.gov.pl

Sygn. akt **3005-1.Ds.5.2021**

Zakład Medycyny Sądowej
Uniwersytetu Medycznego
w Białymstoku

Gminny Ośrodek Pomocy Społecznej
w Czeremsze

ZEZWOLENIE
NA WYDANIE/ODBIÓR ZWŁOK

Niniejszym zezwalam na wydanie i odbiór zwłok:

n/n osoby płci męskiej, której zwłoki ujawniono w dniu 12.11.2021 r. w kompleksie leśnym Leśnictwa Borowina Nadleśnictwa Bielsk oddział 297N w pobliżu m. Wólka Terechowska gm. Czeremcha

Gminnemu Ośrodkowi Pomocy Społecznej w Czeremsze.

PROKURATURA OKRĘGOWA W SUWAŁKACH

PROKURATOR
(podpis prokuratora)
Izabela Sadowska-Rejterada

Figure A.15. Copy of correspondence dated 9 February 2024 between the District Prosecutor's Office in Suwałki and the Social Welfare Center regarding the burial of the body, citing "prolonged search and identification activities conducted by the police [...] and the advanced decomposition of the remains." Document received from Piotr Czaban.

Conclusion

The case of Muhammad Yasin Jassem shows how a reported medical emergency can be subordinated to the operational logic of the border regime. Despite repeated requests for assistance and information about Muhammad's condition and location, no rescue response was initiated. Instead, Bashar was transported away from his brother and subsequently pushed back to Belarus, while Muhammad's passport was, according to Bashar, retained by the Border Guard. Three days later, Muhammad's body was found not through a rescue operation, but by a forestry worker. After his death, the same logic of institutional fragmentation continued: information concerning the missing person, his identity document, and the unidentified body remained disconnected, and Muhammad was buried as NN while his family continued searching for him. The significance of this sequence lies not in an absence of information, but in how actionable knowledge was rendered ineffective within the procedures of the border regime. This produced a form of evidentiary disappearance, separating Muhammad from his name, family, and documented history while dispersing responsibility across institutions. These connections were eventually reconstructed not by the institutions involved, but through the work of Muhammad's family and an external journalistic investigation.

Death of Ahmed Al-Shawafi

- Age at the time of death: 26
- Country of origin: Yemen
- Date of the request for help: 15 February 2022
- Date the body was found: 21 February 2022
- Exact date of death: 15 February 2022
- Location: In the restricted Kozłowe Borki Nature Reserve, Białowieża Forest, Poland.



Figure A.16. Screenshot of a post by Piotr Czaban on X (formerly Twitter), 21 February 2022. Screenshot from Piotr Czaban, X, 21 February 2022.

Summary

On the 15th of February 2022, Ahmed Al-Shawafi, a 26-year-old man from Yemen, crossed the Polish–Belarusian border with a small group through the Przewłoka River, at a section where wetlands and watercourses interrupted the continuity of the border barrier that was under construction.

The group entered the Kozłowe Borki Nature Reserve and moved for several hours through dense vegetation, wetlands and animal tracks. After entering another watercourse, their clothing and belongings became soaked. Shortly afterwards, Ahmed began shivering violently, stumbled, and collapsed. The group attempted to resuscitate him for approximately 15–20 minutes, but he lost consciousness and stopped breathing.

With no mobile network coverage at the site, the group was unable to call for assistance. They eventually reached a road, where they encountered Polish Border Guard officers, communicated Ahmed's location and requested immediate assistance. It cannot be established whether Ahmed was still alive at that point. No attempt was made to reach him or verify his condition; instead, the group was pushed back to Belarus. Only after regaining mobile coverage were they able to contact Ahmed's family and civil society emergency networks.

On the 21st of February, six days after the group had reported his location, biologist Rafał Kowalczyk came across Ahmed's body while conducting ecological fieldwork in the reserve. The subsequent prosecutorial investigation established hypothermia as the immediate cause of death.

This reconstruction draws on the testimony of Maryam[440], a Syrian woman who was travelling with her child in the same group as Ahmed, which was recorded in an interview conducted by Katarzyna Czarnota in 2022; materials collected by investigative journalist Piotr Czaban; testimonies from humanitarian actors; and fieldwork conducted with biologist Rafał Kowalczyk, who discovered Ahmed's body. The spatial reconstruction draws on an on-site interview with Kowalczyk at the location where the body was found.

440 *The name Maryam is a pseudonym. The interviewee's name has been changed to protect her identity and safety.*

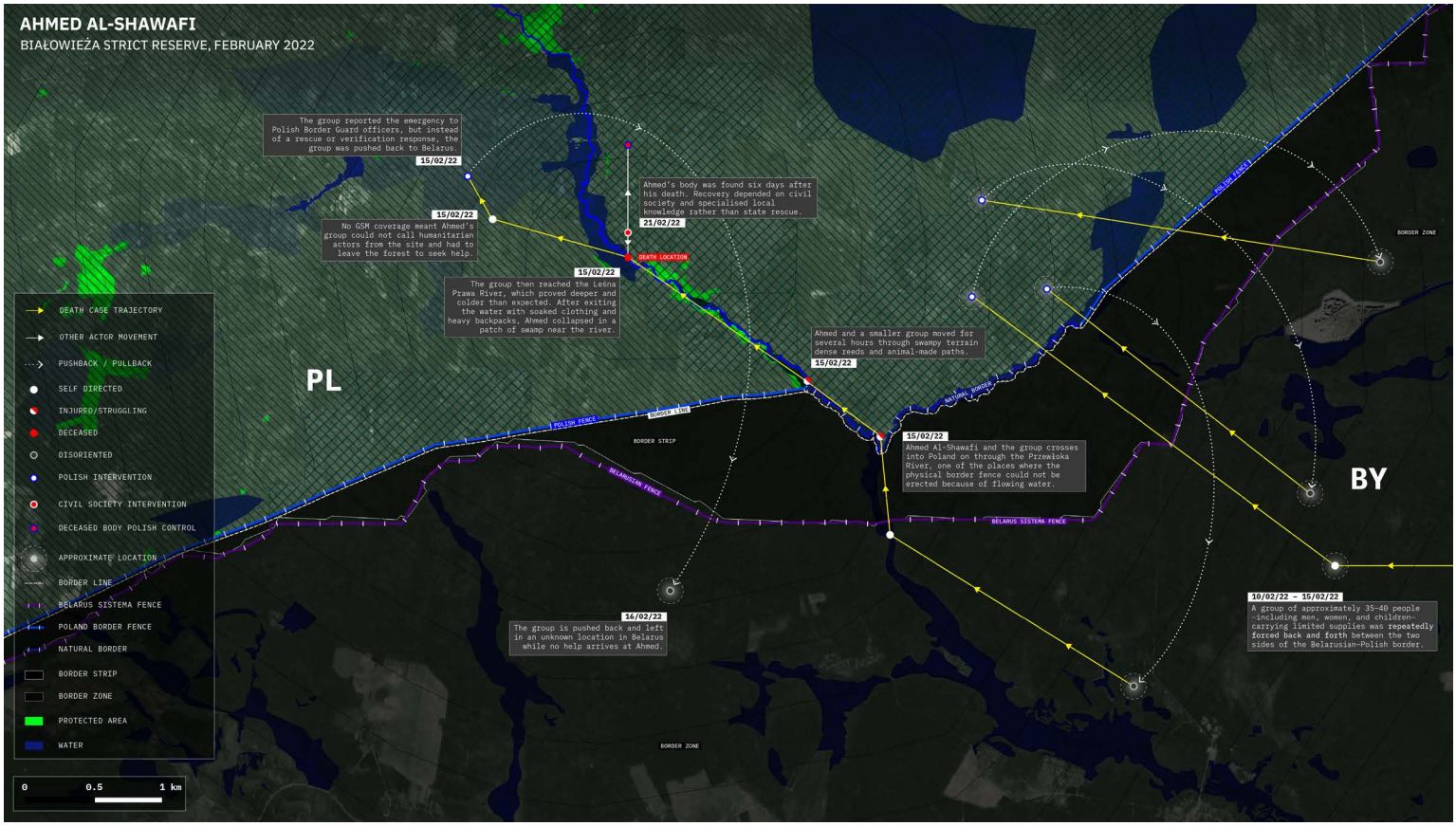


Figure A.17. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Ahmed Al-Shawafi. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Chain of Events

Between 10 and 15 February 2022, a group of approximately 35–40 people, including men, women and children, were in the Belarusian–Polish border zone with limited supplies. During this period, they were repeatedly forced back and forth across the border by Belarusian and Polish law enforcement agents, moving repeatedly between the two countries.

In the early hours of the 15th of February, Ahmed Al-Shawafi crossed into Poland with a smaller group through the Przewłoka River. At this location, the river interrupted the continuity of the 5.5-metre metal border barrier then under construction. Ahmed was carrying a phone with GPS navigation, and several people followed him, including Maryam, a Syrian woman travelling with her child.

According to Maryam's testimony, the group entered the Kozłowe Borki Nature Reserve and continued for several hours through wetlands, marshland and dense reed beds, following animal tracks through the terrain. The reeds reached approximately 1.5–2 metres in height. The group had limited food supplies and became increasingly exhausted and disoriented as they moved through the area.

The dense vegetation and wetlands reduced the group's visibility and provided terrain through which they could move while attempting to avoid

apprehension and another pushback. At the same time, moving through wetlands and dense vegetation required sustained physical effort and prolonged their exposure to severe winter conditions.

Meteorological data for Dubicze Cerkiewne indicate sustained cold conditions during the days preceding Ahmed's death. Between 10 and 15 February 2022, temperatures fluctuated around and only a few degrees above 0°C, periodically falling below freezing, particularly during the night. The period was also characterised by high relative humidity, frequently reaching approximately 80–100%, and moderate wind. On the 15th of February, temperatures remained close to freezing for a substantial part of the day. These conditions are particularly significant in relation to the reconstructed sequence of events, during which Ahmed and the group moved through wetlands for several hours and entered cold water, leaving their clothing and belongings soaked.

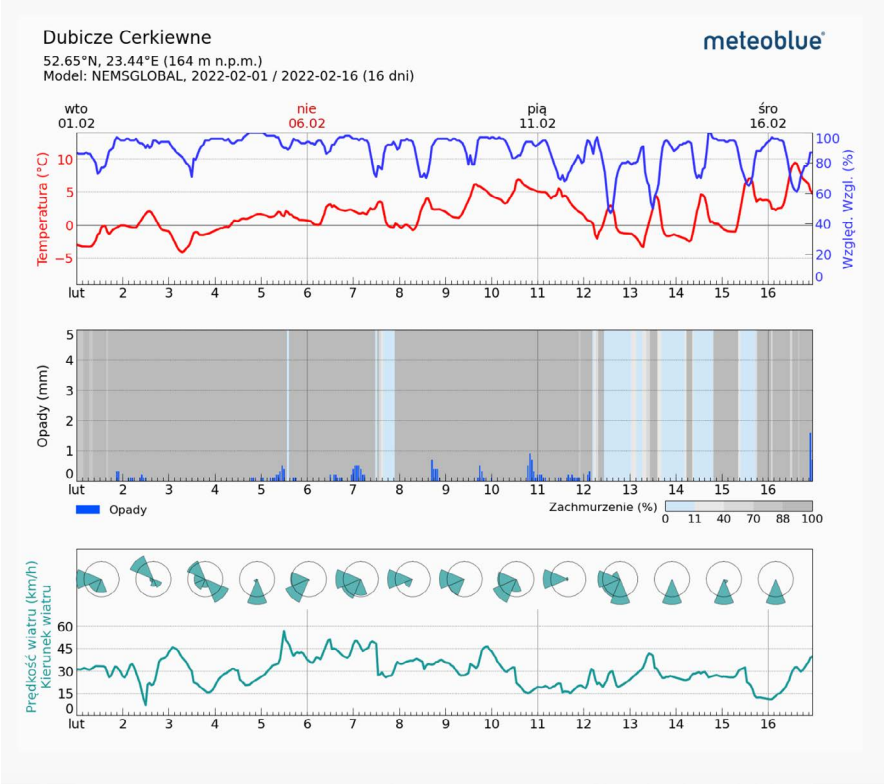


Figure A.18. Meteorological conditions in the Dubicze Cerkiewne area, 1–16 February 2022, showing air temperature, relative humidity, precipitation, cloud cover, wind speed, and direction. Source: meteoblue, "Historical Weather Data: Dubicze Cerkiewne, Poland," meteoblue.com.

On the morning of the 15th of February, while it was still dark, the group reached the Leśna Prawa River. Dense reeds and wetlands made the shoreline difficult to distinguish. Believing they were entering a shallow,

partly frozen water channel, the group stepped into water that proved considerably deeper than expected. Their clothing and belongings became soaked, while waterlogged backpacks made it difficult to climb the riverbank. After leaving the water, Ahmed and Maryam abandoned their wet backpacks and continued on foot.



Figure A.19. During the on-site investigation, biologist Rafał Kowalczyk identified the narrow corridors through the reeds as animal trails. Although they may resemble human-made paths to an untrained observer, he explained that they can be distinguished by their width and the way they cut through the vegetation. On-site spatial investigation, 6 March 2025. Photograph by Katarzyna Czarnota, 2025.

According to Maryam, shortly after leaving the river, Ahmed began shivering violently, stumbled and collapsed in the wetland. He lost consciousness and stopped breathing. The group attempted to resuscitate him for approximately 15–20 minutes, without success. With no mobile phone coverage, they were unable to call for assistance. Unable to carry Ahmed through the surrounding wetlands, they left him where he had collapsed and set out towards the nearest road to seek help from the Polish Border Guard.



Figure A.20. Photograph taken during an on-site spatial investigation at the location where Ahmed collapsed. The wetland is characterised by water-filled depressions and small elevated patches formed by grass tussocks and trees. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, 2026.

After leaving Ahmed, the group walked towards the nearest road to seek help. According to Maryam, after some time, they encountered Polish Border Guard officers, informed them about Ahmed, indicated his location and requested immediate assistance. The officers did not proceed to the indicated location or initiate a response to verify Ahmed's condition.

Instead, Maryam, her child and the other members of the group were taken directly to the border and pushed back to Belarus, despite communicating their intention to apply for international protection in Poland. According to Maryam, they were not taken to a Border Guard facility and received no documentation concerning their apprehension or return. It therefore remains unknown whether Ahmed was still alive when his location was reported to the Border Guard.

Around 16–17 February 2022, following the pushback to Belarus, Maryam and the other members of the group remained in the forest, exhausted and without mobile phone coverage. According to Maryam, they eventually reached a temporary shelter, where they were able to recharge a mobile phone and re-establish communication. They contacted Ahmed's family and the POPH emergency line, reporting what had happened, providing information about Ahmed's last known location, and requesting assistance in locating him.

Humanitarian actors attempted to verify the reported location. The coordinates indicated an area within a strictly protected nature reserve, with limited access and little or no mobile network coverage. Reaching and systematically searching the site required detailed knowledge of the reserve and specialised off-grid navigation equipment.

On the 21st of February 2022, six days after Ahmed's location had been reported to the Border Guard, biologist Rafał Kowalczyk came across a body while conducting field research on forest animals in the Kozłowe Borki Nature Reserve. The body was found at the location described by Ahmed's travelling companions, on a small, elevated patch of vegetation surrounded by water. The clothing, including a distinctive yellow jacket, matched the description previously provided by the group, giving the first indication that the deceased was Ahmed. The location of the body also established that, following the group's request for assistance on the 15th of February, the Border Guard had not reached the place where Ahmed had been left.

441 K. Czarnota and M. Górczyńska, The Lawless Zone: Polish–Belarusian Border Monitoring (Warsaw: Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 2022), https://hfhr.pl/upload/2023/09/the-lawless-zone.pdf.



Figure A.21. Screenshot from the HFHR report The Lawless Zone: Polish–Belarusian Border Monitoring, showing Ahmed Al-Shawafi at the location where his body was found on 21 February 2022. His clothing, including the distinctive yellow jacket, corresponded with the description previously provided by his travelling companions. Screenshot from Report, The Lawless Zone 2022.[441]

With no mobile phone coverage at the site, Kowalczyk had to leave the reserve to notify the police. Police and representatives of the prosecutor's office subsequently attended the scene. The prosecutorial investigation established hypothermia as the immediate physiological cause of Ahmed's death but did not reconstruct the broader sequence of events, conditions and actions preceding it.

When our research team returned to the site with Kowalczyk on the 6th of March 2025, more than three years later, material traces of the group's passage remained along the reconstructed route, including backpacks, food, children's clothing and footwear, some partially covered by vegetation. Their continued presence indicates that these objects had not been collected as evidence during the investigation.



Figure A.22. Belongings found at the reconstructed location where Ahmed's group exited the Leśna Prawa River. According to the spatial reconstruction, some of these objects had been left by members of the group after crossing the river on 15 February 2022. They remained at the site more than three years later, when the investigation team documented the location on 6 March 2025. Photograph by Peter Teunissen, 2025.

On the 14th of March 2022, Ahmed Al-Shawafi was buried at the Muslim cemetery in Bohoniki. His family could not travel to Poland to attend the funeral, while the cost of repatriating his body to Yemen was beyond their financial means. Unable either to bring Ahmed home or to be physically present at his burial, his family participated in the ceremony remotely.



• Fot. Agnieszka Sadowska / Agencja Wyborcza.pl



• Fot. Agnieszka Sadowska / Agencja Wyborcza.pl

Figure A.23. Screenshot of an article reporting on Ahmed Al-Shawafi's funeral at the Muslim cemetery in Bohoniki on 14 March 2022. Photographs by Agnieszka Sadowska.[442]

442 M. Chołodowski, "Kryzys na granicy polsko-białoruskiej. Już piąty pogrzeb uchodźcy na mizarze w Bohonikach" [Crisis at the Polish–Belarusian Border: Already the Fifth Refugee Funeral at the Mizar in Bohoniki], Gazeta Wyborcza, 14 March 2022, https://bialystok.wyborcza.pl/bialystok/7,35241,28221585,kryzys-na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej-juz-piaty-pogrzeb-uchodzcy.html.

Conclusion

Ahmed's death cannot be reduced to hypothermia as an isolated medical event. Hypothermia describes the terminal physiological process, but not the chain of events and conditions that produced and prolonged his exposure. After repeated pushbacks, Ahmed entered the wetlands of the Białowieża Forest, where low temperatures, waterlogged terrain, immersion in cold water and limited mobile coverage compounded exhaustion and restricted access to assistance. When he collapsed, his companions left the site to seek help and reported his location to the Polish Border Guard. The officers did not proceed to the indicated location or verify his condition; instead, the group was pushed back to Belarus. Six days later, Ahmed's body remained at the same location. His death thus emerged at the intersection of environmental exposure and border enforcement: the terrain became lethal not by itself, but through practices that repeatedly exposed people to it while obstructing their access to safety and rescue.

The Death of Yassin Sattar Jabr

- Age at the time of death: 24
- Country of origin: Iraq
- Date the body was found: 24 March 2022
- Exact date of death: Undetermined
- Location: Forest area near Białowieża, within a restricted zone.



Figure A.24. Photograph of Yassin Sattar Jabr, provided by his family. Photograph shared by Piotr Czaban.

Summary

Yassin Sattar Jabr, an Iraqi national, travelled through Belarus and Poland as part of a group that included Jaafar Yassin Mohammed Al-Saadi. According to Jaafar's account, he and Yassin crossed the Polish–Belarusian border on multiple occasions in 2021 and were repeatedly pushed back from Poland to Belarus by the Polish Border Guard. The available evidence does not establish the precise number or dates of

these pushbacks. On the 19th of October 2021, forestry workers encountered Yassin and Jaafar in the Białowieża Forest after Jaafar became ill and required medical assistance. An ambulance and the Polish Border Guard were called. Jaafar was taken by ambulance to hospital, while Yassin was taken away in a Polish Border Guard vehicle. This was the last time Jaafar saw Yassin alive.

More than five months later, on 24 March 2022, unidentified human remains were found by employees of the State Forests near Białowieża, approximately 28 kilometres from Yassin's last confirmed location. The site was in an area subject to state-imposed access restrictions at the time. The remains were in an advanced state of decomposition and partially skeletonised, making visual identification impossible. Fragments of clothing, a necklace, a mobile phone, and a phone case containing a photograph were recovered with them.

The Polish authorities did not initially establish the identity of the deceased or connect the remains with Yassin's disappearance. Identification became possible after the photograph recovered with the remains circulated through the Iraqi Embassy, families searching for missing relatives, independent journalists and transnational networks of contacts. The man depicted in the photograph was identified as Yassin, his family was located, and DNA comparison subsequently confirmed that the remains were his. At the family's request, Yassin's remains were later repatriated to Iraq.

This reconstruction draws on publicly available materials published by Polish journalist Piotr Czaban; interviews with Jaafar Yassin Mohammed Al-Saadi, who travelled with Yassin and was the last known person to see him alive; and accounts from medical professionals and humanitarian organisations operating in the border region.

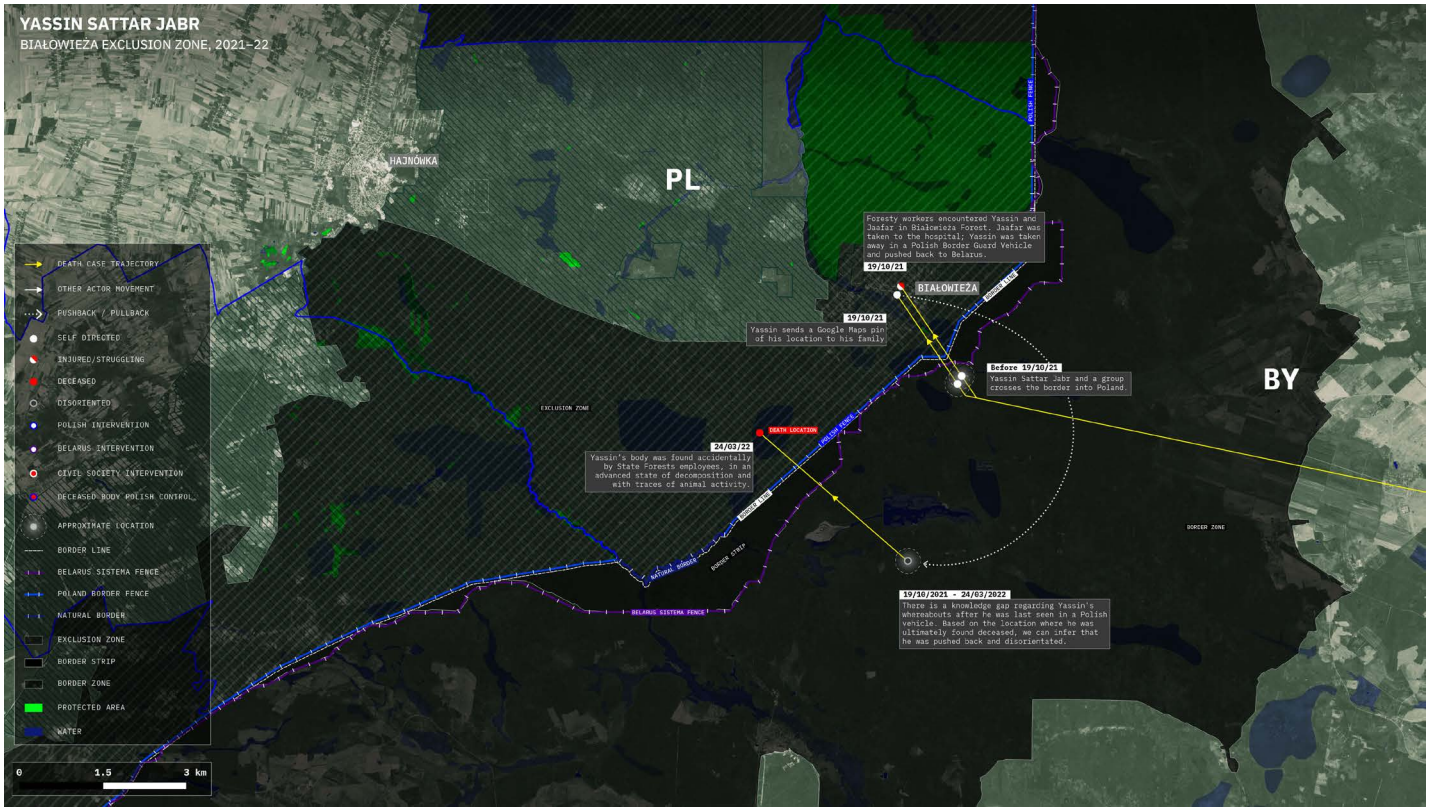


Figure A.25. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Yassin Sattar Jabr. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Chain of events

The exact date on which Yassin Sattar Jabr began his journey towards the Polish–Belarusian border, or first crossed into Poland, has not been established. Around the beginning of October 2021, he was travelling in the border area in a group of four men, including Jaafar Yassin Mohammed Al-Saadi. At some point, two members of the group separated from Yassin and Jaafar, who continued travelling together.

According to Jaafar's account, as later documented by Polish journalist Piotr Czaban, he and Yassin crossed the Polish–Belarusian border on multiple occasions and were repeatedly pushed back from Poland to Belarus by the Polish Border Guard. The available evidence does not establish the dates or precise number of these crossings and pushbacks.



Figure A.26. Photograph showing Yassin Sattar Jabr (left) resting in a forest during his journey through Poland. The photograph was later provided to journalist Piotr Czaban by one of Yassin's travelling companions. The image contains no metadata or geolocation data; the forest is believed to be Białowieża Forest, but its precise location cannot be independently established. Photograph shared by Piotr Czaban.

On the 19th of October 2021, Yassin was in the Białowieża Forest, on the Polish side of the border, with Jaafar Yassin Mohammed Al-Saadi. After Jaafar became ill, forestry workers encountered the two men and called an ambulance and the Polish Border Guard. Jaafar was taken by ambulance to hospital, while Yassin was taken away in a Polish Border Guard vehicle. This was the last time Jaafar saw Yassin alive. From that point onwards, contact with Yassin was lost.

Yassin's whereabouts after he was seen in a Polish Border Guard vehicle on the 19th of October 2021 remain unknown. Based on the available evidence, and recuring documented practices, we consider it likely that he was subsequently subjected to an undocumented pushback to Belarus. Like many other people moving through the border area at the time, he may have spent part of this period hiding or moving through the forest. It is not known when, or under what circumstances, he crossed into Poland

again. His remains were eventually found on the Polish side of the border, approximately 28 kilometres from the location where he had last been seen alive.

On the 24th of March 2022, unidentified human remains were accidentally discovered by employees of the State Forests near a forest path outside Białowieża. Police officers, a prosecutor, and a forensic medical examiner attended the scene. As subsequently documented by journalist Piotr Czaban, the remains were in an advanced state of decomposition and partially skeletonised, with evidence of animal scavenging. The condition of the remains made visual identification impossible and was consistent with prolonged environmental exposure over several months. Fragments of clothing, a necklace, a mobile phone, and a phone case containing a photograph were recovered with the remains.

At the time of the discovery, the site was in an area subject to state-imposed access restrictions. Access was restricted primarily to state authorities, including the Border Guard, military, and police, while local residents retained access. The discovery site was approximately 28 kilometres from the location where Yassin had last been seen alive on the 19th of October 2021.

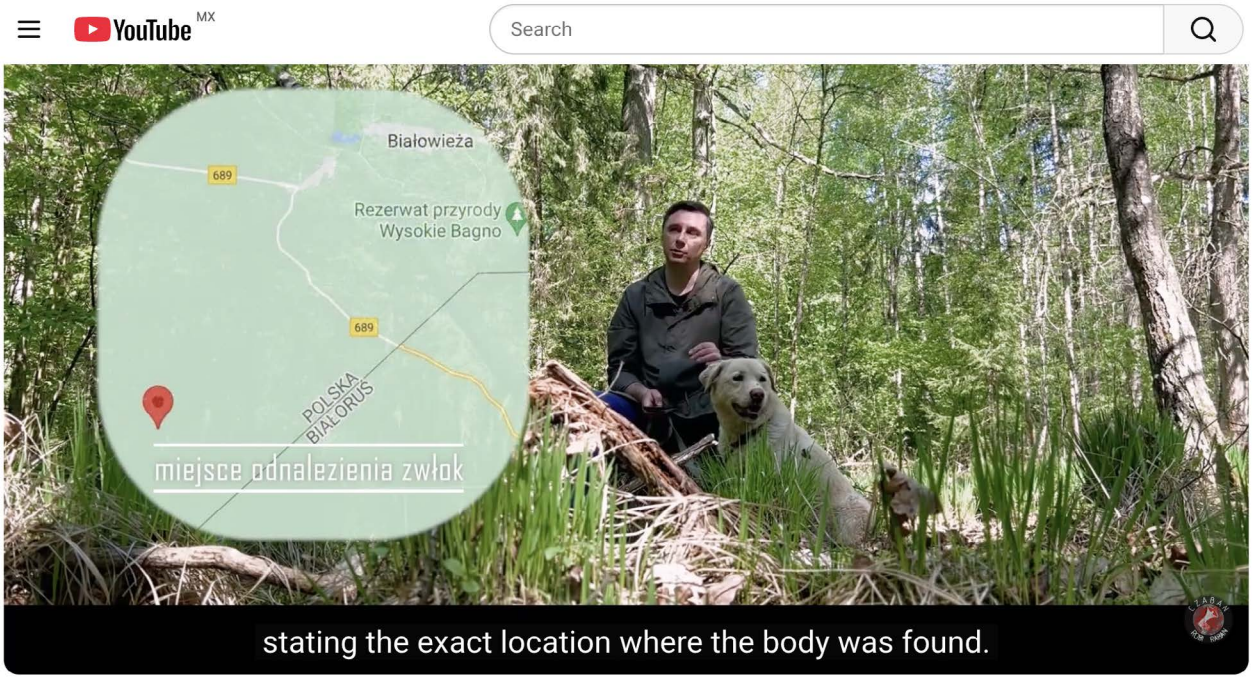


Figure A.27. Screenshot from a video report by Polish journalist Piotr Czaban, documenting the location where unidentified human remains were found near Białowieża on 24 March 2022. The map displayed in the video indicates the discovery site in relation to Białowieża and the Polish–Belarusian border. The remains were later identified as those of Yassin Sattar Jabbar. Screengrab from a video by Piotr Czaban, Czaban robi raban, YouTube.

Following the discovery of the unidentified remains, Piotr Czaban contacted the prosecutor's office to establish what steps were being taken to identify the deceased. He informed the authorities that numerous families were searching for relatives who had disappeared in the Polish–Belarusian border region and that he was already in direct contact with some of them. He requested that photographs of the belongings recovered with the remains be made available to these families to support possible identification.

In a subsequent phone conversation, Czaban learned that a mobile phone and a phone case containing a photograph of a bearded man had been recovered with the remains. He also contacted the Iraqi Embassy in Poland, providing information on how it could liaise with the prosecutor's office and families searching for missing relatives. In parallel, Czaban began documenting the case through his own social media and continued seeking information that could connect the unidentified deceased with one of the missing persons.

On the 30th of March, the Iraqi Embassy in Poland contacted Czaban, creating a further channel for exchanging information concerning missing Iraqi nationals and their families. In parallel, Czaban continued documenting the case publicly and remained in contact with families searching for missing relatives in the border region.

By May 2022, the photograph recovered with the unidentified remains

had started circulating separately through the Iraqi Embassy in Poland. The Embassy shared the material with an Iraqi family searching for a missing relative, who in turn passed it on to Halgord Omar Press, an Iraqi journalist assisting families searching for missing people in the Polish–Belarusian border region.

On the 13th of May, Halgord published the photograph on his public Facebook profile, asking for assistance in identifying the deceased. Piotr Czaban, who had previously learned from the prosecutor's office that a photograph had been recovered with the remains found near Białowieża, recognised it as relating to the same case and contacted Halgord. The public circulation of the photograph created a new identification pathway.

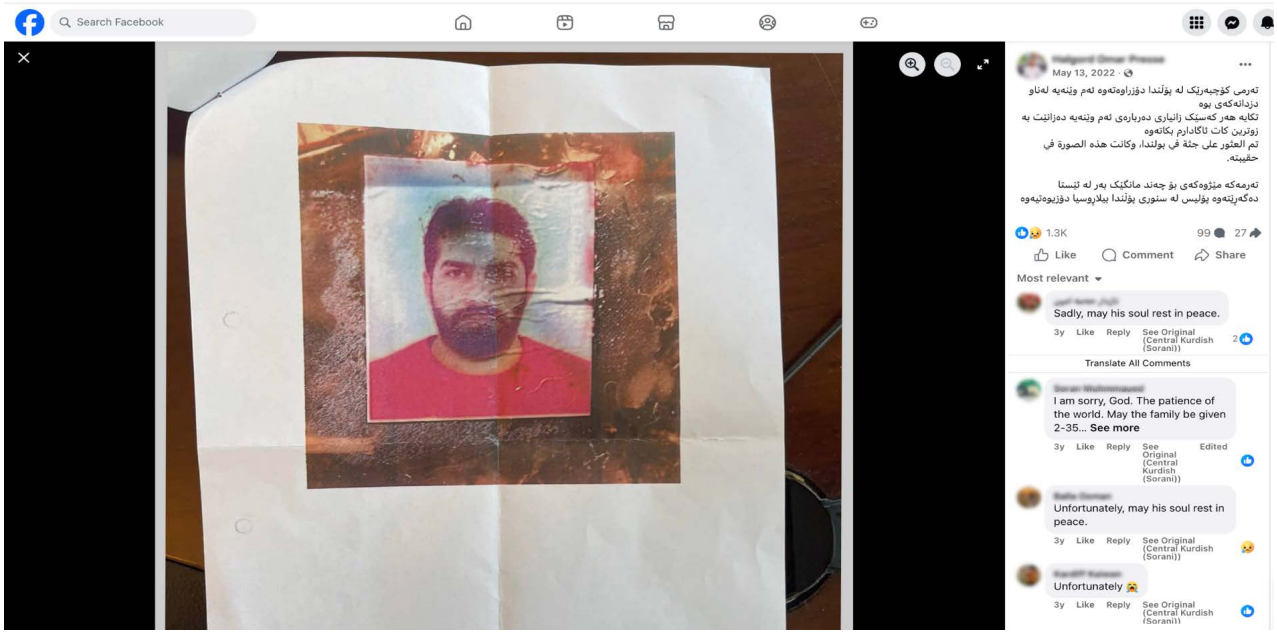


Figure A.28. Screenshot of a public Facebook post by Halgord Omar Press, published 13 May 2022, circulating the photograph recovered with the unidentified remains and requesting assistance in identifying the deceased. The post became a crucial link in the subsequent identification process. Screenshot from Halgord Omar Press, Facebook, 13 May 2022.

By the 14th of May, the man in the photograph had been identified as Yassin Sattar Jabr. His identity was confirmed by an acquaintance who knew him personally. Czaban published the finding on his social media and informed the Iraqi Embassy, which was to contact Yassin's family. At this stage, however, the identification concerned the man depicted in the photograph; it had not yet been established that the remains found near Białowieża were Yassin's.

Through the independent efforts of Piotr Czaban and Halgord Omar Press, together with families searching for missing relatives and their transnational networks of contacts, the photograph recovered with the remains was linked to Yassin Sattar Jabr and his family was located. Czaban informed the Polish authorities of the findings and requested DNA testing. DNA samples provided by Yassin's family were subsequently transferred from Iraq to Poland, where forensic comparison confirmed that the remains were those of Yassin Sattar Jabr.

At the family's request, Yassin's remains were later repatriated to Iraq. The investigation into the circumstances of his death was conducted by the Polish District Prosecutor's Office in Suwałki and was subsequently discontinued, as the investigation did not establish sufficient grounds to attribute criminal responsibility for his death.



Figure A.29. Screenshot of a Facebook post by Piotr Czaban, published 11 July 2024, showing the grave of Yassin Sattar Jabr in Iraq, two years after his burial. Czaban received the photograph while remaining in contact with Yassin's family. Screenshot from Piotr Czaban, Facebook, 11 July 2024.

Two years after Yassin's burial in Iraq, Piotr Czaban remained in contact with his family. The continued exchange illustrates how responsibilities extending beyond identification – including maintaining contact with relatives and preserving information about the deceased – were in practice carried out largely by journalists and civil society actors rather than state institutions.

Conclusion

Yassin was last seen alive after being taken away in a Polish Border Guard vehicle. What happened to him afterwards was not documented. Given the repeated pushbacks previously described by his companion, an undocumented return to Belarus remains a plausible explanation. His remains were found more than five months later, on the Polish side of the border, approximately 28 kilometres from his last confirmed location.

The available evidence does not allow his movements between these two points to be reconstructed. The condition of the remains is consistent with prolonged environmental exposure during the winter period.

The identification process reveals a second evidentiary gap. Although potentially identifying belongings were recovered with the remains, they were not initially connected to Yassin. His identity was established only after information circulated through journalists, families searching for missing relatives and transnational contacts, and was then formally confirmed through DNA testing.

The Death of Mahlet Kassa

- Age at the time of death: 28
- Country of origin: Ethiopia
- Date of the request for help: February 3, 2023
- Date the body was found: February 12, 2023
- Exact date of death: unknown



Figure C.2. Portrait of Mahlet Kassa. Unknown Photographer, date unknown. [10]

443 Photo courtesy of Hope&Humanity Poland/Facebook, as published in Gazeta Wyborcza (Białystok), accessed August 31, 2026, https://bialystok.wyborcza.pl/bialystok/51,35241,29522102.html.

Summary

Between the 2nd and 3rd of February 2023, Mahlet Kassa, a 28-year-old Ethiopian woman, travelled with a group of ten people attempting to cross the Polish–Belarusian border through the Białowieża Forest. According to her travelling companions, Mahlet crossed into Poland during the early morning hours of the 3rd of February.

On the 3rd of February, after Mahlet's physical condition had deteriorated and she became unable to continue walking, two of her companions left the forest and walked to the nearby Polish town of Hajnówka, located only a short distance away, to seek assistance. They informed Polish state officials – the Police and Border Guard – that Mahlet had been left behind in the forest in a critical condition and provided information about her location. Despite receiving this information, no search-and-rescue operation was initiated. Her companions were subsequently subjected to an undocumented pushback to Belarus. Nine days later, on the 12th of February 2023, Mahlet was found dead in a forest near Hajnówka by members of the civil society search-and-rescue group POPH.

This reconstruction is based on multiple sources, including geolocation and OSINT analysis; information provided by Mahlet Kassa's family in the United States and Ethiopia; evidence and testimonies from Hope and Humanity, POPH activists and investigative journalist Piotr Czaban; and materials from legal proceedings concerning the pushback of Mahlet's travelling companions and the circumstances of her death.

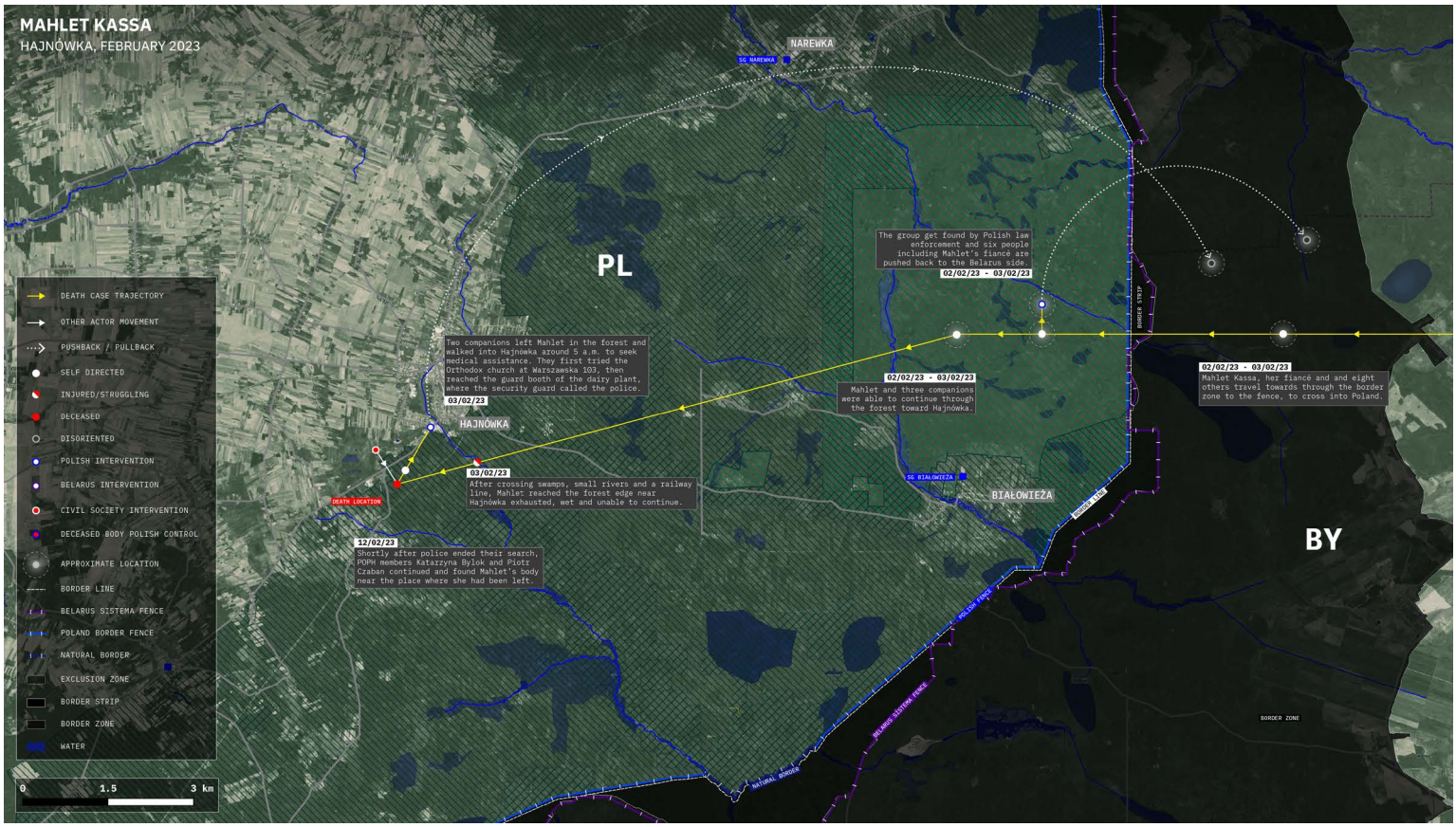


Figure A.30. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Mahlet Kassa. Map by Border Forensics 2026.

Chain of events

According to the documented accounts of Mahlet Kassa's travelling companions, between the 2nd and 3rd of February 2023, Mahlet, a 28-year-old woman from Welkait in Ethiopia's Tigray region, and her fiancé, Abel Behailu, were travelling in a group of ten people attempting to cross the Polish–Belarusian border through the Białowieża Forest. The precise location of their crossing has not been established.

During the night of 2–3 February, six members of the group, including Abel, were intercepted by Polish Border Guard officers and returned to Belarus despite expressing their intention to seek international protection. Mahlet and three other members of the group avoided interception and remained hidden in the forest.

Mahlet and the three remaining members of the group continued moving through the Białowieża Forest towards Hajnówka, crossing wetlands, small watercourses and a railway line. By the early morning of the 3rd of February, they had reached a forested area close to the outskirts of the town. They stopped and hid among fallen trees approximately 700 metres from Primary School No. 3 in Hajnówka.

According to the documented accounts of her travelling companions, by this point Mahlet's physical condition had severely deteriorated. She was struggling to breathe and was no longer able to walk or stand. Her clothes were wet after the group had crossed waterlogged terrain and small watercourses, and she was physically exhausted.

Meteorological model data for the Hajnówka area indicate temperatures below 0°C during the night and early morning of the 3rd of February, together with wind and precipitation. While these data do not represent direct measurements at Mahlet's location, they provide an indication of the environmental conditions in the area at the time. For a person already exhausted, unable to move and wearing wet clothing, exposure to such conditions substantially increases heat loss and the risk of hypothermia. Mahlet was unable to continue and remained in the forest while her companions sought assistance.

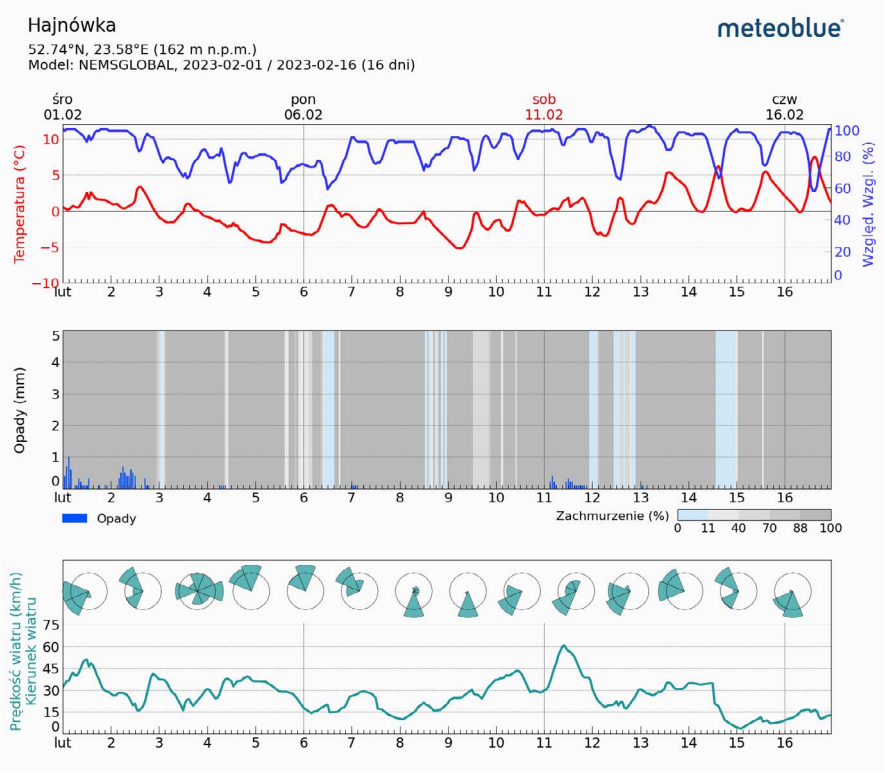


Figure A.31. Meteorological model data for the Hajnówka area, 1–16 February 2023. The model indicates temperatures falling below 0°C during the night and early morning of 3 February, together with wind and precipitation. The data provide an indicative reconstruction of weather conditions in the area rather than direct measurements from Mahlet Kassa's location. Graph: meteoblue, "Historical Weather Data: Hajnówka, Poland," meteoblue.com.

Given Mahlet's condition, the group decided that two of her travelling companions would leave the forest to seek medical assistance, while the third would remain with her. From the place where Mahlet remained waiting for help, the two men reached nearby Hajnówka within only a few minutes. They entered the town at around 4:00–5:00 a.m., while it was still dark. According to the documented account of one of the two companions who went to seek help, the streets were still dark and largely empty. The two men first attempted to obtain assistance by knocking on the door of the Orthodox church at 103 Warszawska Street, but received no response. They then noticed a light across the street in the security booth of a nearby dairy plant and approached the security guard to ask for help.

After being informed about Mahlet's condition, the security guard called the Police. A police patrol arrived approximately fifteen minutes later and subsequently notified the Polish Border Guard. The two companions informed both the Police and Border Guard officers about Mahlet's location and her critical condition. They repeatedly requested immediate medical assistance, explaining that they feared she was dying.

Spatial analysis places the events within the immediate vicinity of Hajnówka. The forest in which Mahlet and her companions stopped extended to the edge of the town, while residential areas, roads and other civilian infrastructure were located nearby. The map shows the location

where Mahlet's body was subsequently found in relation to Hajnówka, the surrounding forest and wetlands, the church where her companions first attempted to seek help, and the hospital.

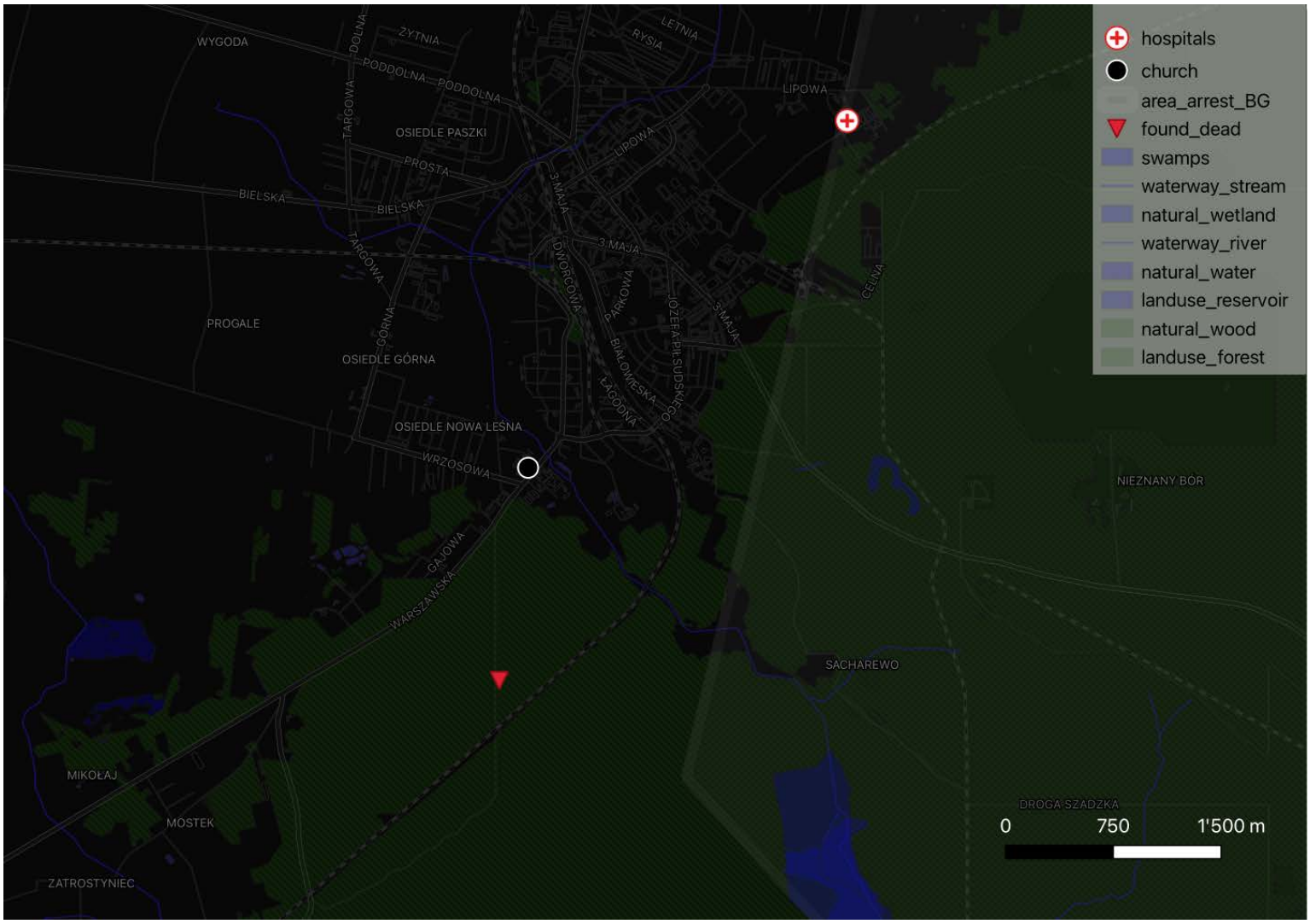


Figure A.32. Spatial reconstruction of Mahlet Kassa's case in relation to Hajnówka. The map situates the forest environment in which Mahlet remained in relation to the town, the church where her companions initially sought assistance, and the local hospital. The red marker indicates the location where Mahlet's body was found on 12 February 2023. The reconstruction demonstrates the close spatial relationship between the forest, the urban area where assistance was sought, and the site where Mahlet Kassa was subsequently found dead. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

This spatial proximity is significant for reconstructing the events of the 3rd of February. Although Mahlet remained in a forest environment, she was not in a remote part of the Białowieża Forest. Her companions were able to leave her location and reach the built-up area of Hajnówka within minutes, where they sought assistance and came into contact with Polish state officials. Information about Mahlet's critical condition and location was therefore communicated from within the town while she remained nearby in the forest.

Despite receiving this information directly from two people who knew where Mahlet was located, no search-and-rescue operation was initiated. According to the companions' testimony, state officials briefly walked several metres in the indicated direction, using flashlights, before returning and stating that no one was there. These actions were subsequently presented by state officials as search activities.

The two companions who had sought help were subsequently subjected to a pushback to Belarus, while Mahlet remained nearby in the forest in a critical condition without medical assistance. State officials later maintained that they had been unable to establish Mahlet's precise location. However, by that point, the two people who knew where she was and could have guided them directly to her had already been pushed back to Belarus. The inability to locate Mahlet therefore cannot be separated from the removal of the very witnesses who could have led state officials to rescue her.

Approximately the 10th of February – the precise date has not been established – Mahlet's travelling companions, who were in Belarus following their pushback, succeeded in contacting Mahlet's family as well as civil society emergency networks operating at the border. They established contact with activists from the Podlasie Volunteer Rescue Service (POPH) and with Małgorzata Rychalska from the civil society organisation Hope and Humanity.

The travel companions informed them that Mahlet had been left in the forest in a critical condition and required urgent medical assistance. They also provided information about the place where she had remained, including a screenshot of a map indicating her approximate location. This information mobilised civil society efforts to locate Mahlet.

On the morning of the 12th of February, investigative journalist Piotr Czaban went to the Police station in Hajnówka to report Mahlet missing

and provide the information available about her last known location. Only following this report did the Police initiate a search for Mahlet. A police search team subsequently entered the area and searched for several hours before ending the operation.

444 Piotr Czaban, YouTube video, Czaban robi raban, 12 February 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JgJUjZMKOc.



Figure A.33. Still from video footage documenting the moment Katarzyna Bylok and Piotr Czaban located Mahlet Kassa's body during their search on 12 February 2023. The footage records the moment they first saw Mahlet from a distance. Subsequent images of her body were deliberately not published, in order to preserve her dignity. Screengrab from a video recorded by Piotr Czaban, 12 February 2023, published on Czaban robi raban, YouTube.[444]

Katarzyna Bylok from POPH and Piotr Czaban continued searching after the police operation had ended. Later that day, they found Mahlet Kassa's body among the trees beside a forest road, approximately 700 metres from Primary School No. 3 in Hajnówka. The location corresponded to the place where Mahlet had been left on the 3rd of February while her companions went to seek assistance. Bylok and Czaban recognised Mahlet from a photograph provided by her family and from the distinctive red jacket she had been wearing. The position of her body and her jacket having been removed suggested she had felt extreme heat shortly before death – a symptom typical of late-stage hypothermia. An Orthodox prayer book was found beside her. After finding Mahlet's body, Bylok and Czaban notified the Police. Police officers, paramedics, forensic technicians and a

prosecutor subsequently arrived at the scene. Paramedics confirmed her death, and the site was documented and secured for further investigation.

Following the discovery of Mahlet Kassa's body on the 12th of February 2023, civil society actors (POPH and Hope and Humanity) informed her family and remained in contact with them throughout the identification and repatriation process. Mahlet was initially recognised by her family from photographs. Formal identification, however, required additional procedures involving Polish institutions and the Ethiopian diplomatic representation in Germany, as Ethiopia has no embassy in Poland. Civil society actors assisted Mahlet's family in navigating these procedures and maintaining communication with the institutions involved.

Following the identification, civil society organisations worked with Mahlet's family to organise the repatriation of her body to Ethiopia. A public fundraiser was launched to cover the costs of transporting her remains.

Mahlet's funeral took place in Ethiopia in March 2023. Thousands of people participated in the funeral procession, which also became a public demand for accountability for the circumstances of her death. Mourners carried banners calling for justice from the Polish state and Border Guard, including the statement: "We need justice from Poland and the Border Guard."



Figure A.34. Mahlet Kassa's funeral in Ethiopia, March 2023, also became a space for publicly demanding accountability for the circumstances of her death. Family members and mourners carried photographs of Mahlet and banners addressed to the Polish state and Border Guard, including one reading: "We need justice from Poland and Border Guard." Thousands of people gathered to mourn her death following the repatriation of her body from Poland. The scale of the gathering demonstrates how the consequences of Mahlet's death extended beyond the Poland–Belarus border, mobilising her family and local community in Ethiopia. Screengrab from a video by Piotr Czaban.



Figure A.35. Mahlet Kassa's funeral in Ethiopia, March 2023. Thousands of people gathered to mourn her death following the repatriation of her body from Poland. The scale of the gathering demonstrated how the consequences of Mahlet's death extended beyond the Poland–Belarus border, mobilising her family and local community in Ethiopia. Screengrab from a video by Piotr Czaban, "Pogrzeb Mahlet Kassy | Chcemy sprawiedliwości dla Straży Granicznej," Czaban robi raban, YouTube.

Conclusion

Mahlet Kassa's case demonstrates how the actions and omissions of state actors transformed environmental exposure into a lethal condition, and how the imperatives of border enforcement displaced the obligation to rescue. At the time her companions sought assistance, Mahlet was alive. She was in a forested area immediately adjacent to Hajnówka, unable to continue walking and waiting for help. Two companions reached the town within minutes, informed state officials of her critical condition and location, and explicitly requested urgent medical assistance. Yet their report of a woman in immediate danger did not trigger an effective search-and-rescue response. Instead, the encounter was processed through the logic of migration criminalisation: the two men seeking help were treated as subjects of border enforcement and pushed back to Belarus.

This sequence is central to understanding Mahlet's death. The same racialised border regime that rendered her companions deportable also removed the two witnesses who knew where she was and could have led state officials directly to her. State officials later maintained that Mahlet's precise location could not be established. This reconstruction demonstrates that this inability was produced, at least in part, by the border-enforcement operation itself: the people capable of locating Mahlet had been removed from Polish territory rather than incorporated into a rescue operation.

Nine days later, Mahlet's body was found in the same area where she had remained while her companions sought help. Her death cannot therefore be understood as an inevitable consequence of winter, forest terrain or geographical remoteness. Assistance was sought while she was alive; state officials were informed that her life was in immediate danger; and the people capable of leading rescuers to her were present. The case exposes how the criminalisation and racialised governance of migration can reorganise the institutional response to a person in mortal danger: a situation requiring rescue was treated as a situation requiring border enforcement. In Mahlet Kassa's case, that transformation had lethal consequences.

Death of Mohammad Jan Goorbaz

- Age at the time of death: 27
- Country of origin: Afghanistan
- Date of the request for help: 20 February 2023
- Date the missing person report was filed: 20 February 2023 (initially refused)
- Date the search team was denied access to the Strict Reserve: 21 February 2023
- Date the body was found: 22 March 2023
- Exact date of death: Unknown
- Location: Strict Reserve of the Białowieża National Park, Poland



Figure A.36. Photograph of Mohammad Jan Goorbaz, provided by his family following his death in Poland.

Summary

Based on information received and documented by the Podlasie Volunteer Rescue Service (POPH) during the intervention, this investigation reconstructs the disappearance and subsequent death of Mohammad Jan Goorbaz, a 27-year-old Afghan national, in the Białowieża Forest in February 2023. The area in which he disappeared included wetlands, waterways and difficult forest terrain, with limited mobile phone coverage and challenging navigation.

On the evening of the 20th of February, POPH received information that Mohammad was alive in the Białowieża Forest but in a critical condition. According to the information transmitted during the intervention, he had been ill, suffering from cold exposure and unable to move independently for approximately three days. Given the immediate risk to his life, the winter weather conditions and the difficulty of the terrain, civil society actors attempted to initiate an urgent search-and-rescue operation and notified the Police.

The Police initially refused to accept a missing person report and redirected responsibility to the Polish Border Guard. Civil society actors nevertheless continued attempting to reach Mohammad. Because his reported location was within the Strict Reserve of the Białowieża National Park, they mobilised biologists and field researchers with extensive knowledge of the forest, including experience in navigating wetlands and other difficult terrain. In the early morning of the 21st of February, however, the three-person search team was stopped by National Park guards and denied access to the reserve.

Following the denial of access, civil society actors continued efforts to establish Mohammad's whereabouts. On the 22nd of March 2023, approximately one month after the initial distress information had been received, his body was located within the Strict Reserve by a search group involving scientists and civil society actors. The body was found close to, but not exactly, at the location initially indicated during the intervention. This spatial discrepancy suggests that Mohammad may have remained alive and continued moving through the forest after the initial distress information was transmitted.

This reconstruction is based on an analysis of documentation and interviews with members of the Podlasie Volunteer Rescue Service (POPH), members of the search teams, and other individuals involved in attempts to locate Mohammad, as well as documentation and materials collected

by investigative journalist Piotr Czaban.

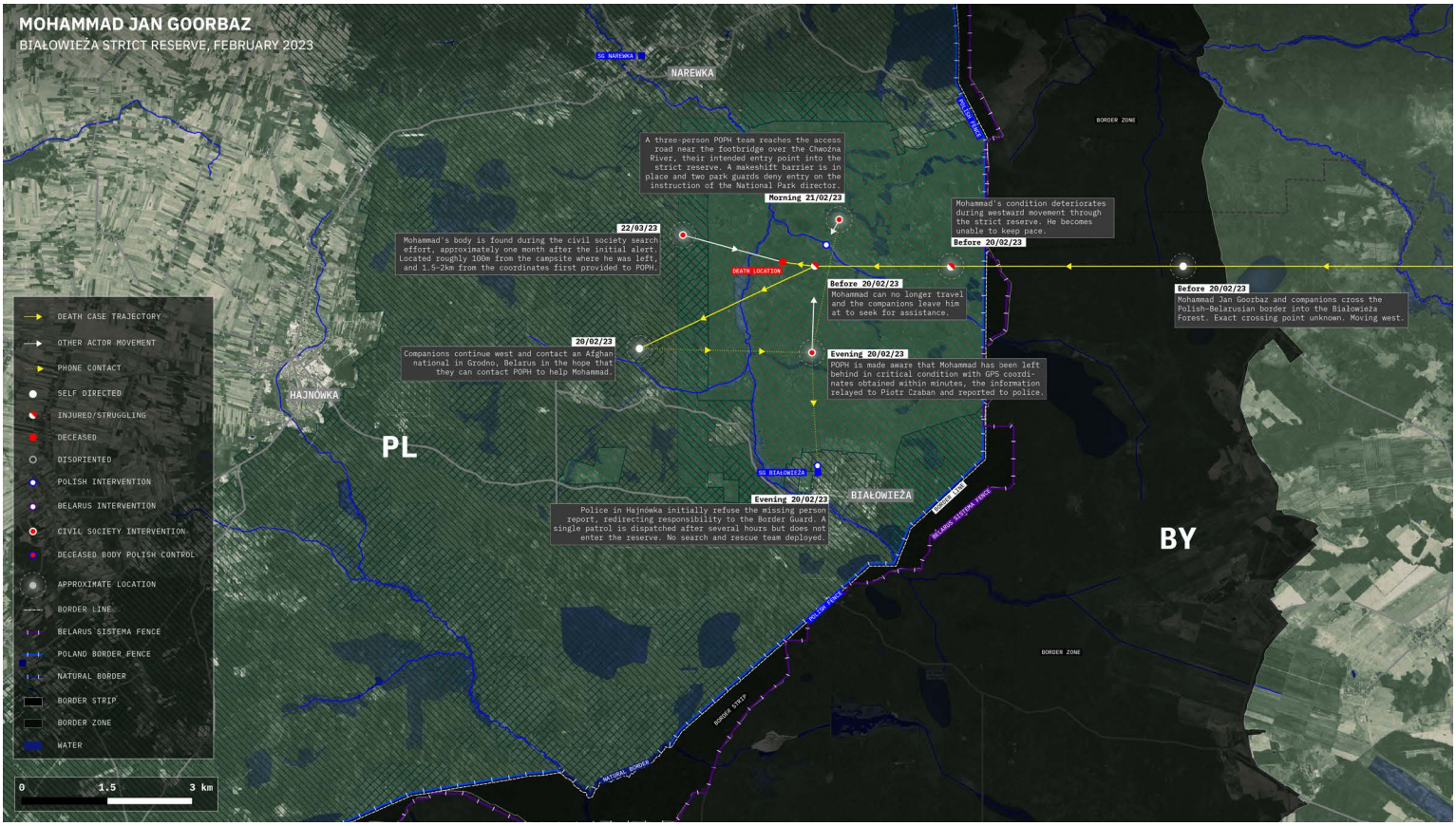


Figure A.37. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Mohammad Jan Goorbaz. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Chain of events

According to information reconstructed from the accounts of people involved in humanitarian interventions at the border, Mohammad Jan Goorbaz, an Afghan national, crossed the Polish–Belarusian border into Poland in February 2023 and entered the Białowieża Forest. The precise date of his crossing and the number of days he had already spent in the border area before the distress alert on the 20th of February have not been established.

At approximately 21:20 on the 20th of February, POPH received an urgent request for assistance for Mohammad. The information transmitted to POPH indicated that he was alone in the Białowieża Forest, too exhausted and unwell to continue walking independently, and was lying wrapped in a blanket near fallen trees and wetlands. Coordinates provided to POPH indicated that he might have been located within the Strict Reserve of the

Białowieża National Park. POPH notified the Police of the need to initiate an urgent search-and-rescue operation. According to Piotr Czaban and other accounts collected for this investigation, the Police initially refused to accept a missing person report and redirected the case to the Polish Border Guard.

Several hours after the initial alert, a single police patrol was dispatched. A small POPH team attempted to reach the indicated area, but the night-time conditions made an effective search extremely difficult: it was dark, cold and slippery, visibility was poor, and their vehicle slid into a ditch. The police patrol did not enter the Strict Reserve, and no specialised police search-and-rescue team nor technical resources such as drones nor helicopters were deployed.

Unable to continue the search effectively, POPH suspended the operation until early the following morning. Given the difficult terrain and weather conditions, they sought assistance from researchers with extensive knowledge of the Białowieża Forest and experience navigating the Strict Reserve and wetland terrain. A three-person team was organised to resume the search in the morning.

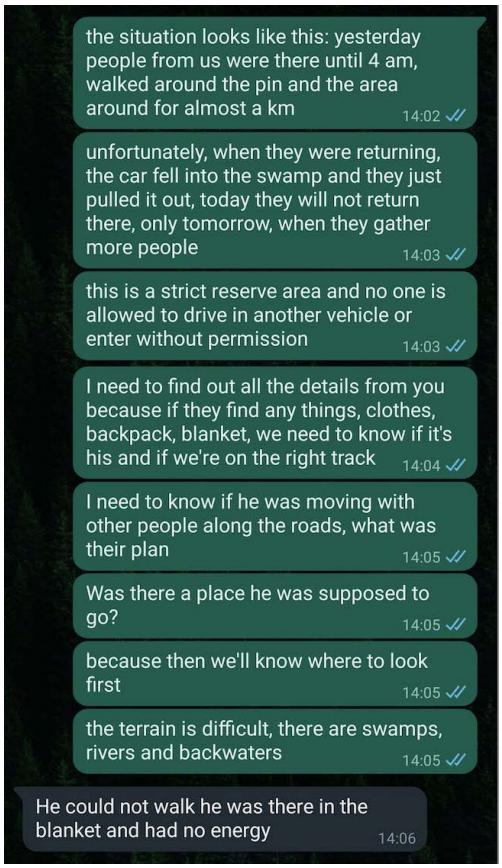


Figure A.38. Screenshot of a conversation with the POPH emergency line documenting the search for Mohammad. The messages describe the night-time search conducted until approximately 4:00 a.m., the search vehicle becoming stuck in wetland terrain, restricted access to the Strict Reserve, and the presence of swamps, rivers, and backwaters in the search area. The conversation also records information that Mohammad was unable to walk and had remained wrapped in a blanket without the strength to continue. Screenshot of the Podlasie Volunteer Rescue Service (POPH).

At approximately 5:00 am on the 21st of February, a three-person search team set out to resume the search for Mohammad. The team drove as close as possible to the footbridge over the Chwoźna River, which they intended to use to enter the Strict Reserve of the Białowieża National Park. When they reached the access point, they found the passage physically blocked by a makeshift barrier, with two National Park guards stationed at the site.

According to members of the search team, neither the barrier nor the presence of Park guards at this location was usual. It followed further communication between the Police and the National Park concerning the planned search the previous night. According to Piotr Czaban, during a telephone conversation that night, a police officer had assured him that a three-person search team would be allowed to enter the Strict Reserve. However, when the team arrived the following morning the guards informed them that the director of the Białowieża National Park had not authorised their entry.

While the available evidence does not establish who ordered the guards to be stationed at the site, the physical obstruction of the access point and the presence of two guards there, following the previous night's

communication about the planned search, indicate that the Park authorities had prior knowledge of the intended entry and had taken measures to prevent access to the Strict Reserve.

Despite the reported risk to Mohammad's life, access remained denied. One of the researchers left the site to contact the Police. According to the accounts collected for this investigation, the Police contacted the National Park again, but permission for the search team to enter was not granted. The Police did not deploy their own search team or accompany the civil society team into the reserve. The civil society search and rescue team was instead informed that the Park Guard would search the area. The investigation has not identified documentation confirming whether such a search was subsequently carried out or establishing its scope. Unable to enter the Strict Reserve, the three-person search team withdrew. Later on, the 21st of February, Piotr Czaban from POPH established direct contact with the head of the Criminal Investigation Department at the Police station in Hajnówka, informing him that Mohammad might still be alive and in need of urgent assistance.

The weather conditions further increased the risks associated with Mohammad's reported physical condition. Historical weather data for Białowieża indicate temperatures of approximately 4–6°C on 20–21 February, combined with high relative humidity, precipitation and strong winds. These data represent conditions modelled for Białowieża rather than Mohammad's precise location within the Strict Reserve, where he was reported to be in wetland terrain. Photographs transmitted during the intervention also show that his clothing was wet. For a person already exhausted, unwell and unable to continue walking independently, prolonged immobility in wet clothing under these conditions substantially increased the risk of further heat loss and hypothermia. The photographs are not reproduced in this report in order to preserve Mohammad's dignity.

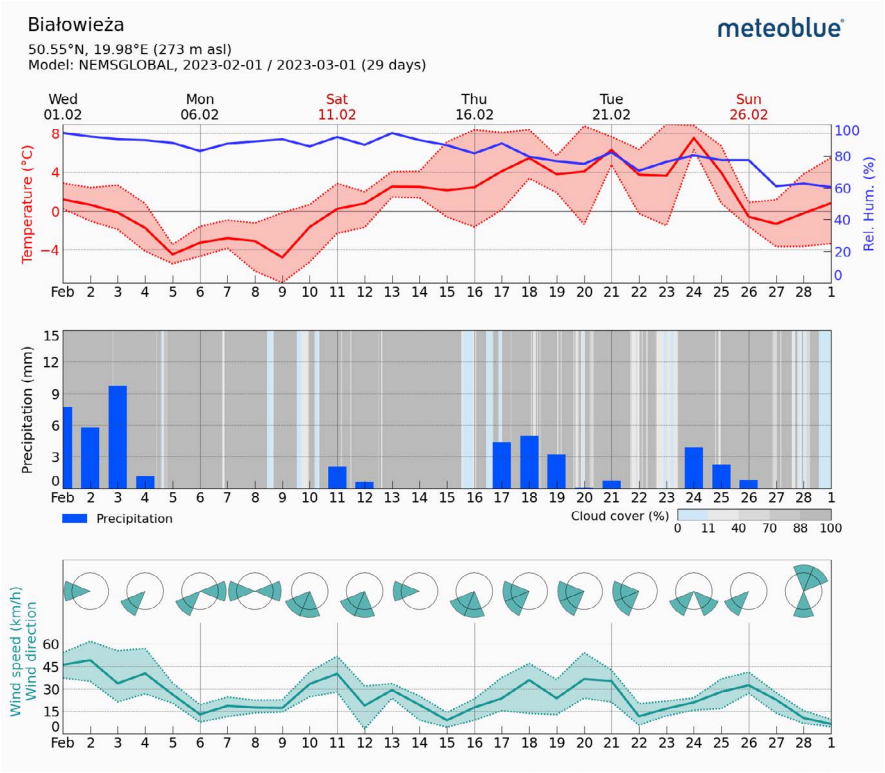


Figure A.39. Modelled weather conditions for Białowieża, February 2023. The data indicate temperatures of approximately 4–6°C, high relative humidity, precipitation, and strong winds on 20–21 February, when attempts to locate and rescue Mohammad were underway. The model represents conditions in Białowieża and not the specific wetland location within the Strict Reserve where Mohammad was reported to be. Graph: meteoblue, "Historical Weather Data: Białowieża, Poland," meteoblue.com.

Following the denial of access to the Strict Reserve, civil society actors continued attempts to locate Mohammad. POPH members, researchers, activists and local residents analysed maps, reconstructed possible movement routes and organised further searches in the Białowieża Forest.

During this period, despite the earlier distress alert, the missing person report and direct communication with the head of the Criminal Investigation Department of the Hajnówka Police, POPH received no information about a coordinated police search-and-rescue operation or the measures taken to locate Mohammad. According to the documentation and accounts collected for this investigation, no specialised police search operation involving search teams, drones or other rescue equipment was deployed in the area indicated by POPH.

While civil society actors continued reconstructing Mohammad's possible movements and searching the terrain, the state institutions that had been informed that his life might be at risk did not provide them with information indicating that an appropriate search-and-rescue operation was underway.



Figure A.40. The search for Mohammad was also documented by investigative journalist Piotr Czaban and subsequently published as part of a video report on his YouTube channel. This frame shows Katarzyna Bylok, then a member of the POPH search-and-rescue team, searching Białowieża Forest. The footage documents the difficult winter terrain encountered by the search teams, including flooded and wetland areas, snow, and fallen trees. Screengrab from a video by Piotr Czaban, Czaban robi raban, YouTube.

On the 22nd of March 2023, the civil society search team located Mohammad's body within the Strict Reserve, approximately two kilometres from the location initially indicated during the intervention. Items of clothing, including his shoes and shirt, were found dispersed between these locations, indicating that Mohammad had most likely continued moving through the wetland terrain.

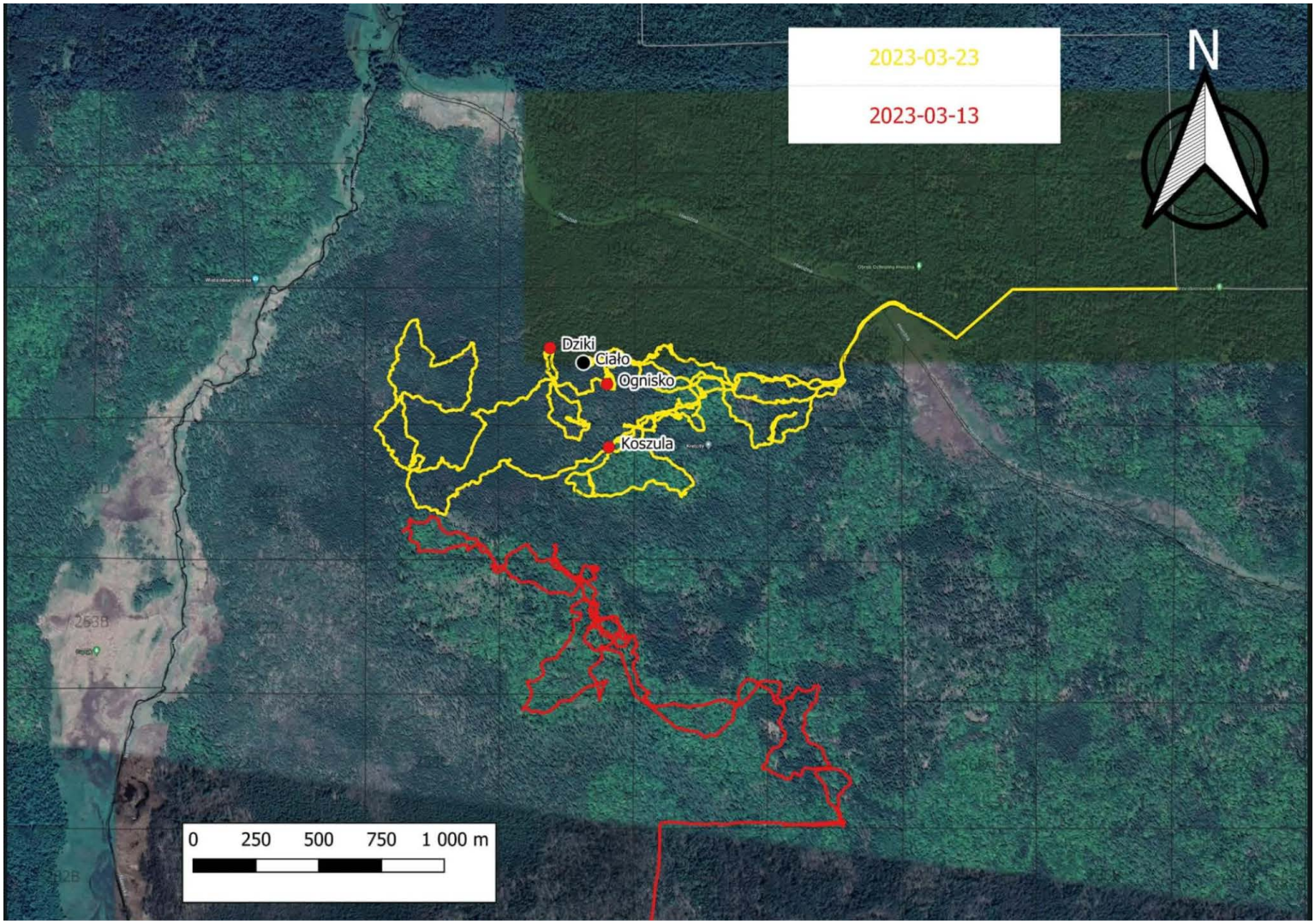


Figure A.41. Retrospective visualisation of civil society search routes through the Strict Reserve, showing searches conducted on 13 and 23 March 2023. Following the location of Mohammad's body, the map brings together the search tracks and material traces used to reconstruct the area through which he had moved, including the locations of a shirt, a former fire site, wild boar remains, and his body. The visualisation demonstrates the spatial relationship between these traces and the extensive search routes through the forest and wetland terrain.

Beside and partly beneath Mohammad's body was a small arrangement of dry spruce branches that appeared to have been gathered together, but that had not been ignited. The available evidence does not establish who collected the branches or when. If they were gathered by Mohammad, however, they may constitute evidence of an attempt to make a fire while he was still alive.

The dispersed clothing and footwear, together with the distance between the campsite, material traces and the body, are consistent with continued movement through the wetland environment during a period of severe physical deterioration. The absence of footwear may also be consistent with paradoxical undressing associated with severe hypothermia, although this cannot be established from the spatial and photographic evidence alone.



Figure A.42. Material traces documented during the search for Mohammad, including his shoes, clothing, and other belongings found at different locations within the search area. Their spatial distribution contributed to the reconstruction of his movements through the forest before his death. Photographs of Mohammad's body are not reproduced in this report, in order to preserve his dignity. Photographs by POPH search team.

Conclusion

Our reconstruction of Mohammad's case reveals a sequence of events in which an attempt by civil society actors to rescue a person reported to be alive and in critical condition was ultimately blocked by Polish state actors. Despite a prior assurance from the Police that the three-person team would be permitted to enter the Strict Reserve, National Park guards physically blocked the access point and denied the team's entry. The Police neither accompanied the team into the reserve nor deployed a specialised search-and-rescue operation, including technical resources available for locating persons whose life or health is at risk, to replace the intervention that had been prevented. The environmental conditions to which Mohammad remained exposed – wetland terrain, cold, moisture and his severely weakened physical condition – therefore cannot be separated from the actions of the Police and National Park authorities governing access and rescue. The reconstruction shows how environmental exposure was prolonged while an organised rescue intervention was obstructed and no effective state response replaced it. The lack of effective rescue which was the outcome of the actions and omission of state agencies created the conditions that ultimately lead to Mohammad's death.

The death of Issam Mohammed Ali Heslan

- Age at the time of death: 55
- Country of origin: Yemen
- Date of the request for help: 19 February 2024
- Date the missing person report was filed: 20 February 2024
- Date the body was found: Unknown (Belarusian side of the borderland)
- Date the family learned of his death: July 2024
- Exact date of death: Unknown, after the events of 7 January 2024
- Location: Belarus side of the border, unspecified.



Figure A.43. Photograph of Issam Mohammed Ali Heslan, provided to investigative journalist Piotr Czaban and subsequently published on his website. Photograph Issam Mohammed Ali Heslan's family archive, via Piotr Czaban.

Summary

Issam Mohammed Ali Heslan, a 55-year-old Yemeni national, travelled from Yemen to Belarus with his teenage son in December 2023. In late December, Heslan entered the Belarusian–Polish border area with a group of other migrants. According to his daughter, Heslan later told her by phone that he had crossed into Poland. However, no digital trace or official record confirming his presence on Polish territory, or documenting a subsequent pushback to Belarus, has been found.

In early January 2024, after several days in the border area, Heslan reportedly attempted to return towards Belarus. According to witnesses later contacted by his daughter, the group scattered after an encounter with Belarusian border guards. Heslan, who was reportedly exhausted, was unable to keep up with the others. They last heard him screaming as they fled. Contact with him was subsequently lost.

From Turkey, Heslan's daughter began searching for her father with the assistance of activists and Polish civil society organisations. A formal missing-person report was filed with the Polish Police on the 20th of February 2024. Searches of available Polish records did not establish his whereabouts.

Several months later, in July 2024, Heslan's daughter obtained information from the Belarusian Border Guard that her father had been found dead on Belarusian territory, close to the border fence. She identified him from a photograph but was not given access to the complete documentation concerning the discovery and identification of his body.

This reconstruction is based on an analysis of documentation and actions undertaken to establish Issam Mohammed Ali Heslan's fate and whereabouts, including those carried out by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR), as well as materials provided by his daughter, witness accounts, OSINT research and publicly available reporting. It distinguishes between events supported by official records and those known through family and witness testimony.

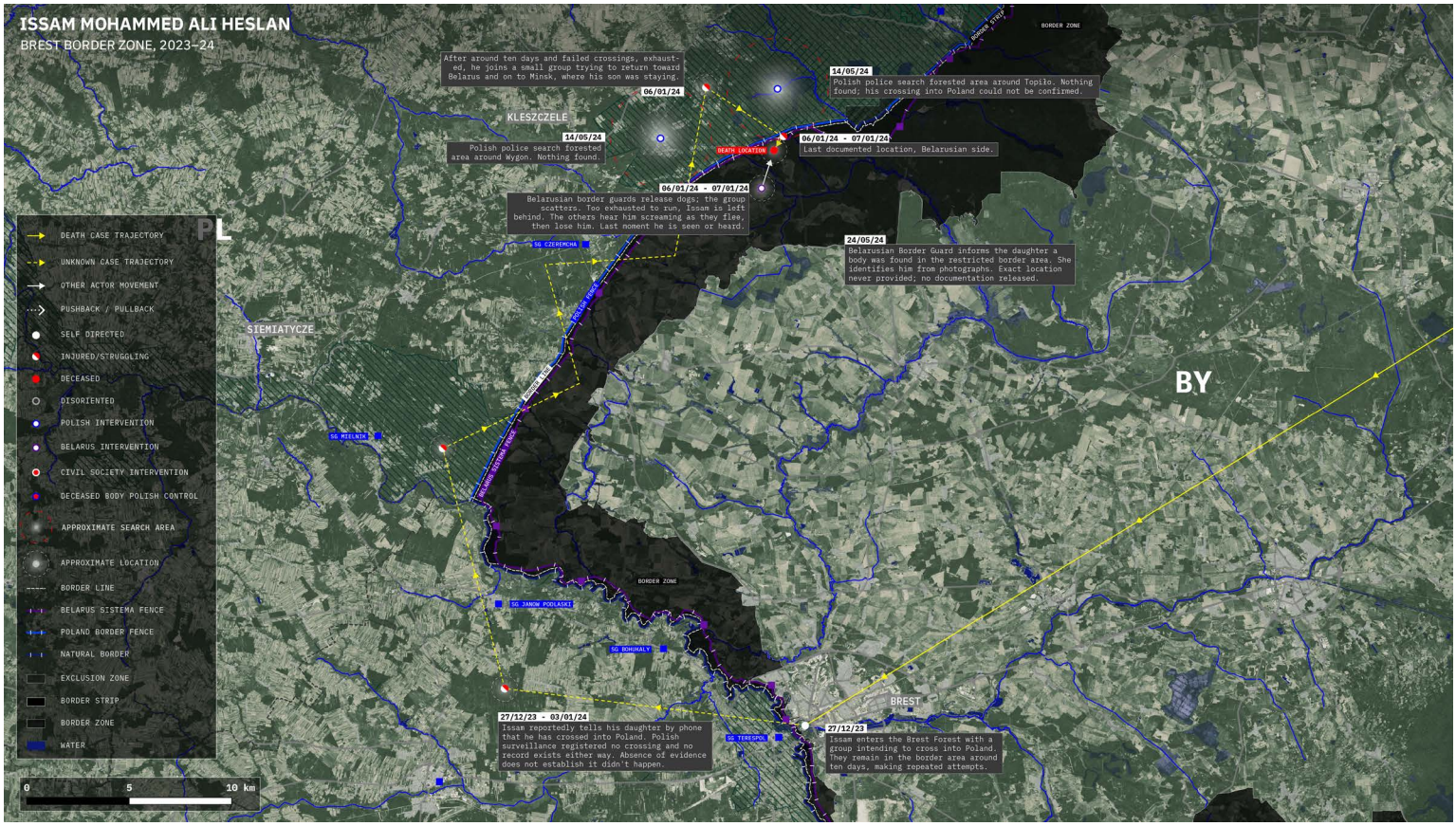


Figure A.44. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Issam Mohammed Ali Heslan. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Chain of events

In early December 2023, documentation and materials provided by Issam Mohammed Ali Heslan's family indicate that he left Yemen together with his 14-year-old son, Rakan. According to information provided by his daughter, Rahiq Issam Mohammed Al-Huslan, Issam decided to leave following threats and intimidation by informal political groups, as well as financial difficulties affecting his ability to support his family. His wife and two other children remained in Yemen, while Issam and Rakan travelled to Belarus.

On the 27th of December 2023, according to information documented by Issam's daughter during her subsequent efforts to reconstruct his movements, he entered the Brest Forest (*Puszcza Brzeska*) on the Belarusian side of the border with a group of other people. This information was obtained from individuals who had been travelling with him. The group intended to cross into Poland. The missing-person documentation records that they remained in the forest and the Belarus–Poland border area for approximately ten days, making repeated attempts to cross.

On the 30th of December 2023 Issam had his last known direct communication with his 14-year-old son, Rakan. According to Rakan, Issam sent him a four-second voice message saying: *"Don't worry. I'll come back."*

Issam and Rakan were subsequently pushed back and separated, after which they lost contact with each other. Rakan later informed his sister Rahiq, who was living and studying in Turkey, that contact with their father had been lost.

Around the 1st of January 2024, Issam's phone is believed to have run out of battery, approximately five days before his disappearance, according to the missing-person documentation. From this point onwards, his movements could no longer be reconstructed through direct telephone communication.

On the 6th of January 2024, after approximately ten days in the forest and repeated attempts to cross the border, Issam was reportedly physically exhausted. According to accounts subsequently obtained from people travelling with him, that night he joined a small group attempting to return towards Belarus and ultimately Minsk, where his son was staying.

On the night of 6–7 January 2024, according to witness accounts subsequently obtained by Issam's daughter and recorded in the missing-person documentation, Belarusian border guards released dogs towards the group as they were returning. The group scattered into the surrounding forest while attempting to escape. Witnesses reported that Issam, already severely exhausted, was unable to run and that they heard him screaming as they fled. They subsequently lost sight of him. This is the last known moment at which Issam was reportedly seen or heard of by members of the group.

Around 6–7 January 2024, the last reported location available for Issam was a set of coordinates that he had previously sent to his son. The missing-person notification also records adverse weather conditions around the time of his disappearance.

Although historical weather data for the precise location and dates of Issam's disappearance were not available for this reconstruction, climate modelling for the Białowieża area provides an indication of the environmental conditions characteristic of the border region in winter. Meteoblue's ERA5T model indicates that January is the coldest period of the year in the area, with a mean daily maximum of approximately –1°C and a mean daily minimum of approximately –5°C. The model also indicates regular precipitation during the month. These figures do not represent the weather recorded on 6–7 January 2024 but provide a broader climatic context for assessing the conditions to which a person

remaining outdoors in the border zone in January could be exposed.

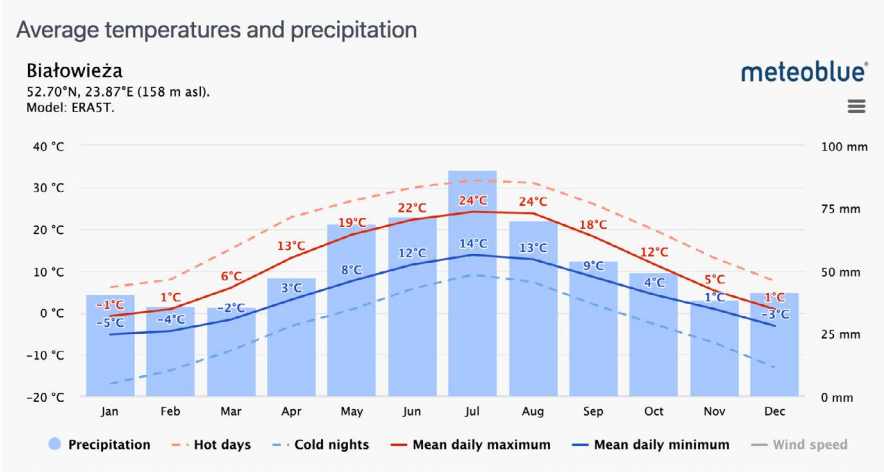


Figure A.45. Average temperatures and precipitation in the Białowieża area. Meteoblue climate modelling (ERA5T) indicates mean January daily temperatures ranging between approximately –5°C and –1°C, alongside regular precipitation. The graph represents modelled long-term climatic conditions rather than observed weather on the specific dates of Issam Mohammed Ali Heslan's disappearance. Graph by Meteoblue, "Historical Weather Data: Białowieża, Poland," meteoblue.com.

A photograph provided by Issam's daughter further documents the conditions he endured while travelling through the border area. It shows Issam in a forest beside a small temporary shelter used for sleeping outdoors. In winter conditions characteristic of the region, prolonged stays and repeated nights outdoors provide limited protection from cold, moisture and precipitation. Combined with physical exhaustion, insufficient rest, and prolonged stress, such exposure can significantly increase the risk of hypothermia and other forms of medical deterioration. By the time Issam was last seen on 6–7 January, witnesses described him as severely exhausted and unable to keep pace with the group.



Figure A.46. Issam Mohammed Ali Heslan in the forest in the Belarus–Poland border area during his journey in winter 2023–2024. The photograph, provided by his daughter, shows the temporary shelter used while staying in the forest. Photograph from Issam Mohammed Ali Heslan's family archive.

Between January and February 2024, Issam's daughter Rahiq, residing in Turkey, attempted to reconstruct her father's movements and establish his whereabouts. The documentation shows that she contacted people who had travelled with Issam and used information obtained from them to reconstruct the circumstances preceding his disappearance. Through these contacts, she also established contact with civil society actors assisting in searches for missing people at the border. At this stage, it remained unknown whether Issam was in Belarus, had crossed into Poland, had been pushed back across the border, or had been taken to a Polish Border Guard facility, hospital or detention centre.

During this period, the family also contacted institutions in Poland and international organisations, including UNHCR, seeking information about Issam's whereabouts. On the 19th of February, Issam's daughter contacted the emergency hotline of the Podlasie Volunteer Rescue Service (POPH). Karolina Mazurek collected the information and documentation provided by the family, assisted in formalising the search in Poland and, acting on behalf of Issam's daughter, reported his disappearance to the Polish Police on 20 February 2024. Given his reported exhaustion,

prolonged exposure in the forest, lack of food and water, and inability to call for assistance, the notification assessed him as being at significant risk of hypothermia, medical deterioration or death. These assessments formed part of the search documentation and should not be understood as established findings concerning the circumstances nor the cause of his death.

A photograph provided by Issam's daughter further documents the conditions in which he stayed while travelling through the border area. It shows Issam in a forest beside a small temporary shelter used for sleeping outdoors. In winter conditions characteristic of the region, prolonged stays and repeated nights outdoors provide limited protection from cold, moisture and precipitation. Combined with physical exhaustion, insufficient rest and prolonged stress, such exposure can significantly increase the risk of hypothermia and other forms of medical deterioration. By the time Issam was last seen on 6–7 January, witnesses described him as severely exhausted and unable to keep pace with the group.

On the 16th of March 2024, Issam's daughter contacted the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR), seeking further assistance in establishing her father's fate and whereabouts. She provided his personal details, a photograph, copy of his passport,and approximate last known location, as well as information gathered from people who had travelled with him. At this stage, the family did not know whether Issam was alive, detained in Belarus, had entered Poland, or whether he remained somewhere in the border area.

Following this contact, legal assistance was incorporated into the search. Lawyer Marcin Czachor, acting on behalf of the family, requested information from the Polish Police on the measures taken to locate Issam and asked that relevant records and facilities be checked, including Border Guard facilities, detention centres, hospitals and records of unidentified deceased persons and remains. He also requested comparison with unidentified bodies found in Poland since Issam's disappearance, while the family declared its readiness to provide DNA samples for identification.

On the 14th of May 2024, in response to an inquiry from the lawyer representing Issam's family, the Polish Police reported that they had checked several Border Guard posts and guarded centres for foreigners, contacted the Yemeni Embassy in Warsaw, and searched forested areas around Topiło and Wygon. These measures did not establish Issam's whereabouts. The Police also stated that the last coordinates available

to them (52.602198N, 23.621452E) were located on the Belarusian side of the border and that the electronic border surveillance system had not registered his crossing. They therefore reported that they could not confirm that Issam had crossed into Poland. The absence of such confirmation, however, does not establish that the crossing did not take place.

On the 25th of May 2024, Issam's daughter informed the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights that her father had been found dead in Belarus. According to correspondence and documentation subsequently provided by the family, she had independently established contact with the Belarusian Border Guard, which informed her that a body matching the identifying information she had provided had been found in the restricted border area and transferred to a morgue. At her request, Belarusian officials sent photographs of the deceased and his belongings, from which she recognised and identified as her father.

The family was not provided with the complete official documentation concerning the discovery and identification of Issam's body and could not establish the circumstances preceding his death. Correspondence from June 2024 further indicates that Issam's daughter was attempting to obtain a death certificate through the Yemeni Embassy, which, according to her account, had neither informed the family of Issam's death nor assisted in locating him. The documentation analysed for this investigation does not establish the precise date, cause or circumstances of Issam's death.

Conclusion

Issam Mohammed Ali Heslan disappeared within a highly militarised and surveilled border environment in which movement was intensively controlled, while the trajectory of a person once missing proved remarkably difficult to reconstruct. By the night of 6–7 January 2024, after approximately ten days in the border area in winter conditions, witnesses described Issam as severely exhausted and unable to keep pace with the group. The last witness account places him in the restricted Belarusian border zone, where members of the group reported hearing dogs and Issam screaming before they scattered and lost sight of him. His body was later reportedly found within the same restricted border area. The family, however, was not provided with the documentation necessary to establish what happened between these two points in time, including the precise date, circumstances nor cause of his death.

The reconstruction also reveals a critical evidentiary gap on the Polish side. According to information Issam communicated to his family, he had crossed into Poland, while other accounts available to the family indicated that he had subsequently been pushed back. Yet when the Polish Police investigated his disappearance, neither institutional records nor the electronic border surveillance system confirmed his presence in Poland. If Issam entered Poland and was subsequently pushed back, as these accounts suggest, his crossing and removal appear to have occurred without producing an institutional trace that could later be used to locate him. The available evidence cannot resolve this discrepancy. It does, however, expose a fundamental limitation of a border infrastructure capable of extensively surveilling and restricting movement while failing to produce a continuous evidentiary record from which the trajectory of a missing person can subsequently be reconstructed.

Issam's disappearance therefore cannot be separated from the interaction between border enforcement and environmental exposure. He spent an extended period outdoors during winter, with limited shelter, while his physical condition reportedly deteriorated. Climate modelling for the region indicates that January is characterised by sub-zero mean daily temperatures, while photographs provided by the family document the precarious conditions in which Issam stayed in the forest. These environmental conditions did not operate independently of the border regime. On the Belarusian side, Issam's last known movements took place within a militarised and restricted zone in which independent access was severely constrained. On the Polish side, his reported crossing and pushback – if they occurred as described – left no identifiable institutional record. The border thus functioned simultaneously as an infrastructure of territorial control and as a space in which prolonged environmental exposure, restricted access and gaps in documentation could make a person increasingly difficult to locate.

The consequences continued after Issam disappeared. His daughter, searching from Turkey, reconstructed his movements through witnesses, contacted civil society organisations, Polish institutions, the Yemeni Embassy and eventually established direct contact with the Belarusian Border Guard. Although the Polish Police formally registered the missing-person report and undertook search measures, it was through the family's own cross-border investigation that information about Issam's death was ultimately obtained. Even then, the documentation necessary to reconstruct the circumstances of his death remained inaccessible. Issam's case therefore exposes an architecture of disappearance: a

border regime equipped to detect, restrict and repel movement, but without an equivalent infrastructure capable of tracing those who disappear, preserving a continuous record of their movements, or enabling their families to establish what happened to them.

In a remembrance shared with humanitarian organisations, Issam's daughter Ayla described her father and the family's search for him:

> *"My father was a man of infinite love to us. His journey was one of hope and a search for a better future for our family. Sadly, his life was cut short at the Belarusian border after he was pushed back by the Polish Border Guard and left to fend for himself in a cruel and unforgiving environment.*
>
> *For four long months, I searched for him day and night, until I discovered that his body had died, and my heart broke.*
>
> *I hope that his memory will live forever."*

The death of Waleed Abdulkareem Qasem

- Age at the time of death: 37
- Country of origin: Yemen
- Date of the request for help: Unknown
- Date the body was found: 6 January 2024
- Exact date of death: Unknown
- Location where the body was found: In the forbidden zone, on the Belarusian side of the border

Summary

Waleed Abdulkareem Qasem was a 37-year-old man from Yemen. On 6 January 2024, the State Border Committee of the Republic of Belarus reported that Belarusian border guards had found him unconscious alongside a Syrian man, close to the Polish border, probably in the Kamyenyets district. According to the Committee, Waleed died before an ambulance arrived. His earlier trajectory, the circumstances immediately preceding his death, and the medical cause of his death remain unknown.

The principal source about Waleed's death is footage produced by the Belarusian State Border Committee and subsequently circulated by Belarusian state media. It shows Waleed's body and his Syrian companion, who describes violence and a pushback by Polish forces. No publicly available autopsy report or investigation file has been identified. Waleed's death is also recorded in the border deaths database maintained by We Are Monitoring.

This reconstruction is therefore based primarily on an analysis of visual and documentary materials produced on the Belarusian side of the border, considered within the broader context of border violence and enforcement practices documented in this investigation.

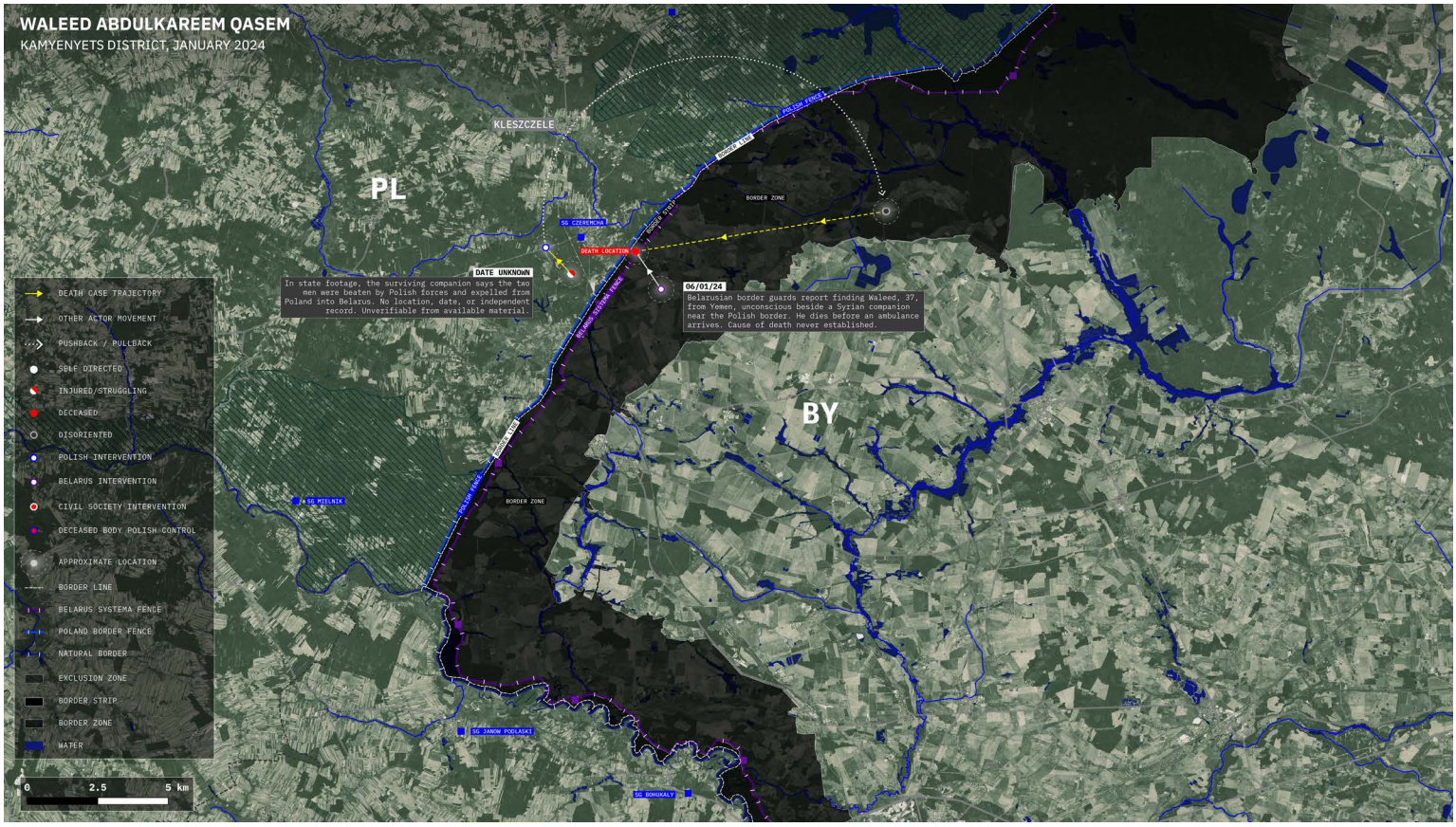


Figure A.47. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Waleed Abdulkareem Qasem. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Chain of events

On the 6th of January 2024, according to the Belarus', Belarusian border guards encountered two men – citizens of Yemen and Syria – close to the Polish border in unknown location. Both were reportedly exhausted and required medical assistance; the Yemeni man, identified by his documentation as Waleed Abdulkareem Qasem, was unconscious. Belarusian authorities reported that Waleed died before an ambulance reached the location. No publicly available autopsy report or other medical documentation establishes the immediate cause of his death.

The conditions under which the available evidence was produced are critical to its interpretation. Waleed and his companion were found within the highly militarised Belarusian border zone, where access is controlled by Belarusian border and security structures and independent observation is severely restricted. Access to Waleed's body and the surviving witness, as well as their documentation and the subsequent recording of testimony, took place within a space physically and informationally controlled by the Belarusian state.

Footage subsequently broadcast by Belarusian state television shows Waleed lying motionless on snow-covered ground, with another man beside him. The surviving man, identified as a Syrian national travelling

with Waleed, describes violence that he attributes to Polish forces and states that the two men had been expelled from Poland into Belarus. If accurate, his testimony provides the only available account of Waleed's itinerary immediately preceding his death.



Figure A.48. Still from a video published by Belarusian state broadcaster NEWS.BY on YouTube following the discovery of two men near the Poland–Belarus border on 6 January 2024. The footage shows a Syrian national standing beside a man lying on the ground, identified in the documentation analysed for this investigation as Waleed Abdulkareem Qasem. No other photograph of Waleed was available to this investigation. Screen-grab from a video by NEWS.BY, YouTube.

The evidentiary conditions of this testimony, however, impose significant limitations on its interpretation. The footage does not establish who conducted the interview, what questions were asked, who else was present, or what may have been excluded through editing. Nor could the witness speak outside of the immediate control of the Belarusian security apparatus. The footage therefore documents that this testimony was given but does not independently corroborate the sequence of events it

describes. No independently verifiable evidence identified in this investigation reconstructs Waleed's earlier movements through the border zone or the interval between the alleged pushback and his death. While Belarusian authorities subsequently reported that investigators attended the location and initiated procedures concerning Waleed's death, the complete investigation file, autopsy report and forensic findings have not been made publicly available. It is therefore not possible from the available material to establish the medical cause of Waleed's death nor the extent to which the investigation examined actions by state actors on either side of the border.

Conclusion

The available evidence concerning Waleed Abdulkareem Qasem's death does not allow us to reconstruct his complete itinerary nor establish the medical cause of his death. Despite these limitations, the case demonstrates how a death at the Poland–Belarus border can become simultaneously an object of investigation and an instrument of geopolitical accusation. Indeed, before the circumstances for Waleed's death could be brought to light and explained, Waleed's body and his companion's testimony had already been incorporated into a state narrative assigning responsibility to Poland and, more broadly, the European Union.

This operation does not depend on fabricating Polish violence. Pushbacks, physical violence and exposure to life-threatening conditions on the Polish side of the border have been independently documented. Rather, it operates through selection and the reconstruction of causality: evidence implicating Polish forces is isolated from a wider system of pushforward and pushback across the border in which Belarusian forces have themselves been documented using violence, restricting migrants' movements and coercing them towards the EU border. A potentially genuine trace can thus become part of a reconstruction in which the violence of one state is made visible while that of the other disappears from the causal frame.

The Death of Binyam Molla Tegegne

- Age at the time of death: 26
- Country of origin: Ethiopia
- Date of disappearance: 12 March 2025
- Last contact with family: 12 March 2025
- Date the body was found: 15 April 2025
- Location: Bug River, near the village of Stary Bubel, Poland



Figure A.49. Photograph of Binyam Molla Tegegne shared with this investigation by Piotr Czaban. Photograph from the Tegegne family archive.

Summary

Binyam Molla Tegegne, an Ethiopian national, last had contact with his family on the 12th of March 2025. In the days that followed, he was in the Polish–Belarusian border area. On the 17th of March, a group of migrants who had crossed the Bug River reached Poland and contacted local humanitarian actor Beata Siemaszko. They reported that Belarusian officers had forced their group to enter the river and that they had witnessed two people drown during the crossing. Siemaszko called the Polish Border Guard after the survivors expressed their intention to seek asylum and because of their poor physical condition. Search operations for the people reported missing in the river were subsequently discontinued. Siemaszko then went to the Polish Police and formally reported the two people as missing, requesting that the search continue.

On 15 April 2025, an unidentified body was recovered from the Bug River. In June, investigative journalist Piotr Czaban learned that unidentified migrants recovered from the river were due to be buried as NN (unknown identity) persons at the cemetery in Janów Podlaski. As part of his own investigation, Czaban sought to establish the identity of the deceased by connecting information about bodies recovered from the Bug River with families searching for missing relatives. He contacted Binyam's family and arranged for them to receive photographs of the clothing and belongings recovered with one of the bodies. The family recognised them as Binyam's.

This intervention prevented the body from being buried as entirely unidentified. Binyam was subsequently buried in Janów Podlaski under his name, although his identity had not been formally confirmed; his gravestone therefore bears his name preceded by the word "probably."

This reconstruction is based on testimonies and documentation collected with Binyam's family by local humanitarian actors, in particular Beata Siemaszko, as well as published and previously unpublished materials provided to this investigation by investigative journalist Piotr Czaban.

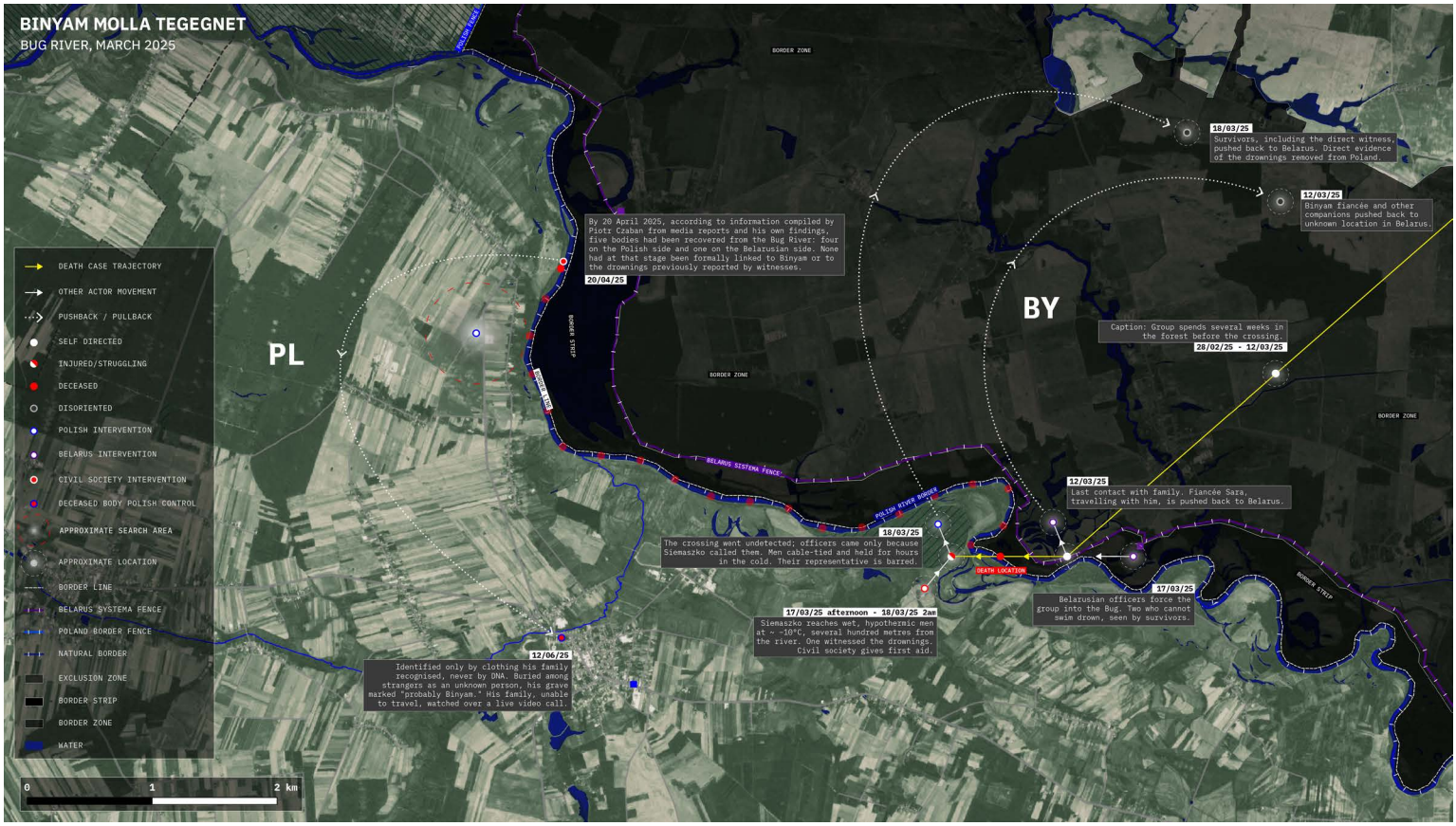


Figure A.50. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Binyam Molla Tegegne. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Chain of events

Late in the afternoon on the 17th of March 2025, Beata Siemaszko, a humanitarian responder affiliated with No To Ci Pomogę, a local grass-roots initiative active in the border region since 2022, received a distress message from a group of migrants who had crossed the Bug River into Poland: “We crossed the river, we need asylum. We are dying from the cold. Please help us.”

Although no verified meteorological measurements for the precise location and time were available for this reconstruction, Meteoblue’s ERA5T climate model for the broader Białowieża region provides contextual information about typical March conditions. The model indicates a mean daily minimum of approximately –2°C and a mean daily maximum of approximately 6°C in March, with regular precipitation. These figures do not represent the weather recorded at the Bug River on the 17th of March 2025, but convey the broader climatic context for assessing the exposure of the migrants. That day, the temperature was below freezing, with strong winds and snowfall; according to Siemaszko. For people who had just crossed a river and remained outdoors in wet clothing, low temperatures, wind and continued exposure constituted an additional and aggravating environmental risk.

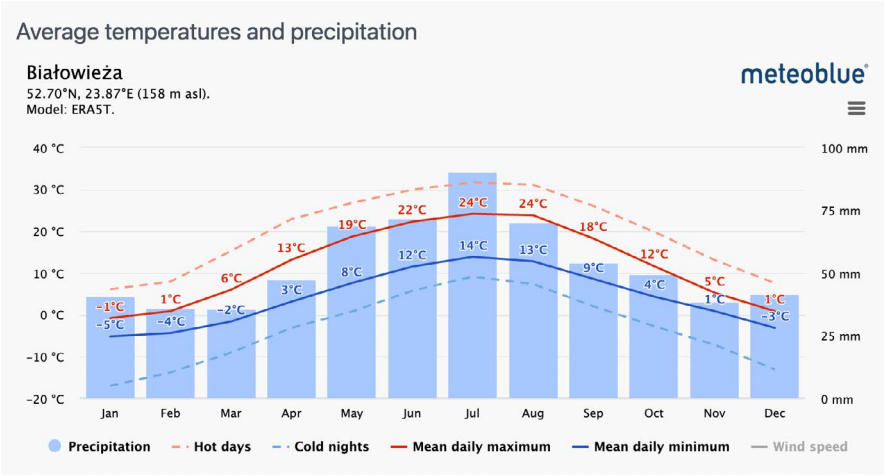


Figure A.51. Average temperatures and precipitation in the Białowieża area. Meteoblue's ERA5T climate model indicates a mean daily minimum of approximately –2°C and a mean daily maximum of approximately 6°C in March, alongside regular precipitation. The graph represents modelled long-term climatic conditions and does not show observed weather at the Bug River on 17 March 2025. Graph: meteoblue, "Historical Weather Data: Białowieża, Poland," meteoblue.com.

Siemaszko reached the group several hundred metres from the riverbank. The men were soaked, exhausted and shivering. She and those accompanying her provided basic thermal protection. One of the men, who complained of severe back pain, described what had happened during the crossing.

According to his account, the group had spent several weeks in the forest on the Belarusian side before Belarusian officers forced them into the Bug River towards Poland. He told Siemaszko that two members of the group could not swim and that he had seen them drowning. The others had themselves barely managed to complete the crossing and were unable to help. The group's crossing had not been detected by the Polish Border Guard. Siemaszko called the Border Guard because the men were in very poor physical condition and had expressed their intention to apply for international protection. Border Guard officers arrived first, followed by Police and military personnel. Siemaszko informed them that one of the men had directly witnessed two people drowning in the Bug River. The Polish state officials present at the scene were therefore aware that two people had been reported missing in the river and might require an immediate search and rescue response.

According to Siemaszko, the men's prepared applications for international protection were taken, read and returned to them. The men were searched and restrained with plastic cable ties and remained outside for several hours despite being wet, exhausted and exposed to sub-zero temperatures. Siemaszko, although acting as their authorised representative, was separated from the group and prevented from participating in the procedures.

A military ambulance and, later, soldiers with a tracking dog arrived. Given the information already provided about two people reported to

have drowned, Siemaszko assumed their deployment was connected to a possible search operation. Her observations, however, do not establish when a search began, what area was searched, nor how long it continued.

The intervention continued until approximately 02:00 on the 18th of March. Afterwards, Siemaszko attempted to obtain information from the Border Guard about the fate of the men she had assisted and represented. According to her account, the Border Guard refused to provide this information. She therefore did not know where the men had been taken or whether their applications for international protection had been registered.

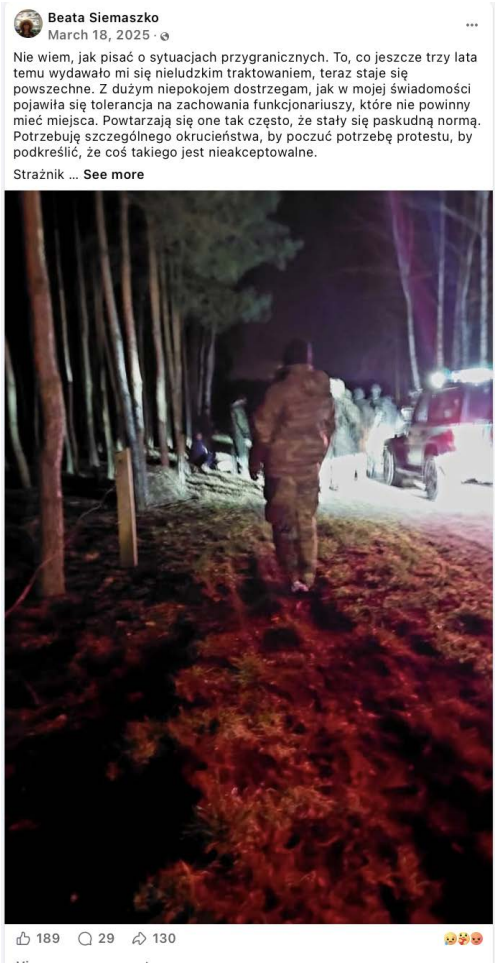


Figure A.52. Screenshot of a public Facebook post by Beata Siemaszko, published on the 18th of March 2025 following the intervention the previous night. The photograph included in the post documents the presence of uniformed personnel and vehicles at the site of the intervention. Screenshot from Beata Siemaszko, personal Facebook account, 18 March 2025.

On the afternoon of the 18th of March 2025, after learning that two people had reportedly drowned while crossing the Bug River, investigative journalist and humanitarian activist Piotr Czaban contacted the Police in Biała Podlaska and the Nadbużański Border Guard Unit to establish whether a search had been initiated.

The institutions initially provided contradictory information. The Police told Czaban that they had received no report of a possible drowning, while the Border Guard informed him that a search operation was underway. In a subsequent conversation, the Police confirmed that they were aware of the incident.

In late March or early April 2025, according to information and materials provided to this investigation by Piotr Czaban, Binyam Molla Tegegne was being searched for by his fiancée, Sara, who was in Belarus. She had previously travelled with Binyam but had been pushed back to Belarus and lost contact with him after the 12th of March. Through emergency numbers operated by humanitarian organisations in Poland, she was put in contact with Czaban.

Sara enabled Czaban to establish telephone contact with a man who had travelled with Binyam during attempts to cross the Bug River. The witness had previously reached Poland at an undetermined time but had subsequently been pushed back to Belarus. Czaban asked him to provide a written account that could be transmitted to Polish law-enforcement authorities.

The witness described the group crossing into Poland, being apprehended and subsequently returned to Belarus. He also reported violence by Belarusian officers, including beatings, the use of dogs and an irritant substance, and described people being forced to make further attempts to cross the river. He stated that during one of these crossings he had directly witnessed people drowning:

“Some individuals were forced to attempt crossing the river, and I witnessed some people drowning in the process.”

The witness did not identify the people he had seen drowning. His account therefore provides direct testimony of reported drownings during forced crossings of the Bug River, but does not, on its own, establish that Binyam was among those who drowned.

In late March or early April 2025, according to materials provided to this investigation by Piotr Czaban, the same witness provided a more detailed account at Czaban's request. He stated that during one of the group's subsequent movements, Binyam was separated from the others. He then relayed information obtained from another person, who reportedly saw Binyam near the river while officers were attempting to force him towards it. The group later tried to locate Binyam but was unable to re-establish contact.

The witness wrote: "They tried again to push us back, but they didn't push back Biniyam. Someone saw them trying to push him hard by the river on the eighth day. After that, we checked every day, but we didn't hear his voice. Some people said that some people drowned in the water and died."

This account constitutes one of the last available traces of Binyam's trajectory, but its evidentiary levels must be distinguished. The witness describes Binyam's separation from the group as part of his own experience; the later sighting of Binyam near the river derives from another person, while the information concerning drownings is presented as information circulating among members of the group.

The witness dated the group's first attempt to cross the border to the 19th of March and its entry into Poland to the 20th of March. These dates conflict with Siemaszko's account published on the 18th of March, documenting an intervention following a crossing that had already occurred. The witness's dates therefore cannot be used to establish the chronology of the same event without further corroboration.

On the 6th of April 2025, Czaban learned from media reports that the body of a man had been recovered from the Bug River and that, according to information provided by a Border Guard spokesperson, the deceased might have been a migrant. Because Binyam remained missing and the evidence collected by Czaban placed the last known stages of his trajectory in the vicinity of the river, Czaban provided the Police that evening with Binyam's details, photograph and available documentation, together with corresponding materials concerning another missing man. He requested that these materials be compared with the recovered body.

On the 7th of April, according to documentation provided to this investigation, Czaban submitted the materials he had collected concerning Binyam and the second missing man to the District Prosecutor's Office in Siedlce.

These included information from their relatives, witness accounts and materials concerning the earlier search operation. He provided Binyam's name and photographs, as well as the account and contact details of the man who had travelled with him. Czaban requested that the information be used to identify the body recovered from the river, continue the search for the remaining missing persons, and clarify the circumstances in which the earlier search had been terminated. At this stage, there was no evidence establishing that the recovered body was Binyam's.

On the 15th of April, two additional male bodies were recovered from the Bug River near Stary Bubel. Their discovery was reported by the media the following day. According to the Police, the bodies were in an advanced state of decomposition and were secured for post-mortem examination; their identities and causes of death had not yet been established.

A spokesperson for the Nadbużański Border Guard Unit stated that the bodies had been discovered by Border Guard officers and soldiers of the Territorial Defence Forces and indicated a possible connection with the earlier report of two people drowning in the Bug River. According to the spokesperson, following that report, the Border Guard and State Fire Service had searched the river for nearly two days using boats, divers and sonar without locating any bodies.

Materials provided by Czaban introduce a discrepancy concerning the discovery of at least one of the bodies. According to information he received unofficially, one body had first been spotted by a kayaker, whereas the Border Guard's public account attributed the discovery to Border Guard officers and Territorial Defence Forces soldiers. The available evidence does not allow this discrepancy to be resolved.

On the 16th of April 2025, Deputy Minister of the Interior Maciej Duszczyk publicly linked the recovered bodies to the March events. Speaking to TVP Info, Poland's public broadcaster, he stated:

"This is one element of the provocation. There were more than a dozen people who were pushed into the water. Some of them were rescued in Poland by Border Guard officers. [...] Some probably could not swim. So they probably drowned while still on the Belarusian side, because the bodies surfaced on our side."

At the time of this statement, the identities of the recovered men and the precise circumstances of their deaths had not been established. It was

not known whether either body was Binyam's, nor where nor under what circumstances the men had died. Nevertheless, Duszczyk incorporated the deaths into a pre-existing narrative of Belarusian "provocation" before these basic facts had been established.

His account also attributed the rescue of those who reached Poland to the Border Guard. The documented sequence of the 17th of March intervention complicates this account. The group's crossing had not been detected by the Border Guard. Beata Siemaszko reached the men after receiving their request for assistance and subsequently called the Border Guard because they were soaked, exhausted and seeking international protection. She and those accompanying her provided the first documented assistance at the site, while the Border Guard arrived following her call.

The statement therefore established a political interpretation before the individual trajectories had been reconstructed: Belarusian forces were positioned as the cause of the deaths and Polish forces as rescuers, while the identities of the deceased, the locations and circumstances of their deaths, and the complete sequence of state actions on both sides of the border remained under investigation.

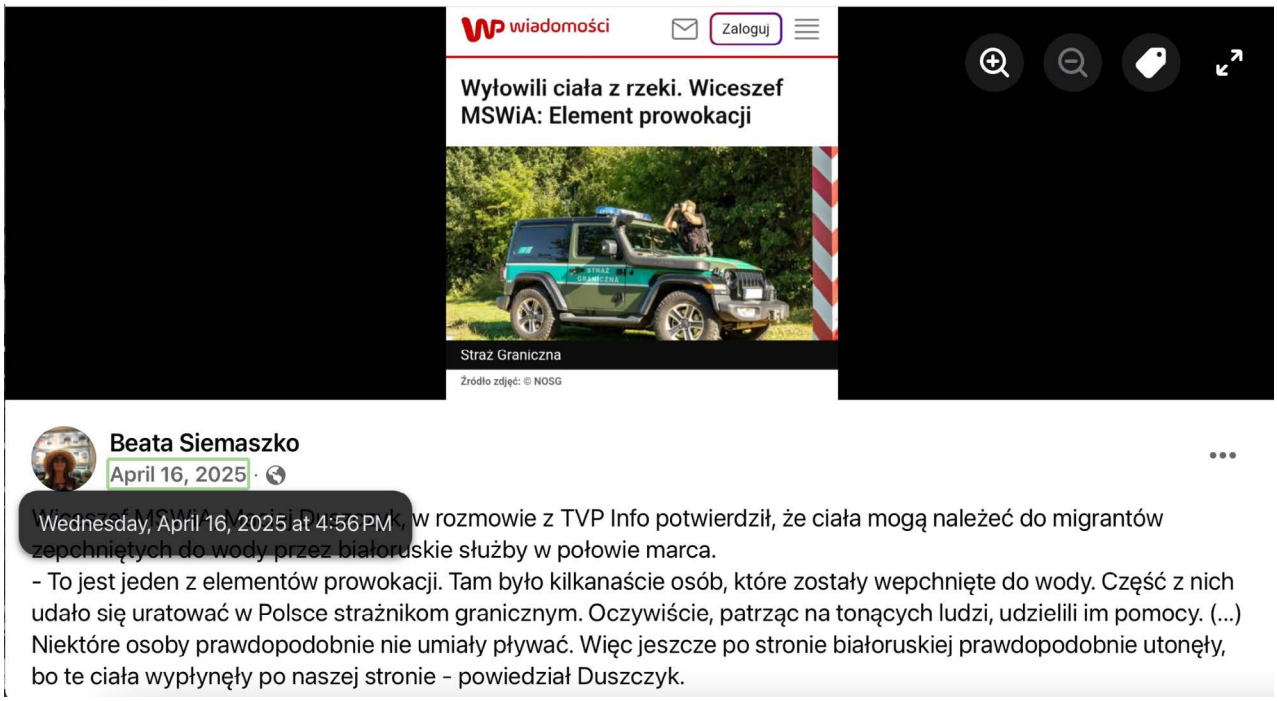


Figure A.53. Screenshot from Beata Siemaszko's Facebook account containing her response to Maciej Duszczyk's statement. Siemaszko notes that the drowning of two people was reported by migrants who had witnessed the incident, and that after reaching Poland, the first humanitarian assistance they received was provided by civil society actors rather than state officers.

By the 20th of April 2025, according to information compiled by Piotr Czaban from media reports and his own findings, five bodies had been recovered from the Bug River: four on the Polish side and one on the Belarusian side. None had at that stage been formally linked to Binyam or to the drownings previously reported by witnesses.

In late April, according to materials provided to this investigation by Czaban, the first material indication linking one of the recovered bodies to Binyam emerged. Czaban remained in contact with Binyam's fiancée, Sara, and his brother, Tadele Molla Tegegne, in Ethiopia. Photographs of clothing found with one of the bodies were compared with family photographs of Binyam. The clothing appeared to match that worn by Binyam in the last photograph available before his disappearance. This provided a potential basis for identification, but no DNA comparison had yet been conducted.

On the 29th of April, Czaban provided the Municipal Police Headquarters in Biała Podlaska with further materials, including photographs of Binyam, a copy of his passport, his brother's contact details and photographs received from Sara. He also indicated that formal identification could potentially be established through DNA comparison with Binyam's brother, in an effort to establish his identity before the recovered body could be buried as an NN (unknown identity) person.

By the 7th of May, Czaban continued providing the Police with materials concerning Binyam and seeking formal identification of the recovered body. The Police contacted the Ethiopian Embassy in Berlin to confirm the family relationship between Binyam and his brother. According to information provided by Czaban, the Embassy did not respond. The identification process subsequently stalled: Binyam's relatives could not travel to Poland to identify the body in person, while the absence of formal confirmation of kinship prevented the DNA comparison from proceeding.

On the 11th of June, Czaban learned by chance that two unidentified foreign nationals, recorded in the prosecutor's documentation as NN persons, were due to be buried the following day at the cemetery in Janów Podlaski. He contacted the police officer conducting the investigation and the director of the Municipal Social Welfare Centre responsible for organising the burial.

Following Czaban's intervention, the families were shown photographs of clothing and footwear recovered with the bodies, which, according to his

account, had not previously been made available to them by the Polish authorities. The families identified the belongings as those of Binyam Molla Tegegne and Halid Abdel Ali. This allowed the families to indicate the identities of the two men but did not constitute formal identification by the investigating authorities. Both therefore remained recorded as NN persons, and their names were placed on the grave markers preceded by the word "probably".

On the 12th of June, the man identified by his family as Binyam Molla Tegegne was buried alongside Halid Abdel Ali at the cemetery in Janów Podlaski. Binyam's family could not travel to Poland. Contact with the families and arrangements enabling their remote participation in the funeral were coordinated by Czaban rather than by the state institutions responsible for the identification and burial. Binyam's relatives participated through a live WhatsApp video connection from the cemetery. The funeral was attended by an Orthodox priest, representatives of the Ethiopian and Eritrean communities in Poland, and Beata Siemaszko, who had documented the testimony of a survivor reporting that two people had drowned during the river crossing in March.

At the time of the burial, Binyam's family had identified his belongings and the available photographic evidence indicated a clothing match, but his identity had still not been formally confirmed through DNA comparison.

445 P. Czaban, "Pożegnanie Binyama i Halida. Zmarli na pograniczu polsko-białoruskim," Czaban robi raban, 13 June 2025, https://czabanrobiraban.pl/pozegnanie-binyama-i-halida-zmarli-na-pograniczu-polsko-bialoruskim/.



Figure A.54. Funeral of Binyam Molla Tegegne and Halid Abdela Ali, Janów Podlaski, 13 June 2025. Their bodies were recovered from the Bug River on 15 April 2025 and remained formally unidentified. Through the investigative and documentation work of their families and civil society actors, both men were subsequently connected to their identities and buried side by side under their names at the cemetery in Janów Podlaski. Binyam's brother, unable to travel legally from Ethiopia to Poland, participated in the funeral remotely via WhatsApp. Screengrab from a report by investigative journalist Piotr Czaban documenting the funeral.[445]

Conclusion

Binyam Molla Tegegne's case reveals a chain of failures extending from the reported drowning to the identification of the dead. On the 17th of March, Polish state officials were informed by local humanitarian actor Beata Siemaszko that survivors had witnessed two people drowning in the Bug River. Although a search was subsequently undertaken, it was discontinued without locating them. On the 15th of April, an unidentified body was recovered from the river.

Yet the recovery of the body did not resolve the disappearance. The connection between the unidentified deceased and Binyam was established not by state institutions, but through the documentation and investigative work of his family and civil society actors. When Piotr Czaban learned that unidentified migrants recovered from the river were to be buried as NN persons, he connected the body with Binyam's family and provided them with photographs of the recovered clothing and belongings, which they recognised as his.

The case therefore demonstrates how physical disappearance can continue as administrative disappearance even after a body has been recovered. Although Binyam's formal identification remains unresolved, the intervention of his family and civil society actors prevented him from being buried as entirely unidentified and restored his name after death.

The Death of Wazir Khan Sahak

- Age at the time of death: 29
- Country of origin: Afghanistan
- Date of birth: 25 January 1996
- Date the missing person report was filed: 5 April 2025 (Level 3, no urgent response)
- Date on-site police search operations were initiated: 16 April 2025
- Date the body was found: 28 April 2025
- Exact date of death:
- Location: Near the village of Straszewo, Knyszyn Forest, Poland

Summary

Wazir Khan Sahak, an Afghan national, became unable to continue moving while travelling through the Poland–Belarus border area in early April 2025. He remained alone in the Knyszyn Forest, exposed to cold and rain and without adequate clothing, food, water nor a means of charging his phone. His disappearance was reported to the Polish Police on the 5th of April. Despite information indicating that he was immobile and exposed to adverse environmental conditions, on-site police search operations were not initiated until the 16th of April.

Wazir's body was found by a deputy forester working in the Waliły Forest District on the 28th of April 2025 near the village of Straszewo. The circumstances of his disappearance, the delay in the search operation, and the environmental conditions to which he was exposed form the central focus of this reconstruction.

This reconstruction is based on OSINT research, documentation concerning the search and subsequent legal proceedings, and an analysis of available case materials.

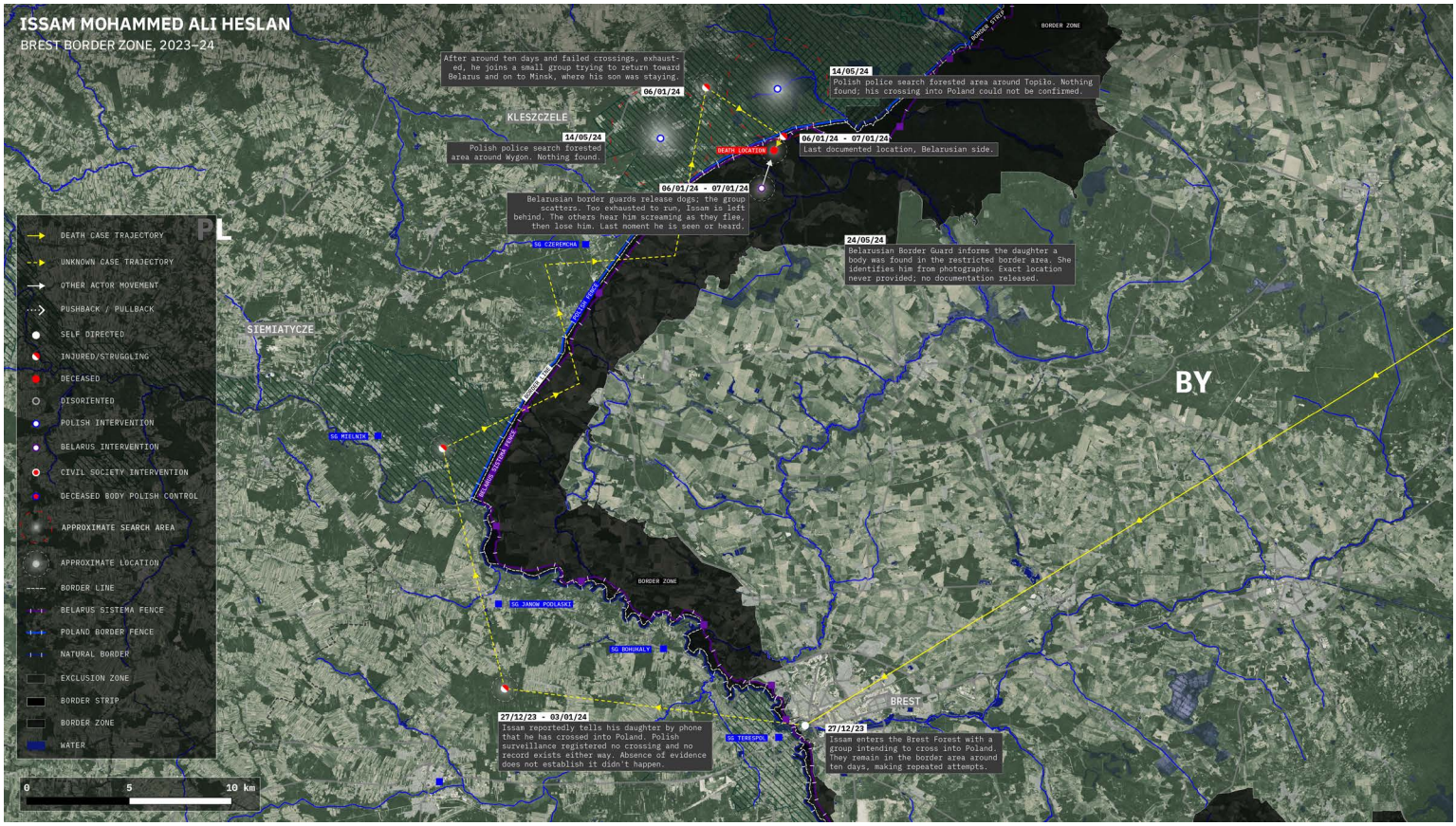


Figure A.55. Map of the chain of events leading to the death of Wazir Khan Sahak. Map by Border Forensics, 2026.

Chain of events

In December 2024, Wazir Khan Sahak left Afghanistan and subsequently travelled to the Russian Federation, where available documentation indicates that he entered legally under applicable visa regulations. On the 15th of February 2025, he crossed the Poland–Belarus border through the Świsłocz River near border marker 483/4, in a section where the border wall did not obstruct the crossing. Late that evening a Polish Border Guard vehicle patrol observed Wazir and seven other people after they had entered Poland and began pursuing their group. Then a Polish Army patrol apprehended Wazir and six others near border marker 485; Border Guard officers subsequently apprehended the remaining member of the group. All eight men were transported to the Border Guard post in Bobrowniki. According to Border Guard documentation, Wazir was informed that he could apply for international protection in Poland and stated that he did not intend to do so, signing a declaration to that effect. Documentation completed the same day also recorded France as his intended destination. The available documentation establishes that these declarations were signed but does not allow the circumstances in which they were obtained to be independently reconstructed and therefore does not establish whether Wazir's decision was informed and voluntary.



język pasztu

61

15.02.2025 r., Bobrowniki
(data i miejsce)

WAZIR KHAN SAHAK
(imię, Nazwisko)

AFGHANISTAN
(Narodowość)

P00407237
(Seria i numer paszportu)

خرګندونه

ز خرګندونه کوم، چې د پولنډ جمهوریت په سیمه کې د نړیوالې ساتنې د غوښتنلیک وړاندې کولو په حق
پورې اړوند معلومات راکړي دي.
په دې دول خرګندونه کوم، چې د پولنډ په سیمه کې د ساتنې غوښتنه نه کوم او نه غواړم د همدې په ټرڅ غوښتنلیک
وړاندې وکړم هم نه غواړم، چې د پولنډ په سیمه کې د نړیوالې ساتنه راکړلو د نیت خرګندونې وکړم.
زما د سفر موخه FRANCE ده
زما د کورنۍ غړي/اقربا الان په همدې هیواد کې پاتې دي، چې زما د سفر موخه ده.
☐ هو ☐ نه

(Data i podpis)
15/02/2025

Figure A.56. Copy of a declaration concerning international protection signed by Wazir Khan Sahak at the Border Guard post in Bobrowniki on 15 February 2025. The document records France as his intended destination and contains a signed indication that he did not intend to apply for international protection in Poland. Photograph from Wazir's friend.

On the 16th of February 2025, according to official records, Wazir was identified on the premises of the Border Guard post in Bobrowniki on the basis of his passport. He was issued a Pashto-language decision imposing a three-year ban on entry into Poland and other Schengen states, which he signed. The documentation also informed him of his right to appeal the decision to the Commander of the Border Guard post.

Later that day, the order requiring Wazir to leave Poland was enforced. According to Border Guard records, officers transported him to the state border near marker 553 and returned him to Belarus. The procedure therefore combined notification of a formal right to appeal with Wazir's immediate removal from Polish territory. However, once returned to the forested border zone on the Belarusian side of the border, he no longer had direct access to the institution before which he could appeal. Border Guard documentation treated the removal as compatible with the principle of non-refoulement, based on an assessment that return to Belarus would not expose Wazir to a risk of persecution or serious harm. The available records do not indicate that, before his removal, Wazir was provided with medical assistance, dry clothing, or access to legal assistance.

Between February and March 2025, according to accounts provided by

migrants who encountered Wazir after his return to Belarus, he remained in the Poland–Belarus border zone and joined another group waiting for an opportunity to cross into Poland again. For approximately one month, he stayed in the forest, sleeping in makeshift shelters and relying on campfires for warmth. The migrants described limited access to food, low temperatures, and rainfall, as well as the constant need to avoid detection by border forces on both sides of the border. Their accounts indicate that Wazir remained in these conditions for several weeks following his removal from Poland, before attempting to cross the border again.

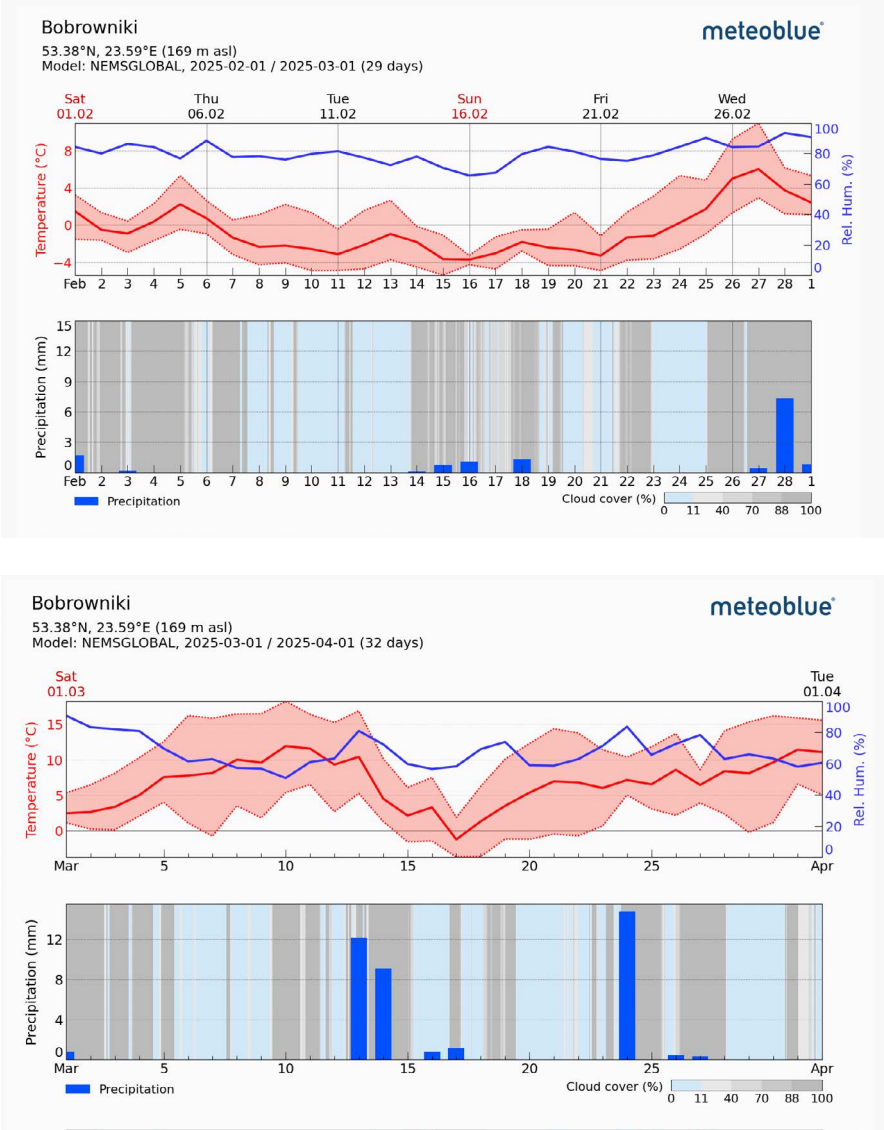


Figure A.57. Modelled historical weather conditions for Bobrowniki, Poland, in February and March 2025. The graphs show temperature, relative humidity, precipitation, and cloud cover during the period in which Wazir Khan Sahak was returned to Belarus and subsequently remained in the Poland–Belarus border area. The data are based on the NEMS Global weather model and represent simulated historical conditions rather than direct measurements at Wazir's precise location. Graph by meteoblue, "Historical Weather Data: Bobrowniki, Poland, February–March 2025," meteoblue.com.

On the 10th of March 2025, Wazir had his last known contact with a family member living in the United Kingdom. According to interviews conducted for this investigation, the call was made from Poland. No further direct contact with Wazir was established.

On the 3rd of April, the family member received a WhatsApp message from a man who said that he had travelled with Wazir as part of the same group. According to his account, Wazir had crossed into Poland with the group in mid-March. After approximately ten hours of walking, his physical condition deteriorated to the point that he could no longer continue. His legs had become severely swollen, and he was unable to walk. The group continued without him because they feared apprehension and being returned to Belarus. The witness provided the family with coordinates indicating the location where Wazir had remained, in a forested area beyond Waliły station, near the road towards Bobrowniki.

During the night of 3–4 April, after unsuccessful attempts to contact Wazir, his family contacted the Podlasie Volunteer Rescue Service (POPH) via its emergency line and provided the coordinates. On the morning of the 4th of April, a POPH team went to the indicated area and searched throughout the day but did not locate Wazir. Because POPH did not have access to specialised search resources, it subsequently sought the involvement of state services with greater search capacity.

Between the 5th and the 11th of April 2025, Wazir's disappearance was formally reported to the Polish Police. The notification stated that he was alone in the forest, unable to move independently and in need of urgent assistance and included approximate location data and four photographs. Despite these circumstances, the case was not classified as a Level 1 disappearance requiring an immediate response to a threat to life or health, but as a Level 3.

The report was subsequently transferred from the Police in Ostrów Wielkopolski to the Voivodeship Police Headquarters in Białystok. In the course of these checks, the Police established that Wazir had previously been apprehended by the Border Guard and returned to Belarus. They also confirmed that his details had been entered into the Schengen Information System with an alert refusing entry and stay in Member States. The available documentation does not establish whether Wazir was still alive when the missing-person report was filed.

Between the 16th and the 27th of April 2025, the investigation moved

to on-site search operations. On the 16th of April, eleven days after the disappearance had first been reported, the case reached the Police unit in Zabłudów, responsible for the area where Wazir had last been located. Officers searched within approximately five kilometres of the indicated location, including forest tracks, clearings, remnants of infrastructure and the source area of the Kołodzieżanka River, as well as nearby roads and settlements. Wildlife cameras in the area were also checked. Wazir was not found.

On the 28th of April 2025, a deputy forester working in the Waliły Forest District discovered a body near a forest road in the Knyszyn Forest. The Police, Border Guard, prosecutor and a forensic expert were subsequently notified. According to Wazir's family, the body was later identified as Wazir Khan Sahak.

The body was lying face down and was in an advanced state of decomposition. The shoes and one sock had been removed, while several layers of clothing remained on the body. Wazir's lifeless body was found in the area previously indicated in the missing-person report as the location where Wazir had become unable to continue moving. The position of the body and the displaced clothing constitute material evidence relevant to reconstructing the circumstances of his final hours, and the later identification of the cause of death as hypothermia.

Between the 29th of April and the 5th of May 2025, the District Prosecutor's Office in Białystok opened an investigation into Wazir's death under Article 155 of the Polish Penal Code, concerning suspected involuntary manslaughter. The investigation was conducted by the Criminal Department of the Municipal Police Headquarters in Białystok under prosecutorial supervision. The prosecutor commissioned a forensic medical examination to establish the cause of death and assess possible injuries, together with histopathological and toxicological tests.

On the 5th of May 2025, a member of Wazir's family, accompanied by POPH, attended the identification procedure. By that time, the autopsy had already been conducted, and direct visual identification was no longer possible. DNA samples were collected from the relative, who subsequently identified Wazir from photographs taken at the location where the body had been found. The Polish Prosecutor's Office subsequently discontinued the investigation into Wazir's death on the grounds that the circumstances did not constitute the elements of a criminal offence. Following the completion of the required formal procedures, Wazir's

family, assisted by civil society actors from the Podlasie Volunteer Rescue Service (POPH), formally identified his body.

In May 2025, Wazir Khan Sahak's body was repatriated to Afghanistan and buried in Nangarhar. On his final journey home, his cousins travelled on the same flight as the coffin carrying his body. For Wazir's family, however, the closure of the investigation did not resolve the circumstances of his death. They continue to ask: what happened to him in the Polish forest and who bears responsibility for the chain of events that preceded his death?

Conclusion

Wazir Khan Sahak's death cannot be understood through hypothermia as a medical cause alone. After being returned to Belarus in February 2025, he remained in the border zone for several weeks, exposed to cold, rain and hunger. After crossing into Poland again, his physical condition deteriorated until he became unable to walk. His companions continued without him, fearing apprehension and pushback, but later transmitted the coordinates of the location where he had remained.

When Wazir's disappearance was reported to the Police on the 5th of April, the information provided indicated that he was alone in the forest, unable to move, and in need of urgent assistance. Nevertheless, on-site police searches did not begin until the 16th of April. His body was found on the 28th of April in the area previously indicated in the missing-person report. The correspondence between the reported location and the place where the body was recovered makes the delay in the search operation central to the reconstruction of his death.

The case demonstrates why environmental exposure cannot be separated from border enforcement and institutional inaction. Cold, wet conditions and immobility created the conditions in which hypothermia could become fatal, but Wazir's exposure was shaped by pushback, prolonged displacement, fear of apprehension, and delayed search intervention. The relevant forensic question is therefore not only how Wazir died, but how the conditions in which he died were produced.