

**HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN
BELARUS AND AT THE
EUROPEAN UNION BORDER
IN 2023–2024: A**

**STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS AND
PERSPECTIVES**

HUMAN CONSTANTA IS A HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATION FOUNDED IN 2015.

In 2021, Human Constanta, like many other civil society organizations in Belarus, was subjected to unjustified prosecution and forced liquidation, which greatly hampered human rights work in the country. In 2022, the organization's website was blocked, forcing the team to leave the Belarusian domain zone.

Despite all the difficulties and transformations, we continue our activities.

OUR MISSION:

is the promotion of public interests and joint actions in response to modern challenges in the field of human rights.

WE WORK IN SUCH AREAS AS:

- Protection of human rights of foreign citizens and stateless persons
- Digital rights and freedoms
- Promotion of anti-discrimination
- Human rights education
- Sport and human rights
- Anti-extremism

We work in three dimensions: **advocacy, analytics, and education.**

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

- Helping others protect their rights
- We conduct expert analysis of Belarusian legislation and law enforcement practices, identifying inconsistencies with international human rights standards and using this data in our advocacy work
- Transferring this knowledge through educational activities

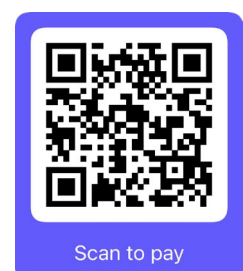
OUR VALUES

are respect for human rights and non-discrimination, gender equality, sustainability, and critical thinking. We believe that the implementation of these principles leads to a world where there is no dominance of some social groups over others, and society over nature.

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Introduction

In the summer of 2021, thousands of migrants, primarily from conflict-affected countries such as Iraq and Syria, arrived at the border between Belarus and the European Union (EU). They attempted to cross the border and seek international protection in the EU. In response, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia declared a state of emergency along their borders with Belarus, reinforced border security, and began constructing barriers, deploying the military to control the situation.

The EU accused Belarus of deliberately orchestrating the flow of migrants, facilitating their arrival at the border, and, in some cases, forcing them to enter the EU illegally. The Belarusian authorities have denied these allegations.

Over the four years of the humanitarian crisis, the Human Constanta team has been monitoring the situation and providing assistance to migrants in distress in Belarus. While 2021 saw the organised arrival of foreigners—mainly from the Middle East—on group and individual tourist visas, the crisis dynamics have changed since 2022, becoming less controlled by the Belarusian authorities. Despite a decline in the number of migrants arriving in Belarus with the intention of crossing into the EU—partly due to the cancellation of direct flights from Iraq and Syria, reduced issuance of tourist visas, and increased detentions and deportations—the humanitarian crisis in Belarus and at the EU border continues. All four countries involved persist in violating migrants' rights, leaving them in an extremely vulnerable position, sometimes leading to deaths and disappearances.

This report analyses key aspects of the humanitarian crisis in Belarus in 2023–2024, identifies major issues and the most common human rights violations faced by migrants, and provides recommendations for the states and international organisations involved.

The report is based on data collected through monitoring the situation at the EU border and within Belarus. It draws on information obtained from interviews with migrants, witnesses of human rights violations, human rights defenders, and journalists from other countries. The anal-

ysis also includes official statements from state authorities, reports from international organisations, and data from open sources.

Chapter 1: Key Aspects of the Humanitarian Crisis

1.1. Main Migration Routes

At the beginning of the humanitarian crisis in 2021, most migrants arrived in Belarus on tourist visas via international flights. However, following the reduction of flights from Iraq and Iran to Minsk and the mass return of migrants via evacuation flights or through the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) voluntary return programme in November 2021, people began seeking alternative routes and entry grounds into Belarus.

By 2022, it became evident that transit through Russia had become the main route. The Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) confirmed an increase in the number of foreigners using this route. Migrants enter Russia on visas or under visa-free agreements and then cross the land border into Belarus. Since there is no border control along the entire Belarus-Russia border, most migrants remain unregistered in Belarus. This lack of registration not only complicates assessing the actual number of arrivals but also exposes people to additional risks. Entering the country outside official checkpoints¹ places migrants in an irregular status, leaving them without necessary documents, medical insurance, or other legal protections. Under such conditions, they are less likely to seek assistance from official institutions, including medical facilities, further increasing their vulnerability to various threats.

Since November 2024, Human Constanta's free legal office has begun receiving requests from citizens of various African countries (primarily Burundi, the Comoros, Cameroon, and Guinea) who arrived in Belarus on student visas. According to them, they initially came to pursue higher education; however, the inability to work—and thus sustain themselves and pay study tuition—has made their situation unstable. Forced to seek safety and means of survival, many attempt to cross into the EU to apply for international protection there. Foreign students from Russian universities face similar challenges. Lacking alternatives, they also travel to Belarus in an attempt to reach the EU.

¹ Until 11 January 2025, crossing the Belarus-Russia border by foreign nationals and stateless persons—regardless of whether they held a visa or a permit for permanent or temporary residence in Belarus or Russia—using railway or road transport was considered a violation of the internationally established procedures for crossing Belarus's State Border. On 11 January 2025, an agreement signed on 19 June 2020 between the Government of the Republic of Belarus and the Government of the Russian Federation came into force. This agreement concerns the mutual recognition of visas and other matters related to the entry of foreign nationals and stateless persons into the territories of the states that are parties to the Treaty on the Establishment of the Union State.

The indirect transit routes to Belarus make it impossible to assess the real scale of the humanitarian crisis. The absence of accurate data on the number of migrants complicates monitoring efforts and the development of effective support measures. As a result, vulnerable migrant groups remain outside the scope of official institutions and non-governmental organisations, making timely responses to their needs more difficult and increasing the risks they face.

1.2. Exploitation of Migrants in Belarus

The prolonged humanitarian crisis in Belarus and at its border with the EU in 2023–2024 has particularly affected irregular migrant women, who have found themselves in extremely vulnerable situations.

Cases have been documented where migrant women from African countries sought help after finding themselves in dire conditions in Belarus. These women reported being left without means of survival, housing, or any support from the state or local organisations. In their struggle to survive, some were forced to engage in sex work in exchange for food and temporary shelter.

Sexual exploitation also became a threat during attempts to cross the Belarus-EU border outside official checkpoints. Migrants reported cases of gang rape in Belarusian border areas. After experiencing violence and failed attempts to enter the EU, women returned to Belarusian cities in states of psychological shock and disorientation. However, they avoided contacting law enforcement, fearing detention and subsequent deportation from Belarus.

Additionally, reports have surfaced about threats of sexual violence and forced physical contact by both Belarusian and Polish border guards. Human Rights Watch [documented](#) testimonies from migrants who claimed that Belarusian border guards subjected them to violence, degrading treatment, and various forms of coercion. One Ethiopian woman recounted being forced to undress completely under the threat of rape by Belarusian border officials.

According to the U.S. State Department's 2024 Trafficking in Persons [Report](#): Belarus, the vulnerability of irregular migrants from third countries to exploitation in Belarus continues to grow. Firstly, the de facto authorities deport migrants without screening for potential exploitation and. In some cases, they either denied or delayed responses to requests from the UNHCR to provide assistance to these individuals. Furthermore, there are no measures in place to reduce the demand for commercial sexual exploitation involving irregular migrants. As a

result, the lack of effective protection mechanisms increases the risks of human trafficking in the country.

In all these cases, irregular migrants face serious difficulties in accessing legal assistance in Belarus. The issue of [providing](#) medical and psychological support to victims of human trafficking is particularly pressing. In response to an inquiry about available support, the Department for Citizenship and Migration of Belarus stated that victims of human trafficking, including irregular migrants, are entitled to assistance on equal terms with other affected individuals under the law. However, the department also emphasised that the irregular stay of this category of foreigners in the country constitutes an administrative offense, punishable by fines or deportation.

Thus, while Belarusian authorities formally allow for the provision of assistance to irregular migrants who have suffered from human trafficking, their approach in practice remains repressive. Instead of prioritising protection, they focus on the migrants' irregular status, making it risky for them to seek help. The threat of fines and deportation creates significant barriers to obtaining legal, medical, and psychological support. The situation is further complicated by the fact that many migrant women lack identification documents, making it even harder for them to access assistance and increasing their risk of further exploitation.

1.3. Coverage of the Humanitarian Crisis in Belarusian Media

The coverage of the migration crisis at the Belarus-EU border by Belarusian state media highlights several key aspects of how the humanitarian crisis is presented:

- **Migrants as victims of violence and human rights violations.**

State media regularly report cases of mistreatment of migrants by European security forces. One [article](#), for example, describes how refugees from Syria, Iraq, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Morocco were beaten and subjected to other forms of violence at the borders with Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland.

- **Migrants as a tool of political pressure.**

Alexander Lukashenko has repeatedly [stated](#) that Belarus will not restrain the flow of migrants heading to the EU, especially given the sanctions imposed on the country. He has emphasized that European countries themselves created the conditions for the migration crisis and must now deal with its consequences. In this context, migrants are portrayed as a threat to the European Union.

- **The need for international cooperation.**

In the second half of 2024, state media increasingly emphasized the importance of restoring international cooperation to address migration issues¹. Reports claimed that Belarus was taking measures to reduce the number of irregular migrants within its borders and those heading to the EU, calling on European countries to engage in dialogue to prevent irregular migration and protect migrants' rights.

Meanwhile, independent Belarusian media presented a different perspective on the situation at the border in 2023–2024. These outlets focused on the role of the Belarusian de facto authorities in creating and escalating tensions with neighbouring countries. In their reports, migrants were primarily depicted as victims of political manipulation by the Belarusian leadership. They highlighted the vulnerability of migrants in Belarus and the government's responsibility for exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. Key aspects of this coverage included:

- **Migrants as a tool of pressure by the Belarusian authorities.**

Independent media stressed that the Belarusian authorities used migrants as leverage against EU countries. They pointed out that after Lukashenko's [statement](#) in May 2021 about ceasing to restrain the flow of migrants and narcotics across the EU border, the migration crisis entered an active

¹ [Ambrzevich: Belarus is looking for possible ways to cooperate with the EU on the issue of illegal migration; MFA: Belarus is ready to resume cooperation with the EU on migration issues;](#)
[Pakhomchik: Minsk's efforts to combat illegal migration are showing results.](#)

phase. Some publications included testimonies suggesting the possible involvement of Belarusian de facto authorities in organising migrant flows toward the EU border.

Migrants as victims of violence and political manipulation.

Independent outlets reported cases of violence and mistreatment of migrants by Belarusian border guards and security forces. They also highlighted that migrants were being used as [pawns](#) in Belarus's political games against the EU.

Overall, the analysis of Belarusian media coverage reveals a clear divide in how events are portrayed, depending on the source of information. State media depict Belarus as a victim of Western policies, focusing on the mistreatment of migrants by European authorities and advocating for international cooperation. In contrast, independent Belarusian media highlight the responsibility of the Belarusian de facto authorities in creating and escalating the humanitarian crisis.

1.4. Belarusian Society's Response to the Humanitarian Crisis

Despite the prevalence of rhetoric in state media blaming the European Union, public opinion in Belarus reflects a different perspective. In spring 2024, Human Constanta conducted an analysis of Belarusian public opinion, both inside the country and abroad, regarding different categories of migrants. The survey included 890 respondents aged 18 and older.

The results showed that:

- 15% of respondents closely followed news about the border crisis,
- 61% read about it along with other news,
- 17% did not follow the events directly but were aware of the situation.

When asked who they considered responsible for the crisis, responses were as follows:

- 90% blamed the Belarusian authorities,
- 54% cited international criminal groups,
- 54% pointed to Russian authorities,
- 48% held migrants' countries of origin responsible,
- 46% blamed Belarusian border guards,
- 28% blamed the migrants themselves.

Only 9% attributed responsibility to EU politicians.

Furthermore, 65% of respondents supported the actions of Polish and Lithua-

nian authorities, whereas only 1% supported the Belarusian government. The survey also found that Belarusians tended to sympathize with Lithuanian and Polish border guards (56%) and EU politicians (35%), while only 5% expressed solidarity with forced migrants.

These findings indicate that a significant portion of Belarusian society recognizes the responsibility of the Belarusian authorities for the humanitarian crisis, despite the dominant rhetoric in state media. At the same time, the high level of support for neighbouring countries' actions and the low level of solidarity with migrants suggest that border security is perceived as a priority. This underscores the need for broader public discussions on migrants' rights and the humanitarian aspects of the crisis, as well as the importance of independent information and human rights advocacy.

1.5. The EU's Response to the Ongoing Humanitarian Crisis

As early as 2021, several European politicians characterized the humanitarian crisis at the Belarus-EU border as a “hybrid attack” orchestrated by the Belarusian de facto authorities. This narrative shifted the focus away from human rights and humanitarian needs toward national security concerns. This approach was reflected not only in public statements by European officials but also in practical measures: the construction of a five-meter-high barrier along the Polish and Lithuanian borders and the deployment of several thousand military personnel to strengthen border security. Polish authorities claim these measures have been effective, reporting that out of 29,707 border crossing attempts in 2024, only 10,900 were successful.

Lithuanian authorities, in turn, emphasize that in addition to physical security measures, legal regulation plays a crucial role. In 2023, Lithuania took a significant step by approving the submission of a lawsuit against the Belarusian authorities to the International Court of Justice regarding their involvement in organising the humanitarian crisis. This process is seen not only as a means of protecting national interests but also as an effort to draw international attention to human rights violations occurring in Belarus.

On 14 May 2024, the Council of the European Union adopted the EU Migration and Asylum Pact, initially proposed by the European Commission in 2020. This document introduces a set of legal frameworks and policies aimed at unifying migration and asylum procedures across EU member states. However, experts argue that the pact prioritizes stricter control over the EU's external bor-

ders and complicates access to fair and effective asylum procedures.

In May 2024, an [incident](#) occurred at the Polish-Belarusian border, where a 21-year-old Polish soldier was fatally stabbed while attempting to prevent an irregular border crossing. In response, the Polish parliament [approved](#) controversial amendments to national legislation, including decriminalizing the use of firearms by border guards in certain self-defense situations. These changes have raised concerns about potential human rights violations, as they effectively reduce accountability for the use of force at the border.

In October 2024, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk [announced](#) plans to temporarily suspend the right to asylum, citing national security threats due to Belarus's policies. Additionally, Tusk categorically rejected the implementation of the EU Migration and Asylum Pact, arguing that its provisions could jeopardize Poland's security.

In December 2024, Poland [passed](#) amendments to its Law on Granting Protection to Foreign Nationals, introducing the concept of "instrumentalization of migration." These changes formally enshrined Tusk's earlier proposals for suspending the right to seek asylum in cases where migration is deemed to be politically manipulated. The new law reinforces repressive trends in Poland's migration policy, raising [concerns](#) among human rights organisations.

The EU's response to the migration crisis at the Belarusian border demonstrates the predominance of national security concerns over the protection of human rights. The policies of individual states, such as Latvia, Poland, and Lithuania, suggest a gradual departure from international asylum protection standards. This creates a risk of further restrictions on migrant rights and the use of migration as a tool of political pressure. The tightening of border controls, the refusal to uphold EU-wide migration policies, and legal changes in Poland confirm a broader shift toward stricter border control measures, which could have long-term consequences for the international protection system for asylum seekers.

Chapter 2: Deaths and Disappearances of Migrants at the Border

2.1. Data on Migrant Deaths and Disappearances in Belarus

On 4 August 2021, a few months after the start of the humanitarian crisis, Belarusian authorities officially confirmed the first migrant death at the EU border. As of the end of February 2025, the Belarusian State Border Committee reported 63 deceased migrants whose bodies were discovered on the Belarusian side of the border. An additional 16 deaths were recorded based on testimonies from other migrants and activists working in border areas. The committee publishes information via its Telegram channel, but it provides only minimal details about the locations where bodies were found, the victims' nationalities, and possible causes of death. Despite the availability of video footage, often featuring bodies or their companions, identifying the victims remains a challenge.

To date, the known deceased migrants originate from Sri Lanka, Iraq, Guinea, Syria, Togo, Yemen, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Egypt, Iran, India, and Somalia. In several cases, hypothermia was reported as the preliminary cause of death. Additionally, some reports indicated signs of violent deaths, such as bruises and abrasions on the bodies. However, no information has been disclosed regarding criminal investigations into these cases or their outcomes. The situation is further complicated by the fact that some migrants may die in rivers, swamps, or other hard-to-reach locations, leaving their bodies undiscovered. Thus, the actual number of deaths could be significantly higher, with many victims of the Belarus-EU border crisis remaining unidentified.

No official statistics on missing migrants in Belarus are available. However, between April 2022 and December 2024, Human Constanta received reports of at least 119 missing migrants from Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Somalia, Guinea, India, and Ethiopia. These reports came from relatives, friends, and international organizations. In each case, Human Constanta immediately relayed the information to the Belarusian State Border Committee, the only agency with the authority and capability to conduct search and rescue operations in border areas. However, the committee frequently failed to respond to requests and did not provide updates on search operations, their results, or the fate of the missing individuals.

Some of these missing migrants may have been detained and placed in tempo-

rary detention centres across Belarus, while others could have been deported to Russia, from where they originally travelled. The lack of transparent mechanisms for tracking missing persons and investigating disappearances exacerbates the situation, depriving families of any means to obtain reliable information about their missing relatives.

2.2. Risk Factors at the Border

According to migrants' testimonies, the main risks to their health and lives at the border include exposure to cold weather, lack of food and water, and physical violence from border guards. These attacks often result in serious injuries, including fractures and significant blood loss caused from attacks by service dogs. The increase in such incidents has been confirmed by Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) following the construction of border fences. Migrants also reported that border guards frequently confiscate their personal belongings, including mobile phones, which are crucial for navigation and for finding a way out of forested areas.

The Belarusian border zone is a highly restricted area, accessible only to individuals and organisations with special permission from the State Border Committee of Belarus. Unauthorized presence in this zone is prohibited, significantly hindering the work of NGOs and international organisations. This restriction prevents timely responses to reports of migrants in danger, missing, or deceased. Due to the absence of independent monitoring, there is no way to objectively assess whether Belarusian authorities are conducting search-and-rescue operations diligently or investigating migrant deaths.

Providing humanitarian aid in Belarus has been effectively criminalised: any attempt to assist migrants—such as offering food, clothing, or medical care—can lead to criminal charges. This creates a climate of fear, discouraging both individuals and organisations from offering help, further isolating migrants in critical situations. The lack of cooperation between Belarus and neighbouring EU countries further complicates crisis monitoring, aid delivery, and repatriation of missing or deceased migrants.

Chapter 3. The Practice of “Voluntary Returns” and Deportations of Migrants from Belarus

3.1. Raids and Detentions of Migrants in Belarus

Between 30 September and 6 October 2024, Belarusian authorities conducted the second phase of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) operation, “Illegal Migrant-2024”, aimed at counteracting irregular migration. Similar operations have been conducted in Belarus annually for the past 17 years. In 2024, the Belarusian authorities expanded their focus beyond traditional migration violations, such as illegal employment of foreign workers, to targeting transit migrants. During the operation, at least two groups from Afghanistan and Iran were detained after arriving in Belarus from Russia, intending to cross into the EU. The official reason for their detention was lack of valid Belarusian visas, which justified their forced deportation.

Human Constanta’s human rights monitoring revealed that between December 2024 and January 2025, just before the Belarusian presidential elections, authorities intensified raids and arrests of foreigners. Law enforcement officers conducted sweeps in areas where migrants were likely to be present—including markets, train stations, hotels, rental apartments, and even on the streets of major cities. Among those detained were women with young children.

The escalation of repressive measures forced many migrants to remain indoors for weeks, fearing to go outside. Some avoided seeking medical assistance, as law enforcement officers were stationed there. Even in cases of life-threatening health conditions, they preferred to remain untreated.

3.2. “Voluntary Returns” and Deportations of Migrants

Unlike the negligence of Belarusian authorities toward transit migrants in 2021–2022, Human Constanta documented a significant increase in detentions and subsequent deportations of foreigners from Belarus in 2024. Deportations occur both forcibly and through the so-called “voluntary return” scheme.

After being detained, most foreigners were placed in temporary detention facilities across the country. If detainees declare their willingness to purchase tickets and leave Belarus voluntarily, the authorities process their deportation or expulsion and release them from detention. In such cases, a stamp was placed in their passport, indicating a deadline by which they had to leave the country, along with a ban on re-entry for a specific period. However, in some cases, “voluntary” deportation was actually forced. Several foreign nationals reported that Belarusian authorities pressured them to buy tickets by threatening prolonged detention in temporary detention facilities, which are only meant for short-term administrative arrests. Human Constanta documented a case in which an Afghan citizen was coerced into confirming his intention to return home to avoid such prolonged detention.

Beyond standard deportation procedures, cases were recorded in which detained migrants were transported to Russian territory under the pretext of re-admission, without any official documentation. This practice was especially common for migrants without identity documents or with expired Russian visas. Instead of initiating official identification procedures, which could take months, Belarusian authorities preferred to expel these migrants informally. Migrants in these cases are not issued any deportation documents, leaving them in a legal limbo at the Belarus-Russia border. As a result, many of them return to Belarus, where they are detained again and once more unlawfully expelled across the border.

At the end of 2021, the IOM [launched](#) a programme to assist with the voluntary return and reintegration of migrants in Belarus, helping dozens of migrants return to their countries of origin on regular and additional flights. Although IOM officially [maintained](#) in 2023–2024 that this programme remained available for those unable to afford a safe return, its actual capacity became significantly limited. In an official response to an inquiry from Human Constanta, IOM confirmed that the programme was still operational but provided assistance only in the most vulnerable cases. However, the specific criteria for vulnerability were not disclosed and were determined on a case-by-case basis. This creates un-

certainty for migrants, who cannot predict whether they qualify for support and are often forced to seek alternative, and frequently unsafe, ways to escape their crisis situation.

3.3. Exit Visas

In some cases, foreign nationals independently decide to leave Belarus and apply for an exit visa. In 2024, obtaining such visas did not pose significant difficulties, requiring only the payment of a state fee and a fine for violating the rules of stay. The very act of applying for an exit visa is generally regarded as confirmation of the migrant's intention to leave the country.

Even in complex situations—such as prolonged irregular stays in Belarus or prior detentions—migrants are usually granted exit visas. If the initial visa does not permit departure, reapplication is allowed, and there have been cases where migrants received exit visas up to three times. Each time, they were required to pay the fee and fine again.

Belarusian border authorities, particularly at the Brest checkpoint on the border with Poland, generally allowed irregular migrants with exit visas to leave the country without additional obstacles. However, if Polish border authorities refused entry and did not accept asylum applications, the exit visa was annulled upon return to Belarus. Additionally, cases of migrant detentions at the Kamenny Log checkpoint on the Lithuanian border indicate inconsistent practices among Belarusian border officials regarding exit procedures.

Exit visas typically have a validity period of at least one week. While some migrants sought assistance in obtaining these visas, the majority managed the process independently, as Belarus had a vested interest in their departure.

Overall, the Belarusian authorities' approach to migration policy appears inconsistent: on one hand, repressive measures against migrants are intensifying; on the other, there is notable flexibility and disregard for regulations when migrants express a willingness to leave the country.

Chapter 4: Conditions for Migrants in Belarus

4.1. Undocumented Migrants in Belarus

In 2023–2024, Human Constanta repeatedly received reports of cases where, during attempts to cross the “green” border between Belarus and EU countries, Belarusian border guards did not detain migrants but confiscated their passports. These documents were subsequently not returned, and in some cases, border guards destroyed them in front of the migrants in the border zone. Additionally, there were instances where migrants lost personal belongings, including identity documents, while attempting to cross the border.

The lack of identity documents severely limits migrants’ ability to safely remain in Belarus or return to their countries of origin. In most cases, when undocumented migrants contact Belarusian migration authorities, they are immediately detained and placed in temporary detention facilities, which are not designed for long-term detention. However, in practice, detained migrants can remain there for months, completely isolated from the outside world, without access to interpreters, lawyers, or diplomatic assistance.

The process of restoring lost documents requires the involvement of diplomatic missions of the migrants’ home countries. However, not all nations have embassies in Belarus, which complicates and delays the process of identity verification and the issuance of new documents. Moreover, there is no transparent oversight of the actions of the detention facilities administration, the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or foreign diplomatic services. As a result, requests from undocumented migrants are often ignored, leaving them in a legal vacuum, deprived of basic rights and protections.

One particularly vulnerable group consists of migrant women who have given birth while staying in Belarus. By law, they can obtain a birth certificate and a birth record for their child, but to arrange identity documents for the newborn, they must apply to their respective embassies. When such embassies are absent in Belarus, the process can take many months or even years. For example, a Liberian woman who gave birth to two children in Belarus was unable to obtain documents for them for over two years. During this time, she was undergoing deportation proceedings and faced threats from the Belarusian authorities regarding the possible removal of her children. In 2024, the authorities did take her children away and returned them only after she presented passports and

tickets to Liberia. In another case, a Sudanese woman was denied a birth certificate for her child in Belarus, without which obtaining a Sudanese passport for the newborn was impossible.

4.2. Employment of Migrants in Belarus

As of 1 January 2025, Belarus expanded the List of Professions for Foreign Workers, allowing migrants and stateless persons without permanent residence permits to be employed without restrictions aimed at protecting the national labour market. This reform eliminates the need to obtain special work permits in certain sectors, significantly simplifying the legalisation process for migrants in the country.

In practice, this flexibility applies not only to migrants who enter Belarus legally but also to those who were previously undocumented. For instance, a Yemeni citizen who was in the country without valid legal grounds applied to migration authorities for a residence permit as he intended to work officially and integrate into society. In response, the Department of Citizenship and Migration of Belarus granted him temporary residence, provided he secured employment within a specified period. Although he ultimately failed to find a job, this case illustrates the Belarusian authorities' willingness to relax formal requirements for foreigners seeking legal employment, particularly in high-demand professions.

4.3. Access to Medical Care in Belarus

In 2023–2024, the Human Constanta team did not record any cases of urgent medical assistance being denied to irregular migrants in either public or private medical institutions in Belarus. No instances of detention or repressive measures in connection with seeking medical care were reported either. Most commonly, migrants seek hospital treatment for injuries sustained while attempting to cross the Belarus-EU border, including fractures, lacerations, frostbite, and burns. Additionally, chronic illnesses are common among them.

Parents with underage children can also receive necessary medical care in public institutions. For example, a Guinean woman took her child to a children's hospital due to a high fever, and the child received free medical treatment without any subsequent issues with law enforcement.

However, despite the formal availability of urgent medical assistance, many migrants avoid seeking medical help due to fears of detention and deportation. Law enforcement officers are permanently stationed in public medical institutions, exacerbating the concerns of irregular migrants. As a result, many prefer to forgo medical treatment even in critical situations. One known case involved a group of Sudanese migrants who attempted to cross the Polish border and

suffered violence from border guards. Forced to return to Belarus, they found themselves in critical condition, with dog bite wounds, fractures, frostbite, and fever after prolonged exposure to cold in the border zone. However, their fear of detention prevented them from seeking medical help, worsening their vulnerability and putting their lives at risk.

Until 2023, Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) operated in Belarus, providing medical aid to irregular migrants. As its specialists were independent of state structures, many migrants felt safe seeking help. However, after the mission's closure, a significant portion of irregular migrants, fearing state-run hospitals, were left without access to medical care.

Additionally, migrants are often forced to conceal the circumstances of their injuries, especially if they are legally residing in Belarus. For example, one migrant who contacted Human Constanta was afraid to disclose the true cause of her injury, fearing that her educational institution might expel her, leading to the loss of her legal status and subsequent deportation.

Despite the possibility of receiving urgent medical care in Belarus, access to psychological support remains an unresolved issue. Human Constanta documented cases in which survivors of violence and individuals who had attempted suicide were unable to receive qualified psychological help. This was often due to a lack of information about available services as well as language barriers that hindered communication with medical staff.

Thus, while migrants can access emergency medical assistance in Belarus, fear of detention renders it practically inaccessible to many. The closure of Medecins Sans Frontieres exacerbated the situation, leaving irregular migrants without safe access to medical services. As a result, a significant portion of vulnerable groups remain without timely treatment, and the lack of psychological support threatens not only their physical but also their mental and emotional well-being.

4.4. Barriers to Seeking International Protection in Belarus

In 2024, the Human Constanta team recorded an increase in applications for international protection in Belarus. However, an analysis of the process shows that Belarusian authorities continue to evade compliance with refugee legislation and create additional barriers to submitting applications.

One of the key obstacles is the refusal of the Departments of Citizenship and Migration to accept applications. When migrants attempt to submit their requests in person, they are often unjustifiably turned away. In response, the Human Constanta team has attempted to help applicants overcome these barriers by pre-filling application forms and sending them by post, as well as filing complaints against unlawful actions by state authorities. However, complaints to higher authorities have yielded little success—initial applicant interviews are delayed for several months. During this period, many migrants remain in Belarus without legal status and face the risk of detention and deportation.

Another major issue is the lack of access to lawyers, interpreters, and representatives of international organisations (such as UNHCR and IOM) for detained migrants. Without such assistance, detainees have virtually no chance of officially submitting an asylum request. In most cases, Belarusian authorities manage to deport migrants before their application process can be confirmed.

For example, an Afghan citizen was detained in Belarus and placed in a temporary detention facilities, where he expressed his intention to apply for international protection. UNHCR representatives in Belarus became involved in his case following a request from French journalists and visited him in detention. However, they refused to take further action, citing the detainee's supposed lack of intent to seek asylum in Belarus. The individual later reported that he was simply never given the opportunity to submit his application.

Trust in Belarus's international protection system among migrants continues to decline. The main reasons include:

- Incidents of violence by border service officers,
- The low quality of service in migration agencies,
- The absence of effective support and integration programmes for refugees.

Due to these factors, many migrants prefer to seek protection in other countries. For instance, a Somali citizen who was in the process of applying for protection in Belarus attempted to cross the Russian-Finnish border to seek asylum in Finland. However, he was detained in Russia, where he faced the threat of deportation. To avoid expulsion, he was forced to sign a contract with the Rus-

sian Armed Forces. Only urgent intervention by Russian human rights activists prevented him from being sent to the frontline, but it did not stop his deportation to Somalia, where his life was in danger.

Thus, the Belarusian international protection system not only fails to guarantee the safety of refugees but also creates additional risks. Instead of receiving protection, migrants face systematic refusals, delays in processing their applications, and the threat of deportation without proper review. As a result, many are forced to seek alternative means of escape, which sometimes exposes them to even greater dangers to their lives and freedom.

Recommendations

To address the humanitarian crisis in Belarus and at the EU border, we call on the Belarusian authorities to:

- Cease the practice of forced expulsions and deportations of migrants without proper assessment of the risks they face in their country of origin, including potential human trafficking threats.
- End the practice of informal expulsions of migrants to forested border areas of Russia.
- Ensure the unhindered acceptance and timely processing of asylum applications in accordance with the law.
- Guarantee detained migrants access to legal representation, interpreters, and international organisations, as well as communication with diplomatic representatives of their home countries.
- Provide victims of human trafficking with access to medical, psychological, and legal assistance without the threat of detention or deportation.
- Decriminalize assistance to migrants and stop the persecution of activists for providing food, clothing, and medical aid to migrants.
- Allow humanitarian and human rights organisations to operate freely, conducting independent monitoring of the humanitarian crisis in Belarusian border areas.
- Collect and publish data on migrant deaths and disappearances at the EU border, ensuring transparency and aiding families in locating missing persons in Belarus.
- Facilitate the issuance of identity documents to migrants and ensure proper documentation for children born in Belarus.

We also urge the authorities of Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland to uphold the human rights of migrants on their territory and at the Belarusian border, specifically:

- **Ensure unhindered access to asylum procedures and avoid detaining asylum seekers in particularly vulnerable situations.**
- **End the practice of pushbacks at the Belarusian border and prohibit violence or degrading treatment of migrants by border officials.**
- **Grant independent journalists and human rights organisations access to border areas for monitoring the situation and providing humanitarian aid to migrants.**

International organizations operating in Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, including the UN, UNHCR, IOM, and OSCE, must strengthen their role in protecting migrant rights in these countries by:

- **Securing access to detained migrants and those stranded in border areas between Belarus and the EU.**
- **Expanding humanitarian aid programmes, including medical, legal, and psychological support for irregular migrants and asylum seekers.**
- **Monitoring human trafficking and the exploitation of irregular migrants while assisting authorities in Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland in protecting trafficking victims.**
- **Improving migrant access to voluntary return and reintegration programmes in their countries of origin.**

Finally, we remind journalists covering the humanitarian crisis in Belarus and at the EU border to:

- **Avoid spreading xenophobic or stereotypical narratives about irregular migrants and asylum seekers, ensuring balanced reporting on the crisis.**
- **Push for access to detained migrants and those in border areas to provide comprehensive coverage and enhance public oversight.**
- **Increase coverage of violence, human trafficking, and migrant deaths at the Belarus-EU border.**