



# Border Violence Monitoring Network

# ILLEGAL PUSH-BACKS AND BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS



AUGUST 2021  
BALKAN REGION

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In August the Border Violence Monitoring Network<sup>1</sup> (BVMN) recorded 30 pushbacks, impacting 324 people across migratory routes in the Balkans. This report brings together these testimonies with field observations from across the region, highlighting the various types of border violence being enacted by the EU and other states. The analysis presented considers patterns in police violence during pushbacks, as well as the dire conditions in camps and squatted housing, aspects which make up some of the internal bordering processes impacting people-on-the-move.

In particular focus is the experience of displaced Afghans transiting through Turkey, Greece and the Balkans. The report provides statistical data on the experience of Afghan people-on-the-move since 2017, charting the longstanding patterns of border violence targeting them among other groups. Alongside this, the publication looks at the situation for Afghans arriving in Turkey, the challenges they face in accessing asylum and support, and the risks faced in crossing into Eastern Turkey from Iran. Providing insight into EU responses to the situation in Afghanistan, updates also come from the border of Turkey with Greece, where further additions were made to the border wall which prevents people from accessing the territory.

Aggressive pushback practices continued in the Evros area throughout August with more groups left stranded on islands in the Evros/Meriç river, causing more avoidable deaths. This sits alongside wider issues of concern that came to a head in August, including the dangerous impacts of wild-fires across the country, the ending of UNHCR cash benefits to asylum seekers and further criminalisation of sea rescue in the Aegean. Pushback violence is also evidenced with testimony analysis from the Hungarian border, where the use of K9 units mirrors police brutality endemic in the Croatian context. This report also provides further evidence of sexual violence being carried out by Croatian officers during pushbacks to Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as challenges for LGBTQIA+ transit communities in Turkey.

In litigation news, two key cases are analysed. First the chain-pushback of a Cameroonian plaintiff denied asylum access in Slovenia, who's ruling by the Supreme Court has been flagrantly ignored by the offending Slovenian authorities – current holders of the Presidency of the Council of the EU. Second, the case of a further chain-pushback documented by Austria Pushback Alarmphone is highlighted, despite a landmark ruling in July from the Regional Administrative Court of Styria. Also included is a follow up on the pattern of squat dispersals from Northern Serbia to the border with North Macedonia, described in this publication in relation to Belgrade.

The report also provides other updates, such as news on funding requirements imposed on the Greek Coast Guard related to the implementation of independent border monitoring. Meanwhile joint patrols on the Italian-Slovenian border persisted and news of increasing illegal removals at the Polish-Belarus border marked further disturbing trends. Across the EU external border, August was scored by persistent pushbacks and police brutality.



Border Violence  
Monitoring Network

A U G U S T  
R E P O R T  
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*\*BVMN is a network of watchdog organisations active in Greece and the Western Balkans including No Name Kitchen, Rigardu, Are You Syrious, Mobile Info Team, Disinfaux Collective, Josoor, [re:]ports Sarajevo, InfoKolpa, Centre for Peace Studies, Mare Liberum, Collective Aid and Fresh Response.*

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## REPORTING NETWORK

BVMN is a collaborative project between multiple grassroots organisations and NGOs working along the Western Balkan Route and Greece, documenting violations at borders directed towards people-on-the-move. The members have a common website [database](#), used as a platform to collate testimonies of illegal pushbacks which are gathered through interviews.

## TERMINOLOGY

The term *pushback* is a key component of the situation that unfolded along the EU borders (Hungary and Croatia) with Serbia in 2016, after the closure of the Balkan route. Push-back describes the informal expulsion (without due process) of an individual or group to another country. This lies in contrast to the term “deportation”, which is conducted in a legal framework. Push-backs have become an important, if unofficial, part of the migration regime of EU countries and elsewhere.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodological process for these interviews leverages the close social contact that we have as independent volunteers with refugees and migrants to monitor pushbacks at multiple borders. When individuals return with significant injuries or stories of abuse, one of our violence reporting volunteers will sit down with them to collect their testimony. Although the testimony collection itself is typically with a group no larger than five persons, the pushback groups which they represent can be as large as 50 persons. We have a standardised framework for our interview structure which blends the collection of hard data (dates, geo-locations, officer descriptions, photos of injuries/medical reports, etc.) with open narratives of the abuse.

## ABBREVIATIONS

BiH	-	Bosnia and Herzegovina
HR	-	Croatia
SRB	-	Serbia
SLO	-	Slovenia
ROM	-	Romania
HUN	-	Hungary
ITA	-	Italy
BGR	-	Bulgaria
MNK	-	North Macedonia
GRK	-	Greece
TUR	-	Turkey
EU	-	European Union



# TRENDS IN BORDER VIOLENCE

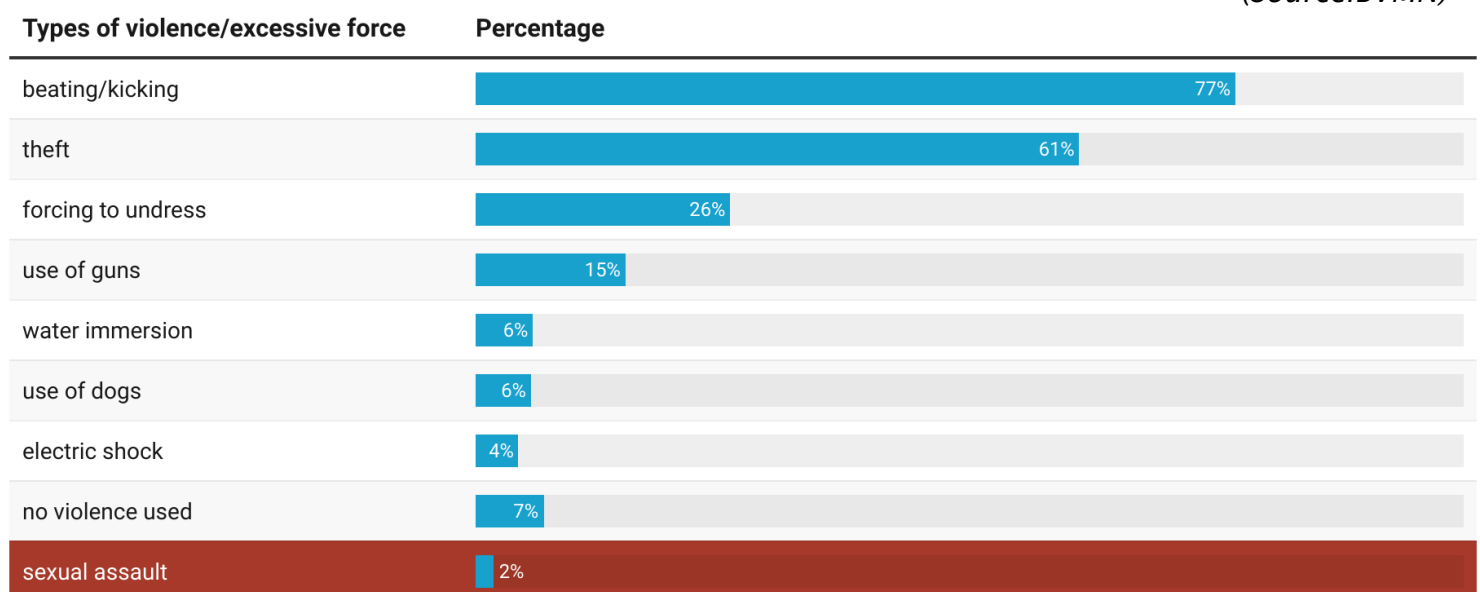
## VIOLENCE AGAINST AFGHANS ON THE ROUTE

The unfolding events in Afghanistan, which reached a peak in August, have led to the large displacement of people to neighbouring countries and further risk of violence and death to those targeted by the Taliban regime. While immediate attention understandably has been focused on the country itself, it is also important to situate forced displacement of people from Afghanistan within the wider context of EU complicity, both for the violent invasion and occupation launched in 2001 alongside the United States, but also for the subsequent 20 years of repressive border enforcement which has prevented Afghans from reaching sanctuary in the EU. Violence against Afghans at borders is endemic, and epitomised by the pushback practices observed along EU borders. This externalisation is also coupled with extensive immigration detention and deportation flights, with countries such as Germany only (temporarily) [pausing forced returns to Kabul airport](#) in August this year.

BVMN has so far recorded 481 pushback cases involving Afghans across Balkan migratory routes since January 2017. These incidents make up [41% of all testimonies](#) recorded by the network. Over 11,300 persons were involved in these pushbacks, though it is important to note that the exact number of Afghans is not discernible via this data because interviews with members of transit groups do not provide hard demographic breakdowns on their composition. What the statistics do highlight however is the prevalence of violence to which Afghans are either subject or witness to. Of the 481 cases, groups involving Afghans were targeted with a range of brutal physical violence, on many counts amounting to torture. BVMN stands in solidarity with people impacted by this dire situation: those in Afghanistan, those trying to leave, and Afghani's on the route.

### Types of violence used in pushbacks involving Afghans

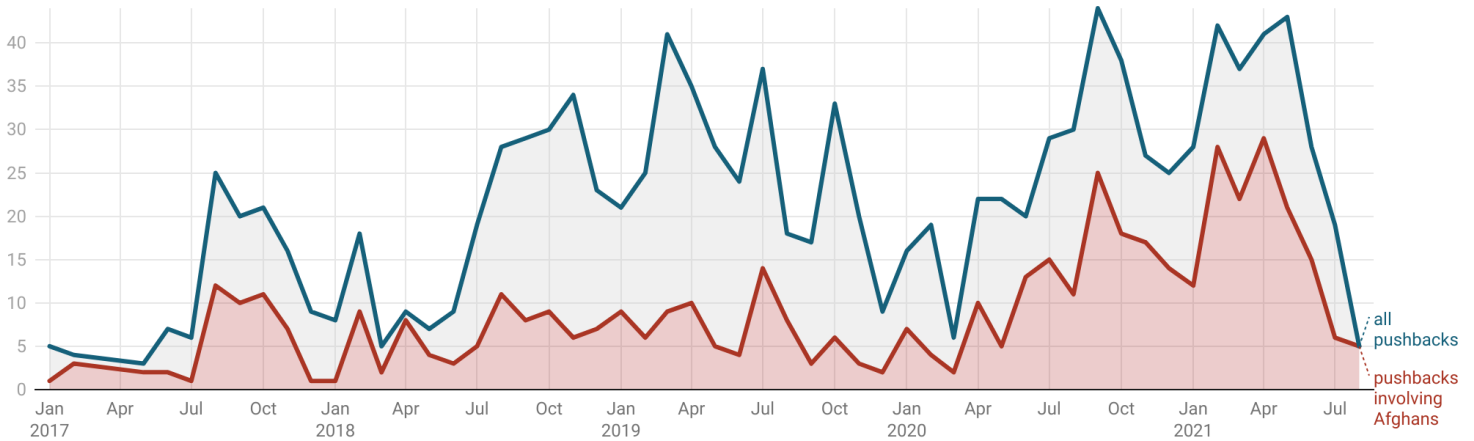
(Source: BVMN)



Created with Datawrapper

## Collected testimonies involving Afghans

Amount of testimonies collected per month. Displayed numbers do not show the amount of all push-backs, but only the number of testimonies collected.



Created with Datawrapper

(Source: BVMN)

## STRANDINGS ON EVROS/MERIÇ RIVER ISLANDS

After several individual incidents in spring 2020, BVMN has noticed a vile new trend in border violence from the Greek authorities since [autumn last year](#) whereby transit groups are apprehended, taken through the usual pushback procedure involving the theft of their phones, money and all other belongings, unlawful detention, beatings and forced undressing before being taken back to the border and then purposefully stranded on small islands in the Evros/Meriç river separating Greece from Turkey. Since then, BVMN has collected more than 24 testimonies describing this tactic leading to people stranded on islands for days – sometimes on Greek, sometimes on Turkish territory.

In three of these cases, group members managed to hide at least one mobile phone and reached out for help, including to BVMN member [Josoor](#). Footage and geolocation data obtained confirmed their presence on these islands, in all cases for multiple days with border guards on both sides preventing a crossing, including with rounds of live bullets. In addition to alerting both the relevant Greek and Turkish authorities, Josoor has [contacted Frontex](#) via urgent letters.

In the last week of August 2021, BVMN noted

a sharp increase in cases involving this highly concerning trend with three groups reaching out to Josoor from islands in the border river. In two of these incidents, alleged deaths occurred. One death of a Syrian man who had reached out for help while still in a forest on Greek territory due to his rapidly deteriorating health condition has now been confirmed dead and his body buried in Turkey. The bodies of two more Syrian men are still located on an island after they, as verified via a video sent by other group members, attempted to cross the river back to Turkey and were carried away by the current. Their families reached out to BVMN asking for support with the repatriation of the bodies to Syria. However, both the Greek and Turkish authorities have so far refused to retrieve the bodies.

For several reasons, BVMN is not (yet) keeping statistics of deaths. However, the recent weeks and months seem to have seen a sharp increase in people on the move dying at the Greek–Turkish land border. In response to two more urgent letters on these two recent cases, Frontex Director Fabrice Leggeri informed BVMN that the information was relayed to the Greek authorities.



*People stranded on an island in the Evros/ Meriç river after pushback from Greece (Source:Josoor)*

## PATTERNS IN HUNGARIAN PUSHBACKS

### 1) Tracking of phones

Reporters in Northern Serbia have received various testimonies about officers checking and tampering with people's phones prior to pushbacks from Hungary, deviating from the other practice of phones being destroyed by officers (see [3.1](#)). Testimonies suggest that devices are targeted by police because of their [GPS function](#) and the potential for discovering information on border crossing routes. One case reported by people-on-the-move also asserted that after being arrested at the border, Hungarian police officers confiscated their phone and installed software that would allow authorities to better track down their movements in future crossings (see [3.2](#)), though this is yet to be fully substantiated. Similar reports of

“bugging” were alleged by respondents in [June](#), and anecdotal evidence from the area around Subotica suggest multiple transit groups suspect tampering of phones to be a common practice in order to surveil their movement.

### 2) Use of dogs

Hungarian Police officers have been reported using dogs while apprehending transit groups in multiple recent cases, including one from [July](#). The animals seem to be mainly used as a dissuasive threat, but on several occasions dogs have been released and inflicted injuries to people-on-the-move, including minors. The increased use of K9 units dates back to the initial strengthening of border controls by the Orban government

after the closure of the humanitarian corridor. Cases also implicate [Frontex officials in dog attacks](#) as early as October 2016, showing it to be a systemic pattern across different border agencies.

### 3) Detainment at apprehension point and in police vans

Apprehension of groups usually leads to periods of on-site detention, with officers holding transit groups while waiting for back-up. People are often subject to violent practices, such as being forced to lie or kneel on the ground, sometimes for hours, with hands on their head or behind their back. Sustaining these painful postures is also an aspect of detention in police vans, with testimonies describing how groups are handcuffed and cramped into the back of vans before being driven to the border with Serbia. While the space in the rear compartment of the vehicles can hold approximately 10 persons, groups are often forced into them in far higher numbers. People-on-the-move are subject to extreme heat and have trouble breathing in such a confined space (see [3.3](#)).

“It was not possible to sit or breath”

### 4) Photos/Videos taken

Many testimonies mention the fact that Hungarian police officers take pictures or make videos of people as they are removed across the border to Serbia (see [3.1](#), [3.2](#), [3.3](#)). Such practise sometimes occurs within police stations or other places of detention, but are often conducted directly at gates in the border fence. People-on-the-move are regularly ordered to hold a tag displaying a number while being recorded or photographed. One group also described how these photographs were taken in [front-on and profile shots](#) with the numbered signs.

### 5) Use of drones

Drones have also reportedly been used by the Hungarian authorities to track border crossings and direct police forces to transit groups (see [3.3](#)). According to the most recent incident, the operation of drones featured a spectrum of arriving Hungarian forces to intercept them and seemed to be deployed in response to the large size of the transit group. Groups interviewed from [July](#) also spotted drones circling overhead before police arrived and pushed them back to Serbia.

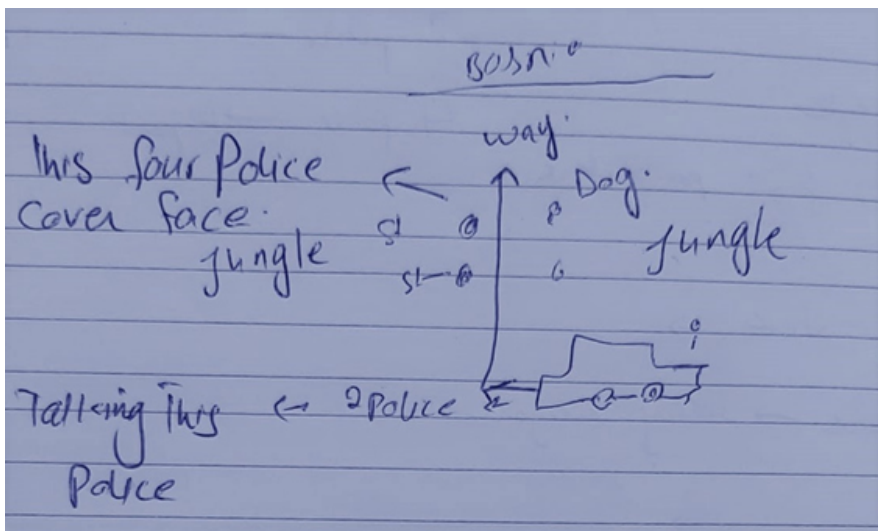
## USE OF DOGS AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE BY CROATIAN POLICE

Disturbing trends of violence at the Croatian border with BiH were observed in August regarding the use of police dogs and sexual violence by officers. In particular, the use of K9 units was a recurrent issue in August, with dogs not only used in patrols/apprehensions, but as weapons during pushback operations. Transit groups report masked officers with Ekipa za Posebne Zadace (EPZ) uniforms – a special subunit of the Croatian Interventna police – using unmuzzled police dogs during violent removals. In one case this led to the mauling and scratching of a person as he fell to the ground while trying to escape the animal (see [6.10](#)).

“A friend fell on the floor and the dog jumped over him. He’s very deadly [bitten]..., he can’t walk now”

Though this shows the use of dogs causing direct injury, though a primary function of their deployment is also to evoke fear. Alongside dog-bites, the psychological violence of K9 units causes individuals to flee in distress, often leading to falls and further injuries. Fallen individuals are sometimes also further beaten by the police while on the ground. This pattern has been reported in the areas of Velika Kladuša and Šturlić, with the main target of this kind of violence being young men, including minors.





Respondents drawing of a pushback involving Croatian K9 police unit (Source: Anonymous)

BVMN members have also collected recent reports of sexualized violence by Croatian officers against transit groups. One recent testimony collected describes Croatian police officers asking people-on-the-move to take off their clothes and forcing other group members to watch. The respondent reports how he and several minors from the transit group were ordered to undress and violently groped [by officers in the genitals](#), a form of brutal sexual abuse witnessed in [previous reports](#) taken from this border area. While the act of forcing individuals or entire transit groups to strip has been observed for some time, sexual assault is an often unreported element of pushback violence. The number of such reports is often small, as the nature of these crimes makes it very difficult for people to report. However, a [criminal complaint](#) lodged by network member Centre for Peace Studies on an incident of rape, as well as reports by [Danish Refugee Council via the Guardian newspaper](#) all point to sexual violence as an underlying practice at the Croatian border.

Finally, there have been further reports of Croatian police crossing into Bosnia-Herzegovina while conducting pushbacks. Several testimonies suggest that Croatian police caught the transit groups in the surroundings of south west Bihac, on the BiH side of the border. The respondents claim that the groups were taken to Croatia by police, beaten and then pushed back again to BiH. This practice was analysed in the [February report](#) by BVMN, with incursions by Croatian police near the area of Izačić. Another recent testimony from the area of Velika Kladuša showcases how this practice not only targets young men, but also families (see [6.4](#)). In this precise case, the respondent described how Croatian officers caught two families within Croatian soil, put on ski masks before crossing into Bosnian territory with the group with a van and leaving them in the area of Velika Kladuša.



# UPDATE ON THE SITUATION

## GREECE

### EXTENSION OF THE BORDER BARRIER

August saw a continued extension of border barriers in Greece. Fearing a new migration 'crisis', Greece's Citizens' Protection Minister, Michalis Chrischoidis, officially announced on [20th August](#) that Greece had constructed a 40-km (25-mile) wall on its border with Turkey, including the installment of a surveillance system. This is in response to the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, with Greece trying to [prevent possible asylum seekers from trying to reach Europe](#). The border includes, among advanced hi-tech and automated electronic monitoring, [radars that can see up to 15 km into Turkish territory](#). This is in addition to a fence of almost 13 km that has already been in place in Greece. Describing the construction of the additional barrier, Chrisochoidis stated:

"We cannot wait, passively, for the possible impact,"

The 5-meter (16.4 foot) tall fence and eight observation towers are constructed in the area of [Feres](#), at the southern part of the border region. With a total budget of [62.9 million euros](#), the project has been undertaken by a consortium of four construction companies. The [Government's spokesman states](#) that the country is taking all measures they possibly can to make sure it does not become "Europe's gateway again".

The experience for many Afghans currently on the Balkan Route, and those recently displaced by the Taliban take-over is characterised by yet further state violence. The extension of the barrier on the border with Turkey represents another obstacle to those seeking safe passage into Europe and is a damning indictment of the Greek state's response.



*Parts of the existing Greek border barrier near Kastanies/Pazarkule (Source:Josoor)*

## CLOSURE OF CASH ASSISTANCE PROGRAMME

The Greek Migration Ministry has [decided](#) to conclude the UNHCR's cash assistance program at the end of September 2021. This means that no financial assistance will be given to asylum seekers, who are not accommodated in formal housing structures recognized by the Greek authorities. According to [media reports](#), in March 2021 the number of people living outside these structures amounted to 25,000 in Greece, while the total number of people receiving financial assistance was 64,500.

The last payment has been issued in August covering two months, August and September. From October 2021 onwards, the Greek authorities will be responsible for providing assistance to asylum-seekers. The Ministry has [announced](#) that asylum seekers

of the "urban population" should submit a housing request in case they lack the financial resources to cover their basic needs. At the same time, mainland camps and ESTIA lack sufficient capacities to accommodate these people and waiting periods for state housing can last months. This leaves many people at risk of becoming [homeless](#), struggling to survive without any support.

Additionally, the Ministry of Migration announced the closure of some mainland camps such as Skaramangas. This puts even more pressure on existing camps that will have to shelter residents of closing camps.

## DEVELOPMENTS IN THE AEGEAN AND RESTRICTIVE BILL TABLED IN PARLIAMENT

Over the last three months an increase in documented new arrivals – as can be observed in the [weekly snapshots](#) provided by the UNHCR – has been witnessed in the Aegean. In Samos alone 174 people arrived between June and August. However, this possible trend is not only observed on the 'usual' 5 hotspot islands. For example, on 5th August, a group of 26 people-on-the-move landed on Ikaria. Of this group, [only 12 were officially documented and sent to Samos](#). It remains a serious concern as to what exactly happened to the rest of the group since locals witnessed far more than 12 people arriving on that day.

On Sunday 29th August, [Efimerida Syntakton reported](#) yet another pushback of 25 people from Potami beach on Samos. Local villagers intervened and offered them food and water, only to then witness the police arrest them, take their phones, their money and make them enter an unlabelled white van, claiming that they were taking the group to RIC in Vathy. They never arrived there. Most noticeably, on 31st August, [a total of 159](#)

[people were intercepted](#) off the coast of Milos and Kythira, two islands located about 150 miles and 250 miles respectively, from the Turkish coast.

Overall, in the month of August alone [68 pushbacks in the Aegean](#) have been reported by Aegean Boat Report, involving altogether a total of 1,530 people. At last, 172 people [pushed back in three separate](#) events between the 29th and 30th of August. All were denied their right to apply for asylum.

Meanwhile, on the 25th August, the Migration Ministry introduced a new draft for a ['Reform of deportation and return procedures'](#) to be discussed by the Greek Parliament. The Ministerial Bill – [strongly criticised](#) by Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner Dunja Mijatović – targets once again civil society groups supporting people on the move, and it will further hinder NGOs capacity to operate in the context of search



and rescue in the Aegean Sea. Of particular concern is Article 40, stating that NGOs have to be registered and '[act under the orders and instructions of the port authorities](#)', which would represent a drawback on the possibility of monitoring and reporting fundamental rights violations by the same authorities.

At the same time, this Bill entails a harsh increase on the administrative cost of asylum procedures, raising the [fee for a subsequent asylum application](#) to 100 euros – which would have a clear impact on the substantial right to asylum.

While the draft is discussed in Parliament, organisations operating in Samos have been notified of an extensive list of requirements that humanitarian workers have to present in order to access the new MPRIC soon to be

opened in the Zervou area. NGOs staff will have to present a copy of the identity card/passport, a criminal record issued up to three months before submission, a declaration by the person that they haven't been convicted for a criminal offense, a CV and an employment or voluntary contract.

The predictable result of these requirements, combined with the severe sanctions disciplined in the Ministerial Bill, will be a chilling effect on the work of civil society on Samos – while the Secretary General for Reception of Asylum Seekers, Manos Logothetis, is already [inviting local business](#) into the new camp facility to ensure that the people confined in the structure will not need to go to the city. It remains unclear whether local business-owners will also be asked to provide a similar list of documents upon entering the new MPRIC.

## DG HOME MAKES FUNDS TO THE HELLENIC COAST GUARD CONTINGENT ON MONITORING MECHANISM

In light of the developments in Afghanistan, Migration Ministry Mitarakis has decided to take a [strong position](#) against the possibility of Afghan nationals entering Europe from Greece. In line with this decision, the Hellenic Coast Guard has [forwarded a request](#) to the European Commission to liberate more fundings to tackle an eventual increase in border-crossing. However, after [increasing concerns regarding pushbacks](#) in the Aegean and on the Greek land border over the last months, the DG Home has decided to pledge the allocation of additional funds provided that Greece establishes [an independent monitoring mechanism for fundamental rights](#).

A similar mechanism – [although far from being fully independent](#) – is already in place in Croatia, since July 2021. The Croatian model has been the subject of deep scrutiny from [BVMN and others](#) for its fraudulent use of funds and prior lack of implementation. In Greece, the Ministry [replied](#) hinting at a

supposed doubled standard informing the conditional funding set by the Commission. Athens argues that there is a possible lack of legal basis and that Greece will implement such a monitoring mechanism when it will be mandatory to all EU members.

Even though the Commission is in all its right to mention their human rights concerns in regards to border protection, it seems once again that not all members of the Council share the same 'vision', since Austrian Interior Minister – Carl Nehammer – is talking about the possibility of [deportation centers in nearby countries](#) as an answer to a possible increase in Afghan refugees. Once more migration is highlighting a rupture in European politics.



## IMPACT OF FIRES ACROSS THE COUNTRY

On [21st July](#), a small wildfire began burning over the northern half of Evia, an island around 30 miles northeast of Athens. Over the next 20 days – with temperatures mostly exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit, or 38 degrees Celsius – the fire swelled into a [vast conflagration](#), sweeping from one coastline of Evia to another and racking up a staggering balance sheet of damage: 120,000 acres of burned forest, hundreds of millions of euros in economic loss, and the [wholesale evacuation](#) of dozens of villages and thousands of islanders. Two people were killed.

Evacuations were conducted in most areas impacted by the fires, however there were considerable delays in evacuating those in Amygdaleza Pre-Removal Detention Center (PRDC) and Malakasa Camp. While fires raged around Amygdaleza, water to the camp was cut off and people were forced to stay there with no way of protecting themselves from the smoke. Police tried to [ban photos and](#)

[videos](#) from the area to avoid letting people see just how bad the situation was.

On 3rd August, MEP Tineke Strik [called upon](#) the Greek government to evacuate the PRDC, and was met with a [harsh response](#) from Minister of Migration and Asylum Notis Mitarakis: “of course we have a plan. Any interest about the local residents by the way, who are suffering from the fire? Have you asked about them?” despite most residents of the area having already been evacuated. The PRDC was eventually evacuated, but only after days of protest and condemnation, while those incarcerated were in the meantime exposed to heavy smoke and high temperatures. In the meantime, [3,000 residents](#) from Malakasa camp north of Athens were [evacuated in the middle of the night](#) on August 6th. They were [taken to Ritsona](#) and Thiva camps, and later brought back to Malakasa on 9th August after the fires moved away from the centre.

## SERBIA

### INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT FROM BELGRADE

Throughout August, volunteers for network member Collective Aid witnessed regular raids and evictions of informal accommodation centers in Belgrade. During their outreach activities in public parks, volunteers frequently saw police approaching people-on-the-move and forcing them into police vans and buses.

On some occasions, the police would forcibly gather people-on-the-move in an abandoned building near the bus station until they were able to fill an entire bus. People-on-the-move were unable to leave the building to access food or water during these raids, despite temperatures regularly reaching over 30C. There were some instances where volunteers reported seeing people in the building who appeared to be injured. When volunteers attempted to approach the building where groups were

being detained, the police asked to see everyone’s documents and told them that they could not record or take any photographs.

Those picked up during these raids often return to Belgrade a few days later and several report that they were taken to Preševo camp, near the North Macedonian border. Similar reports of such raids have come from the communities in Šid, Sombor, and Subotica along the borders in Northern Serbia. [BVMN’s July report](#) picked up on this pattern, with groups in excess of 60 people being bussed across the length of the country to Preševo.

These large-scale operations have become more frequent over the last few weeks. Local media outlets began to regularly publish

articles about the evictions and statements given by the state authorities. The Serbian Ministry of Interior has also released many [statements](#) on the matter, claiming that they will continue these operations in the future in

order “to preserve the safety and security of all citizens, as well as migrants themselves”. Yet in truth the practice only preserves a heightened state of precarity for people-on-the-move in the capital and border zones, acting as a hindrance to their mobility.

## SLOVENIA

### GOVERNMENT CONTINUALLY IGNORE COURT RULING WON BY CAMEROONIAN PLAINTIFF

In April of this year the Supreme Court of Slovenia recognized that the pushback of a plaintiff from the dissident anglophone region of Cameroon was illegal and that he should be brought to Slovenia. This decision overturned the appeal of the Ministry of the Interior and affirmed the [Administrative Court's decision made in July 2020](#). It recognized that Slovenia violated the 18th and 19th article of the Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the European Union: the principle of non-refoulement, the prohibition of collective expulsion and the plaintiffs right to ask for international protection. The court also ordered the state to ensure the return of the plaintiff to Slovenia, that he is allowed to re-enter it and ask for international protection.

Even though the state is obliged to ensure his (safe) passage to Slovenia, the Ministry and the government have been ignoring this

court order for more than four months and are continuing to ignore it even after the decision was made public in BVMN and InfoKolpa’s [open letter](#) – an extensive article about the decision was also published in the newspaper [Dnevnik](#) and the Open Letter was aired and published on [Radio Študent](#). The only response in the media regarding this court decision came from the general director of police Anton Olaj, who said only that the plaintiff can come to any of the border crossing points in Slovenia, disregarding that the main problem of crossing Croatia, from which the plaintiff has been pushed back multiple times.

The fact that the practice of pushbacks continue – from June of 2018 until August the Slovenian police removed 27,000 people according to available data – and are continued to be ignored as Slovenia has taken over the EU Presidency was also one



*Aleš Hojs presented with the Black book of Pushbacks (Source:GUE/NGL)*

the main topics in the [webinar](#) in July hosted by Infokolpa and BVMN. Entitled “Slovenia & chain pushbacks: A dishonest broker of the New Pact on Asylum and Migration”, speakers discussed this legislative drive under the new Presidency and the enabling of severe right violations at borders. Alongside the grassroots activists speaking there were also two members of the parliament – Tineke Strik and Malin Bjork. They were also among the MEPs that expressed criticism against Minister of the Interior Aleš Hojs in the European Parliament’s [Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs](#) at a hearing on 2nd September. On this occasion they challenged the flagrant disregard shown to the Slovenian Court's ruling in the case of the Cameroonian plaintiff, and neglect shown to the states obligation of ensuring him a safe passage and due asylum access

MEPs also slammed the systemic nature of pushbacks during the hearing and handed over the Black Book of Pushbacks to Minister Hojs, who later, speaking to Slovenian TV replied: “I have read the Black Book already in parliament and have seen what they write about me and the Slovenian police. All lies”. Of course there is no mention of Minister Hojs in the Black Book, which raises questions about the Ministries attentiveness to the evidence presented. Practices described in the book continue to this day – and have been augmented in recent times by Hojs’s Ministry, with the expanded detention of transit groups in the Center for Foreigners in Postojna.

## AUSTRIA

### SOMALI MINOR PUSHED BACK FROM AUSTRIA DESPITE RECENT COURT RULING

On 25th July, a group of six people from different African nations, including a minor from Somalia, applied for asylum in Bad Radkersburg, on the south-eastern Austrian border, after crossing the border with Slovenia on foot. Austrian police brought them to the border station of Sigheldorf, provided them with food, took their personal data, finger prints and pictures and made them believe their asylum request would be processed. The group was told they only had to wait for the transport to the Austrian reception camp. Instead, after four hours a Slovenian police van arrived and they were pushed back.

The Somali minor told [Push-Back Alarm Austria](#), who documented the case in cooperation with [Asylkoordination Austria](#):

“Most of us were sick or had injuries on our legs. We had been walking for seventeen days and had not eaten for three. The Austrian police told us: No problem, you will

go to the camp, see a doctor there and everything will be okay. We were all tired, we fell asleep. We trusted them. No one saw even 1% of possibility that they would take us back. I was happy. My struggle had ended.

And then, my friends woke me up. They said the bus for us has arrived. When I came out, I saw the Slovenian flag, the Slovenian police. The first thought in my mind was: Oh, they will give us to Slovenia, Slovenia will give us to Croatia and Croatia will give us to Bosnia.”

The Somali minor has decided to take legal action and filed a complaint at the very same Austrian court that had issued a [ground-breaking ruling in June 2021](#). In fact, only one month before the recent incident, the Regional Administrative Court of Styria found that in the case of the Moroccan complainant Austrian police had acted unlawfully. In this case authorities also initiated a chain-pushback to Bosnia-Herzegovina, carried out on 29th September 2020, with the collusion



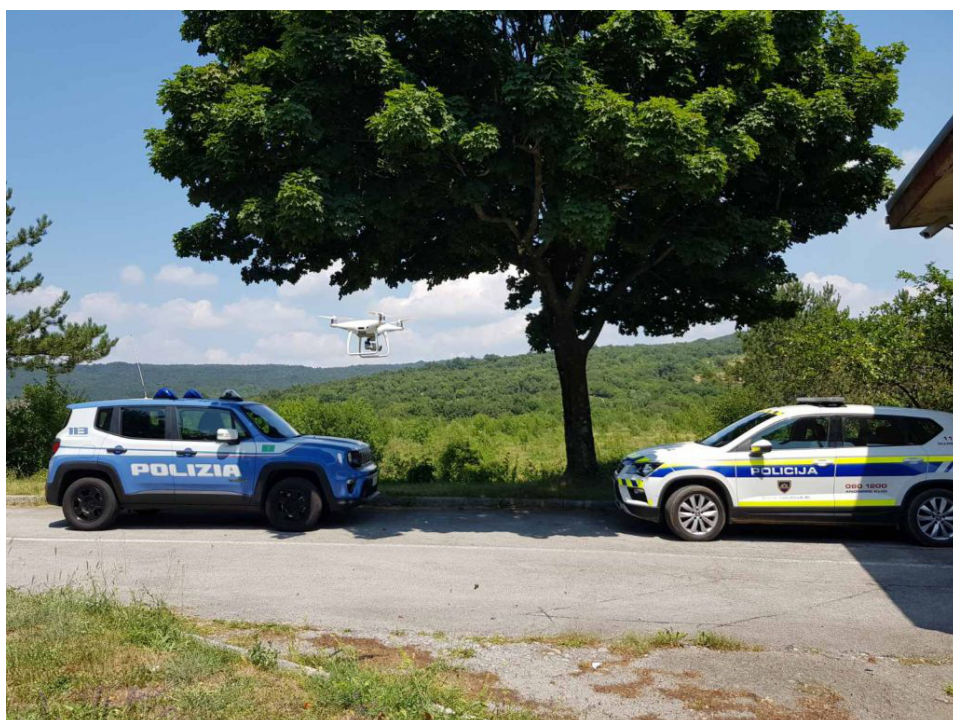
of Slovenian and Croatian authorities. The ruling stated: "Based on the described course of proceedings (...) the court comes to the conclusion that push-backs are to some extent methodically applied in Austria." At the time, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior denied any systematic violation of law. In the light of these new developments, however, the court's assessment proves to be ever more relevant.

Push-Back Alarm Austria is currently dealing

with around 15 similar suspected cases of illegal returns by Austrian authorities. Meanwhile the Austrian MEP Bettina Vollath has asked the EU Commission, in an urgent inquiry regarding the [chain pushbacks scheme involving Austria, Italy, Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia](#), what measures will be taken to stop the infringement of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights by Member States on a systematic level. Read the Commission's answer [here](#).

## ITALY

### SURVEILLANCE AT THE ITALIAN-SLOVENIAN BORDER



*Joint patrols between Italian and Slovenian police  
(Source: Slovenian Interior Ministry)*

The flow of arrivals from the Balkan Route into North East Italy has significantly increased during the month of August. Associations and groups of volunteers supporting people in Trieste said that they have provided direct help to 659 people during this month, including 103 minors. It is thought very likely that the actual number of arrivals and transits is much higher, with many people not stopping long in the immediate border area. During the last weeks, there have been several reports of smugglers being arrested while transporting people-on-the-move into Italian territory. At

the same time, the intensity of control practices along the borders has also increased: in just [one day 150 people](#) were found and transferred to quarantine facilities in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia (FVG) region.

This has once again pushed public and official discourse towards the need to reintroduce informal readmissions to Slovenia, touted to recommence in July of this year. Yet there remains no official confirmation about reintroduction of



“informal readmissions” (pushbacks) by witnesses on the ground, though rumors have begun to circulate about groups rejected from the Italian territory. The Ministry of the Interior [refused to provide details](#) of the cooperation between the police forces of Rome and Ljubljana on border patrols. But in the absence of official statements, the installation of 55 drones by Slovenian authorities sits in line with the growing surveillance of transit across this border.

Volunteers in Piazza della Libertà in Trieste also witnessed a serious episode of institutional racism in August. An ambulance was called in order to provide medical

assistance to an underage boy newly arrived via Slovenia. The health operators initially refused to assist the person, treating him aggressively and disrespectfully. The boy was only given medical assistance after several attempts to seek help and a strong insistence on the part of the volunteers present. Further barriers to health care are also having wider impacts for peoples mobility beyond Trieste, seen most overtly in the lack of access to vaccinations. Without the “green pass”, which marks proof of vaccination, people-on-the-move in FVG are unable to access long-distance travel in order to continue their journey.

## TURKEY

### VIEW FROM VAN: THE SITUATION AT THE IRAN-TURKEY BORDER

Turkey’s Eastern borders – the major entry point for Afghans among others fleeing to and across Turkey for decades – has been militarised since the 1980’s and Turkey’s conflict with the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers’ Party). Whilst the European Commission criticised anti-terror measures in Eastern Turkey for leading to human rights violations, the Commission is active in financially supporting border surveillance in the region to prevent onward migration to EU soil. The EU’s [instrument for pre-accession assistance \(IPA\)](#) for Turkey between 2014 and 2020 supplied the National Coordination and Joint Risk Analysis Center with surveillance vehicles, communication and surveillance masts, thermal cameras, and hardware and software equipment. The IPA also financed the training of border patrols in risk analysis and risk management. Turkey has also been constructing a 295-kilometer-long concrete wall with a barbed-wire fence along its border with Iran, which according to the [Turkish Minister of Interior, Süleyman Soylu](#), was possible due to EU’s financial support of 110 million euros.

In August, the Turkish Government pushed towards faster concrete wall construction in the East and new reinforcement of border surveillance in the region due to the fear of

Afghan migration amid the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan. Pro-Governmental media, [Daily Sabah](#), reported that two reconnaissance and two commando companies from the Land Forces Command, three companies and a battalion from the Gendarmerie General Command and 750 special operations police officers, consisting of 35 teams from the General Directorate of Security, and armored vehicles were sent to the Eastern border to boost the already existing border surveillance. Turkey also launched a [new Coast Guard Command Unit](#) with thermal and night vision cameras, radar and sonar devices, on the Van Lake to prevent smugglers crossing people by boats.

Since internal security concerns (anti-terror operations) interconnect with EU externalisation policies in Eastern Turkey, people-on-the-move as well as locals crossing the border for informal economic purposes (i.e., smuggling of goods) are subjected to tough security measures. These also include several instances of torture and killings by the Turkish and Iranian Armies during the last decade, as reported during interviews carried out by Karolina Augustova with people-on-the-move, local residents in

Van and the Bar Van Association.

Further interviews with people-on-the-move point to pushbacks from Turkey to Iran occurring since 2016 (i.e., EU-Turkey Deal). A member of the Turkish Gendarmerie confirmed to Augustova that pushbacks take place in Eastern Turkey “to avoid financial burden to accommodate all people in removal centres”. Yet, forcing people over a border to Iran, with reports of physical beatings (reported by Afghan males) and destruction of possessions, intensified alongside the recent ban to deport Afghans to their country. For example, an Afghan family who arrived in Van in August said to be pushed back two times before succeeding, when the border patrols told them to “leave and never come back to Turkey”. Moreover, [“interception operations”](#) continue in Turkey’s East and lead to detention or direct transportation of people-on-the-move to the border with Iran and their pushback. This pressures people fleeing to continue relying on smuggler-organised transports in minivans and boats

across the Van Lake towards the West, in the hope of avoiding detection by state authorities, ending in growing fatalities in the East which can be seen in the numerous burials at Seyrantepe cemetery in Van.

Since Turkey retains [geographical limitation to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention](#), Afghans, just as all non-Europeans, are neither allowed to seek asylum in Turkey nor able to seek temporary protection as is possible for Syrians. Instead, Afghans are in theory entitled to seek international protection in Turkey, upon which they ought to be resettled to third states. Since there are few efforts to resettle Afghans to the EU and other Western countries, Turkey fears that Afghans would overstay in the country and thus rejects most applications while developing further measures along its Eastern borders. Tough border surveillance and pushbacks to Iran thus closely correlate with international lack of cooperation on resettlements from Turkey, besides Turkey’s geographical limitation to the Refugee Convention.



*Seyrantepe cemetery in Van, Eastern Turkey where people who died during border crossings are buried (Source:Karolina Augustova).*

## LGBTQIA+ TRANSIT COMMUNITY IN TURKEY

With the general situation of civil and political rights in Turkey deteriorating, a crackdown on the queer community and the rights of LGBTQIA+ people has been rampant in the country since early 2021. With the parallel sharp increase in racism in Turkish society, the queer community of people-on-the-move has been at acute risk. BVMN member Josoor and their partner organisation "[the Aman project](#)", supporting the queer transit community in Turkey, have observed a sharp increase in attacks and repression. Community members not only have to deal with racist and homophobic attacks by civilians but are also at acute risk of repression at the hands of Turkish authorities. With the general anti-migrant sentiment among the Turkish population, authorities have once again begun a campaign of forced "voluntary" returns to Syria and have been cracking down on the undocumented population in Istanbul for the past few months.

By and large the anti-queer sentiment among the population in Turkey is more heightened in smaller towns. Save for a small number of areas in the capital Istanbul, queer people-on-the-move are at severe risk across the breadth of the country. Yet with the Turkish authorities refusing to register people-on-the-move in larger cities such as Istanbul, the main queer population living there are at permanent risk of arrest, detention and removal to provinces closer to the Syrian border, where they are forced to sign voluntary return agreements and are deported to Syria.

One of the Aman projects community members, Syrian trans-woman [Sofia](#), was detained in late July and only released after the Aman project started a large media campaign that led to a member of the UK House of Lords to intervene diplomatically. Sofia was subsequently released and is safe – unlike another Syrian trans woman who was forcefully returned to Syria from Istanbul in 2019 and disappeared just a few days after, assumed to have been killed. With the observed reaction to the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and the resulting crackdown on the POM community in Turkey, Josoor and Aman fear the situation for LGBTQIA+ refugees in Turkey will be deteriorating further in the coming months and the Aman project is focusing its efforts on the resettlement of its community members to other countries.

An LGBTQIA+ Afghan in Van also reportedly had to hide her sexual orientation when applying for international protection in Turkey a few years ago due to her fear of being rejected and deported to Afghanistan, which had happened to her friend before. Among other fears for the LGBTQIA+ community in Van is the possible subjection to medical checks and/or inappropriate comments by doctors to test their "sexual orientation" when registering their cases, as reported during the interviews carried out by Karolina Augustova.

## AN UPDATE ON ISTANBUL AND WIDER TURKEY

For months, anti-migrant sentiment has been rising across the country, leading to horrifying [attacks](#) against Syrians in Ankara in mid- August. The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has contributed to severe repercussions for people-on-the-move of all nationalities in Turkey and at the Greek-Turkish border. Since late June, BVMN member Josoor has observed police buses on every corner of the main squares in Istanbul's districts that host a large population of the transit community. In a cycle that has been repeated since 2019, Turkish police has launched another crackdown on the undocumented population in the whole country, this time it seems in relation to the expected increase of Afghans arriving in the country.

Istanbul's detention centers have been full for months which provides the authorities with the pretext to transport detainees to the provinces closer to the borders where they exert pressure including psychological and physical violence, in several cases amounting to torture, in order to force detainees to sign voluntary return agreements. It is impossible for BVMN to determine the number of people returned to Syria this way over the past few months, but the pattern is of deep concern.

Josoor and other organisations in Turkey have been observing an increase in the number of Afghans arriving in the country.

According to data from the Afghan Embassy (which has been operating independently and can continue to do so as long as Turkey does not recognise the Taliban as the new government), at least 100 Afghan families have been arriving in Istanbul daily with around 1000 people asking for support from the Afghan consulate in Istanbul every single day. In addition to the 112,000 Afghans who have received temporary international protection in the past years, there is a population of approximately half a million Afghans currently living in Turkey unregistered since the Turkish authorities have been refusing to issue humanitarian residence permits for Afghan citizens. The Afghan Embassy has long run out of passports to print and has resorted to providing stickers that prove extension and other types of ID cards, both of which will however only be possible until the Turkish government recognises the Taliban as Afghanistan's legitimate government.

As most undocumented people in Turkey, the newly arriving Afghans are in hiding due to the police crackdown and have no options to legalise their stay in the country. As a result, they have no way to formally work and make money to sustain themselves and of course do not receive any support from the state.

## POLAND/BELARUS

### VIOLENCE ALONG THE EU EXTERNAL BORDER

Following the [kidnapping and detention](#) of a dissident journalist Raman Protasevich by the Belarusian authorities in May, the EU has imposed economic sanctions on Belarus. This infuriated the Belarusian dictator – president Aleksandr Lukashenko – who decided to follow the lead of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and put political pressure on the EU by facilitating the movement of people across its borders. Belarus shares borders with three EU member states – Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Since

June, the number of border crossings to these countries from Belarus has seen a significant uptick. In August the Polish Border Guard counted about 3500 of what it calls “illegal” border crossings attempts.

Unsurprisingly, the Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian states, with support of Brussels, answered the opening of this new migration



route with crude violence, illegal pushbacks, raising fences and increasing militarization and surveillance of the borders. Poland has already started constructing a [2,5m high fence of razor wire](#) on the border with Belarus. Activists have documented cases of illegal pushbacks, as seen across multiple other points on the EU external border. People-on-the-move were intercepted by the Border Guard on Polish territory, despite their will to seek international protection in Poland, were regularly brought back to the border and forced to cross into Belarus.

In Belarus, people-on-the-move who have just experienced a pushback are often forced by the Belarusian authorities to attempt crossing the border back to Poland, reminiscent of the actions of Turkish forces at the banks of the Meriç river. In this cruel game resembling table tennis, some groups were propelled back and forth across the border numerous times, a pattern also observed at the border with [Lithuania](#). Other

groups remained stuck on the border, guarded by the Belarusian and Polish forces from both sides, unable to enter either territory. A group of 32 Afghans has been kept in these conditions for weeks and the Polish forces prevented activists from giving them food, water and medical help.

Monitoring these violent practices against people-on-the-move is even harder since the Polish government declared a [state of emergency](#) in a 3km-wide zone along the entire length of the border with Belarus. The zone is guarded by army troops, the police and the Border Guard. Journalists, activists and NGOs that are not based inside the zone are forbidden from entering it. Recording and documenting the activities of the authorities employed in the zone is forbidden. With winter drawing close and temperatures already falling near 0°C at nights it is difficult not to imagine the worst for people-on-the-move trapped in the dense forests on the Poland-Belarus border.

## GLOSSARY OF REPORTS, AUGUST 2021

BVMN published 30 pushback cases in August, impacting 324 people-on-the-move. Those affected by these incidents included men, women, children with guardians and unaccompanied children. They also represent a wide demographic, including people from Afghanistan, Morocco, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Kashmir, Bangladesh, India, Algeria, Kurdistan and Lebanon.

- 7 pushbacks to Serbia (1 chain-pushback from Slovenia, 1 from Croatia, 3 from Hungary, 2 from Romania)
- 15 pushbacks to Bosnia-Herzegovina (4 chain-pushbacks from Slovenia, 11 from Croatia)
- 1 pushback from North Macedonia to Greece
- 7 pushbacks to Turkey (1 chain pushback from Bulgaria, 5 from Bulgaria, 1 from Greece)

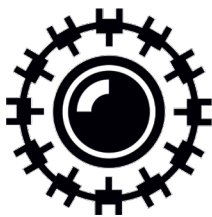
LINK	INCIDENT	RECORDED	DEMOGRAPHIC	GROUP
<b>Slovenia to Serbia</b>				
<a href="#">1.1</a>	10th August	12th August	Afghanistan	3
<b>Croatia to Serbia</b>				
<a href="#">2.1</a>	4th August	6th August	Afghanistan	4
<b>Hungary to Serbia</b>				
<a href="#">3.1</a>	23rd August	27th August	Morocco	3
<a href="#">3.2</a>	24th July	31st July	Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Syria	5
<a href="#">3.3</a>	30th August	2nd September	Afghanistan	50
<b>Romania to Serbia</b>				
<a href="#">4.1</a>	1st August	26th August	Syria, Morocco	4
<a href="#">4.2</a>	27th July	31st July	Egypt, Syria, Iraq	4
<b>Slovenia to Bosnia-Herzegovina</b>				
<a href="#">5.1</a>	23rd July	3rd August	Afghanistan	3
<a href="#">5.2</a>	11th August	11th August	Algeria	10
<a href="#">5.3</a>	11th August	11th August	Morocco	1
<a href="#">5.4</a>	28th August	30th August	Afghanistan, Iran	7
<b>Croatia to Bosnia-Herzegovina</b>				
<a href="#">6.1</a>	13th August	28th August	Afghanistan	3
<a href="#">6.2</a>	13th August	16th August	Afghanistan	6
<a href="#">6.3</a>	14th August	18th August	Kashmir	7
<a href="#">6.4</a>	19th August	28th August	Afghanistan	13
<a href="#">6.5</a>	19th August	20th August	Bangladesh, Pakistan	13
<a href="#">6.6</a>	22nd August	24th August	Pakistan	7
<a href="#">6.7</a>	22nd August	25th August	Afghanistan	10
<a href="#">6.8</a>	16th July	6th August	Afghanistan	16
<a href="#">6.9</a>	29th August	3rd September	Afghanistan	9
<a href="#">6.10</a>	27th August	28th August	Afghanistan	9
<a href="#">6.11</a>	29th August	2nd September	Afghanistan, India, Pakistan	45
<b>North Macedonia to Greece</b>				
<a href="#">7.1</a>	6th August	13th August	Afghanistan	20
<b>Greece to Turkey</b>				
<a href="#">8.1</a>	9 August	17 August	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Algeria, Turkey (Kurdish)	30
<b>Bulgaria to Turkey</b>				
<a href="#">9.1</a>	18th July	3rd August	Afghanistan	6
<a href="#">9.2</a>	10th August	13th August	Lebanon	1
<a href="#">9.3</a>	17th August	18th August	Morocco	3
<a href="#">9.4</a>	20th August	21st August	Syria	15
<a href="#">9.5</a>	12th August	14th August	Syria	9
<b>Bulgaria to Turkey (via Greece)</b>				
<a href="#">10.1</a>	13th August	15th August	Syria, Morocco, Algeria	8

# NETWORK STRUCTURE AND CONTACT

B O R D E R  
V I O L E N C E  
M O N I T O R I N G  
N E T W O R K

BVMN is a volunteer led endeavor, acting as an alliance of organisations in the Western Balkans and Greece. BVMN is based on the efforts of participant organizations working in the field of documentation, media, advocacy and litigation. We finance the work through charitable grants and foundations, and are not in receipt of funds from any political organisation. The expenditures cover transport subsidies for volunteers in the field and four paid positions.

To follow more from the Border Violence Monitoring Network, check out our [website](#) for the entire testimony archive, previous monthly reports and regular news pieces. To follow us on social media, find us on Twitter handle [@Border Violence](#) and on [Facebook](#). For further information regarding this report or more on how to become involved please email us at [mail@borderviolence.eu](mailto:mail@borderviolence.eu). For press and media requests please contact: [press@borderviolence.eu](mailto:press@borderviolence.eu)



## Border Violence Monitoring Network