



Border Violence Monitoring Network

ILLEGAL PUSH-BACKS AND BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS



**BALKAN REGION
JANUARY 2022**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January, the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) shared 29 testimonies of pushbacks impacting 344 people-on-the-move across the Balkans. This report brings together first-hand testimony from a range of countries in the region to look at the way European Union states and other actors are affecting systemic violence towards people crossing borders. It delves into emerging trends in pushbacks and border violence against people-on-the-move in northern Serbia, focusing mainly on evictions and forced removals in the towns of Srsпки Krstur and Dala.

In late January, MEP Cornelia Ernst visited Bihac and spoke with BVMN member projects active in the area about pushbacks from Croatia, as well as chain pushbacks from Slovenia through Croatia. The team took particular note of the continued violence employed during pushbacks—particularly since the implementation of the independent border monitoring mechanism in Croatia. In Una Sana Canton (BiH), the number of people-on-the-move, and particularly of people-on-the-move residing in camps has decreased significantly.

This report also covers updates on violence against people-on-the-move in Romania. Even though the number of people-on-the-move appears to be decreasing, Romania remains one of the main routes into Central Europe. Sections regarding developments in Greece focus on changes in state management of migration, especially increasing surveillance as a strategy of border control. From Italy, solidararians share updates about the situation in Trieste, and the wrongful detention of a person who was airlifted out of Kabul in 2021 following the withdrawal of American forces in Afghanistan.

A final section explores mass deportations of people-on-the-move in Turkey. Amid rising racism and increasingly deadly attacks of locals against refugees as well as rising tensions between different refugee communities in Turkey, authorities have once again started a large-scale campaign of deportations from Istanbul to Syria at the end of January.

**BVMN is a network of watchdog organisations active in Greece and the Western Balkans including No Name Kitchen, Rigardu, AreYouSyrious, MobileInfoTeam, Push-back Alarm Austria Josoor, InfoKolpa, Centre for Peace Studies, BlindSpots, Mare Liberum, Collective Aid, and Fresh Response.*



**Border Violence
Monitoring Network**

**JANUARY
REPORT**

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GENERAL

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 - BosniaandHerzegovina
HR - Croatia
SRB - Serbia
SLO - Slovenia
ROM - Romania
HUN - Hungary
ALB - Albania
BGR - Bulgaria
MNK - NorthMacedonia
GRK - Greece
TUR - Turkey
EU - European Union

TRENDS IN BORDER VIOLENCE

EVICTIIONS AND FORCED REMOVALS NEAR HORGOS

A few kilometers east from Horgos- one of Serbia's main hotspot in terms of migration flows- lie a series of informal settlements used by people-on-the-move. In the last months, these spaces faced increasing violence from Serbian authorities.

Following the disappearance of the humanitarian corridor along the Balkan Route in 2015, many transit groups have used this stretch of green border along the Tisa river as a place to rest and as a crossing point to get into Hungary. The village of Srspski Krstur is mainly inhabited by Moroccan and Syrian communities, and historically the number of women and children sleeping rough there has been extremely high. In the last three months, Srspski Krstur, like other informal settlements in Northern Serbia, was subject to an increasing crackdown from the authorities. As stated in previous monthly reports, large-scale operations in the North were carried out several times this winter. These evictions are notoriously ineffective in tackling smuggling networks, and rather sometimes contribute to reshaping smuggling routes or, at a smaller scale, the distribution of individuals in a given space.

BVMN member organization Collective Aid has seen the presence of families in Srspski Krstur rapidly decrease as a result of mounting repression. A few kilometers away, the village of Dala gradually became a viable alternative for families striving to go further west. Women and children, sometimes as young as a few months old, have been living in an abandoned house on the village's outskirts- some of them for months.

Commissariat mobile teams (also present in the Majdan area) regularly patrol the area, as part of their Border Monitoring mission. While their mandate includes providing information about asylum seeker accomodation centres across the country, it is believed the data collected during their regular visits are used by police forces to forcibly remove individuals from Dala and other living spaces.

As witnessed by members of our team on the field, an overwhelming number of individuals tend to come back to locations they were evicted from. The endless circle of evictions triggered this winter is not only efficient on the part of the state but violent and endangering vulnerable communities with few other options to turn towards when it comes to housing.

UPDATE ON THE SITUATION

CROATIA

DELEGATION VISITS BIHAĆ AND VELIKA Kladuša

On Sunday, January 24, MEP Ernst (United Left-Nordic Green-Left) and her team visited Bihać, BiH. The day started with an open discussion round with members of various grassroots organizations active in Bihać, including No Name Kitchen and local volunteers. The group discussed pushbacks from Croatia to BiH as well as chain pushbacks, the persistence of pushbacks following the [Lighthouse Reports](#), and the implementation of the independent border monitoring mechanism. The team took particular note of the continued violence employed during pushbacks.

Throughout the rest of the day MEP Ernst and her team met with people-on-the-move in and around Bihać. One person on the move described the death of his friend Ijaz in Croatia, a topic the MEP later raised with the Croatian interior minister. Further meetings, individuals and families, who had become victims of pushbacks, detailed their experiences with the Croatia authorities.

In Velika Kladuša, No Name Kitchen volunteers met with the delegation and discussed the persistence of pushbacks at the Croatian border, the lack of consideration of people-on-the-move's requests for asylum, and the abuses they endure at the hands of the police such as beatings and the stealing of personal items like phones, money or ID documents. The living conditions of people-on-the-move in Velika Kladuša and its surrounding area were addressed, along with the barriers to humanitarian work on the field due to the criminalization of the latter.



MEP Ernst meets with Croatian Minister of the Interior. Source: [Cornelia Ernst](#)

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

UPDATE FROM LIPA AND BORICI CAMPS

The number of people-on-the-move in the Una Sana Canton in Bosnia is decreasing, especially those living in official camps.

The new Lipa Camp was only recently opened in November 2021 with a capacity to host 1,500 people. The Secretary General's Special Representative on Migration and Refugees, Ambassador Drahoslav Stefánek, welcomed the opening of the rebuilt camp, stating:

“The opening of the reception center in Una-Sana Canton today shows the commitment of the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina to improve the reception conditions and treatment of vulnerable migrant groups. Adequate reception facilities are one of the key aspects of human rights-based migration management”.

Funding for the building of the camp was in large part provided by the European Commission, which offered €3.5 Million to Bosnia to support the rebuilding of Lipa Camp after it burned down in December 2020. This funding came on top of €4.5 million allocated in April 2020, bringing EU humanitarian assistance for refugees and migrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina to €13.8 million since 2018.

ROMANIA

UPDATE FROM TIMIȘOARA

According to Romanian Border Police reports, people-on-the-move arrive in Romania mainly by land through the southwestern border with Serbia, through the southern border with Bulgaria, and through the northern border with Ukraine. In 2020, people-on-the-move also tried to enter Romania by crossing the Danube River by boats or swimming coils. From what we assessed, most of the people arriving in Timișoara pass through Serbia, even if the number of people passing through Bulgaria has recently increased. Around 80% of the people-on-the-move are in Timișoara, a crossroads to Hungary. Most people-on-the-move stay in Timișoara for a relatively short time, not intending to ask for asylum in Romania, (from a few weeks to some months) before managing to cross through Hungary. Those who are caught with an expired permit of stay are detained in Arad Detention Center.

However, current numbers provided by the IOM show that the camp is operating way under capacity, with more than 50% of beds not occupied. This is confirmed by volunteers and people-on-the-move that report only about 200 people are currently staying at Lipa Camp and 50 at Borici. This is reflective broadly speaking of low numbers of people-on-the-move currently in Una Sana Canton, but it is also in part because people prefer to stay outside of the camps, even in winter, because of the precarious conditions inside. Food from both camps is reported to be inadequate and of poor quality. For Lipa camp, in particular, people-on-the-move report concerns about theft when they leave their possessions unattended for even short times and concerns that the close quarters will lend themselves to the transmission of illnesses. At Borici Camp, which is a center for women, children, and families, a strict curfew is still in place. People are allowed to leave only between 8:00 am and 4:00 pm. Persons staying at the camp report that Covid-19 precautions are given as a reason for this curfew, however, vaccines have been made available at the camp.

During 2020 and 2021 Timisoara recorded an escalation of transits and presences of people-on-the-move due to the restrictions caused by the pandemic as well as the increasingly difficult situation at the Bosnian-Croatian border, the conditions outside and inside the camps in Bosnia Herzegovina, the systematic violence, and pushback chains from (Italy-Austria) Slovenia and Croatia.

According to all the actors active in Timisoara about the people-on-the-move and migration situation, the flow is now decreasing but Romania still remains one of the main routes to Central Europe. This decrease is due both to pushbacks and police violence in the countries prior to the arrival in Romania, as well as to higher control that makes it more difficult to enter and leads to increased costs, even for those who try to cross the borders hiding in cars and trucks.

Moreover, this decrease is related to the recent high rate of evictions of informal areas and squats, where people-on-the-move could remain without leaving traces of their presence, and to the terrible living conditions of the governmental camps, where people usually remain for a very short time before crossing to Hungary. The border areas are patrolled by "gendarmierie", Romanian special forces, and Frontex that trains local police, implements and reinforces controls. Until spring 2021 there were cases of pushbacks and violence by the Hungarian police, now it seems that there is less pressure.

The organizational system within the country between state institutions and local charitable organizations that do not have public funding is based on an uneasy peace. On one hand, the police don't interfere with the street work of NGOs if they stay in specific suburb areas, on the other hand NGOs and their partners are not part of international networks and do not focus in a political way on the issue of rights violations, essentially maintaining a humanitarian approach. It seems that there is a slow but constant under-the-radar transit, tolerated by authorities because of its small size and managed by a trafficking network that does not create particular conflict in the territory.

GREECE

FIRE IN KARATEPE CAMP

On two separate occasions, on 14th January and a week after on 28th January, two large fires hit the so-called "Yellow Zone" in Mavrovouni camp (Lesvos), where single men are accommodated.

This area is made up of a total of fourteen large structures commonly known as Rubb Halls: 3-meters high tents that extend over a grid of roofless "rooms". The tent and comprehensive structure are made of tarp and metal, while the narrow corridor in the middle and the grid of 4-meter square "rooms" on both sides are all made of plywood.

In these Rub Halls, absent any form of privacy, about 40 to 50 people have been assigned their accommodation, in bunk beds and without the possibility to lock their doors. Inside these "rooms", they often live up to four people, most of the time without autonomous access to lighting, heating, or electricity.

On each occasion of the fires, the Fire Brigade swiftly intervened evacuating the affected structures and the immediate surroundings. In total, about 100 residents were left luckily uninjured but distressed and with all their belongings destroyed by the flames.

As for the cause of the fires, most accepted explanations bring in the scarce to absent access to heating - with seasonal temperatures steadily close to zero - for which some residents might have tried to remedy via handmade and unsafe electrical connections.

VISIT OF FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE VALERIE PÉCRESSE AND PROTEST

On the 15th of January, French presidential candidate Valérie Pécresse visited the new Closed Controlled Access Centre (C.C.A.C.) on Samos. During her visit, she praised the newly built camp by calling it a "un modèle à développer", a model to develop. She went on to say that the containers are flawless and the fences an 'example for the policy of humanity and firmness'. Her rhetoric concurred with her initial statement the previous day while visiting Athens.

In front of the ancient Acropolis, she declared that "[t]here is no Europe without borders, and the question of borders is absolutely key today to building European power". She stressed that her "European model" is a Europe with designated entry points, which everybody attempting to enter, has to pass. While she attempted to shift away from a 'fortress Europe' image, she clearly approved this picture with her 'European model', the externalisation of border management.

Besides her fairly predictable statements, Péresse insistently interrogated a camp resident in front of international media about his journey to Europe. Stressing that the Congolese asylum seeker comes from a country of origin with no Mediterranean border, she continuously pushed him to reveal that he passed from Turkey, a country deemed safe for many refugees. This interaction was not only astonishing but also out of touch - especially as she doesn't possess the mandate to ask these questions nor the legitimacy to pronounce herself upon their validity.

Péresse's visit was also met by a protest organised by the Somali community. Many people from Somalia are currently arbitrarily detained as they are unable to present a valid asylum applicant card upon leaving the camp. The group displayed banners like "Stop Detention" and "Freedom, Justice, Equality for all". Their statements stand in stark contrast to the Péresse approved policy of humanity.



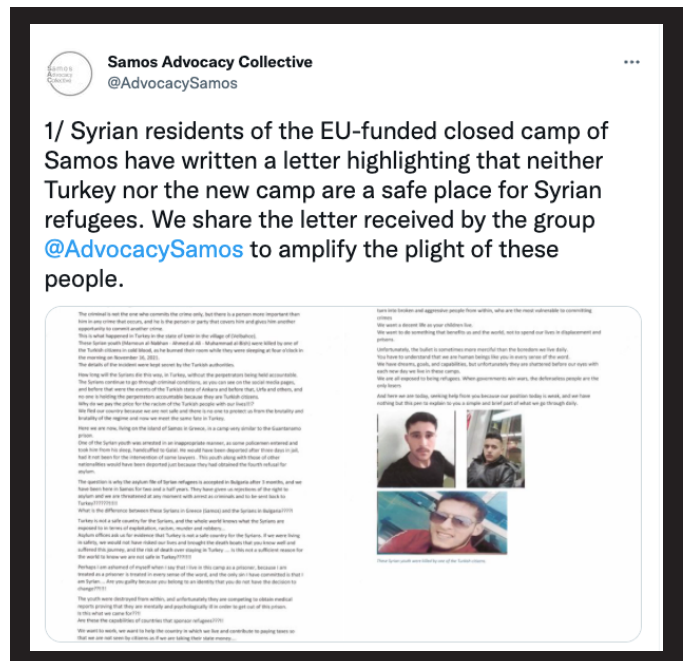
French Presidential Candidate Péresse's visit to Samos
Source: [eKathimerini](#)

LETTER BY SYRIAN CAMP RESIDENTS IN SAMOS

Syrian residents of the recently opened Closed Controlled Access Centre of Samos have written a letter highlighting that neither Turkey nor the new camp are a safe place for Syrian refugees.

Last November, three young Syrians were burnt to death in a "cold blooded," racist attack by a Turkish nationalist. This incident, which received little media coverage, provides yet another evidence that "Turkey is not a safe country for the Syrians", despite being deemed so by the 2016 EU-Turkey Deal and by the Joint Ministerial Decision by the Greek Government in 2021. In issuing this decision, Greece declared that Syrians (among other nationalities) that had passed through Turkey before claiming asylum in Greece could have their claim in Greece dismissed because they could allegedly receive protection and safety in Turkey. Needless to say, this argument is untenable.

As Turkey has not accepted returns of refugees to its territory since March 2020, thousands of Syrians in Greece find themselves stuck in limbo. Those in Samos are now forced to live in the 'prison-like' camp funded by the EU. Testimonies from the report "All I Want Is To Be Free and Leave" show that people living in the camp are subjected to unwarranted and indefinite detention, inedible food, lack of basic services, and fundamental rights and freedoms. The letter from Syrian residents highlights the violence, discrimination, and fear that Syrian refugees face from Turkey to Greece.



Source: [Samos Advocacy Collective](#)

ITALY

UPDATE FROM TRIESTE

In Trieste, the number of arrivals seems to have decreased in the last month. During January 2022, the associations working in Piazza Libertà, in Trieste, met and supported at least 61 people-on-the-move from different nationalities: Afghanistan and Pakistan but also from Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Kurdistan. The majority people-on-the-move were single men, but associations also interacted with 8 minors and 2 families with children. It is a small number of people compared with the previous summer and autumn. The reduction in current arrivals is likely due to winter conditions, but also the fact that in BiH there are currently fewer people-on-the-move outside and inside the official camps, and tight controls within the border region.

WRONGFUL DETENTION OF ASYLUM SEEKER FROM KABUL EVACUATIONS

Thanks to the work of ASGI (Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione), [the story of an asylum seeker detained at the CPR \(detention and repatriation center\) in Gradisca d'Isonzo](#) has been published. A. is an Afghan citizen who was evacuated with a flight of the Italian Ministry of Interior on August 15th, following the occupation of Kabul by the Taliban. He later reached France and was deported to Italy, where he was locked up for 32 days in the detention and deportation center of Gradisca. As the lawyer Caterina Bove declares in the interview: "A. is free and now he will continue with his asylum path only thanks to "fortuitous events"--in short, that under different circumstances, A could have spent much longer wrongfully detained. In this way, this case is enigmatic of broader issues within systems of detention and deportation in Italy, showcasing how blatantly people's rights are violated.

TURKEY

MASS FORCED RETURNS FROM ISTANBUL

Amid rising racism and increasingly deadly attacks of locals against refugees as well as rising tensions between different refugee communities in Turkey, authorities have once again started a large-scale campaign of deportations from Istanbul to Syria at the end of January. After initial reports of a few hundred forced returns towards the border area, it now appears that around 800 people have been rounded up on several occasions in different districts of Istanbul with the largest operations being reported from the suburb of Esenyurt, a hub for different refugee communities. Unconfirmed rumors are circulating about an unprecedented forced return operation on February 12th. Desperate Syrians in deportation centers have taken to social media to plead for their rights. The returns are indiscriminate, even people with valid residence papers have been targeted, and these operations also involve people from the LGBTQI+ community.

In previous such campaigns, authorities would set up checkpoints all over the city and proceed to detain those Syrians who had either no papers or papers that granted them residency in provinces other than Istanbul. Due to social tensions and economic issues, a considerable number of people registered in other provinces reside in Istanbul unregistered as the city has long tried minimizing the number of refugees residing there. Currently applications for international protection are stopped entirely. This time, however, the authorities seem to round up and forcibly expel even people with valid papers registered in Istanbul. They are driven across the country and placed in deportation camps along the border where they are then coerced to sign voluntary return papers. In addition, anyone who is detected by Turkish authorities after pushbacks from Greece or Bulgaria, under Turkish law can be deported as well due to a regulation citing the attempt to irregularly leave the country as a reason for deportation.

GLOSSARY OF REPORTS, NOVEMBER 2021

In January, BVMN shared 29 testimonies of pushbacks impacting 344 people-on-the-move across the Balkans. Those affected by these incidents included men, women, children with guardians, and unaccompanied children. They also represent a wide demographic, including people from Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Morocco, Iraq, Algeria, Pakistan, and Cuba.

- 6 Pushbacks to Serbia (1 from Romania, 3 from Hungary, and 2 from Croatia)
- 15 Pushbacks to Bosnia-Herzegovina (1 from Slovenia, and 14 from Croatia)
- 5 Pushbacks to Turkey (2 from Greece, 3 from Bulgaria, 1 from Bulgaria to Turkey via Greece)
- 2 Pushbacks to Greece from Italy

Romania to Serbia				
1.1	3rd December	15th December 2021	Afganistan	12
Hungary to Serbia				
2.1	1st January	2nd January	Syrian, Moroccan, Palestinian	7
2.2	10th January	13th January	Afghanistan	20
2.3	24th January	30th January	Syrian	1
Croatia to Serbia				
3.1	28th December	1st January	Afghanistan, Iran	6
3.2	12th January	27th January	Algeria, Pakistan	9
Slovenia to Bosnia-Herzegovina				
4.1	11th January	29th January	Iran	3
Croatia to Bosnia-Herzegovina				
5.1	4th December	20th December	Afghanistan	19
5.2	9th December	20th December	Afghanistan, Turkey	15
5.3	15th December	30th December	Pakistan	3
5.4	18th December	28th December	Afghanistan, Morocco	5
5.5	24th December	25th December	Afghanistan	13
5.6	9th January	17th January	Afghanistan, Gambia, Pakistan	7
5.7	17th January	26th January	Cuba, Iran	3
5.8	17th January	27th January	Algeria	4
5.9	18th January	27th January	Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan	70
5.10	20th January	22nd January	Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan	9
5.11	22nd January	27th January	Afghanistan	1
5.12	27th January	28th January	Afghanistan	6
5.13	28th January	31st January	Afghanistan	10
5.14	31st January	<u>31st January</u>	Afghanistan, Cuba	7

Italy to Greece				
6.1	12th January	15th January	Afghanistan	1
6.2	22nd January	25th January	Afghanistan	1
Greece to Turkey				
7.1	19th January	20th January	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Morocco, Algeria, Eritrea	68
7.2	20th January	21st January	Afghanistan, Syria, Morocco	25
Bulgaria to Turkey				
8.1	12th <u>january</u>	14th January	Syria	5
8.2	19th January	20th January	Morocco	2
8.3	27th January	28th January	Syria	14
Bulgaria to Greece				
9.1	17th January	20th January	Morocco	3



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. For press and media requests please contact: press@borderviolence.eu



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