Border Violence Monitoring Network

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ILLEGAL PUSH-BACKS AND BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS
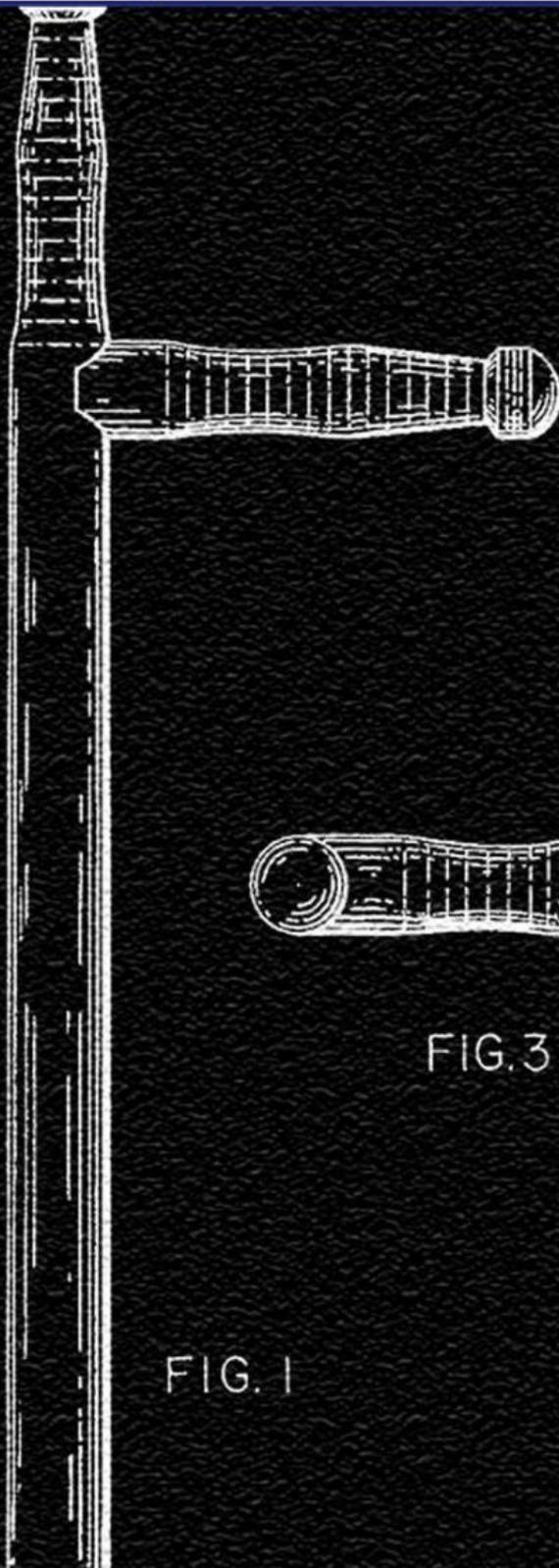
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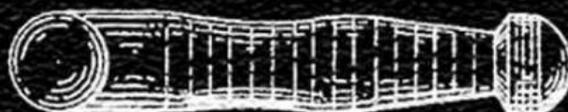
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OCTOBER 2021 BALKAN REGION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October the Border Violence Monitoring Network* (BVMN) shared 36 testimonies of pushbacks impacting 986 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.

In Greece the publication focuses on the issue of dead and missing people in the Evros/Meriç river area, looking at the weaponised geography that has led to countless drownings when people cross from Turkey to Greece. The enforced risk of transit is also analysed in the case of a stand-off with a cargo-ship near Kos and a pushback recorded off Ikaria in October, both cases reinforcing the climate of consistent violence against people navigating the Aegean. Monitoring findings at the sea and land border are outlined here, as well as events such as the nationwide evacuation simulation carried out last month in several of Greece's Reception and Identification Centres (RICs).

Further analysis in this publication picks up on the situation in the Serbian village of Majdan where people-on-the-move face severe challenges in improvised squats, as well as frequent violent pushbacks from neighbouring Romania. Across the north of Serbia, reports of squat evictions and forced removal by the police to the southern town of Preševo continued, with parallels to evictions occurring in Western parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina last month, where families sheltering in the border area where bussed to Sarajevo.

In Croatia, landmark visual material of masked officers repeatedly beating transit groups across the border came to light in October, with accompanying evidence for both Greece and Romania. This report looks at the findings published by the Lighthouse Reports and coalition partners, as well as the evasive response from the Croatian Ministry of Interior. Such high profile cases must also be seen in conjunction with evidence of continued Slovenian complicity in chain-pushbacks and the continued presence of joint patrols on their northern border with Italy.

In sum, the border violence which has for so long been a mainstay of domestic and externalised EU policy continued unabated into Autumn, in spite of continual and well founded evidence exposing perpetrators. In a wider view, this report connects up such impunity with the burgeoning trend of endemic pushback violence at other borders across the bloc, most notably at the Polish-Belarussian border, but also in Germany, where fascists have increased their mobilisation at the country's eastern border.

*BVMN is a network of watchdog organisations active in the Balkans, Greece and Turkey 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.

Border Violence Monitoring Network

OCTOBER
REPORT
2021

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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 push-backs 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
AUT – Austria
MNK – North Macedonia
GRK – Greece
BGR – Bulgaria
TUR – Turkey
EU – European Union

DEAD AND MISSING IN EVROS

The arrival of winter rains and cold weather brings new dangers for people-on-the-move seeking to reach Greece via the Evros land border. Risk of death by drowning or exposure is a consistent threat for those trying to cross this way and those who have been pushed back by the police. This is due to both immediate physical violence on the part of the authorities in the context of pushbacks -- forcing people to jump out of dinghies in the middle of the river or leaving them stranded in the middle of the river, only to be swept away by strong currents -- as well as the weaponization of geography: policies of deterrence pushing people to cross across difficult terrain where the landscape and river itself become used as tools of border enforcement. During the winter, water levels in the Evros are higher and temperatures consistently drop below freezing, drastically increasing risks for those attempting to cross. As the Greek coroner Pavlos Pavlidis from Alexandroupolis hospital states:
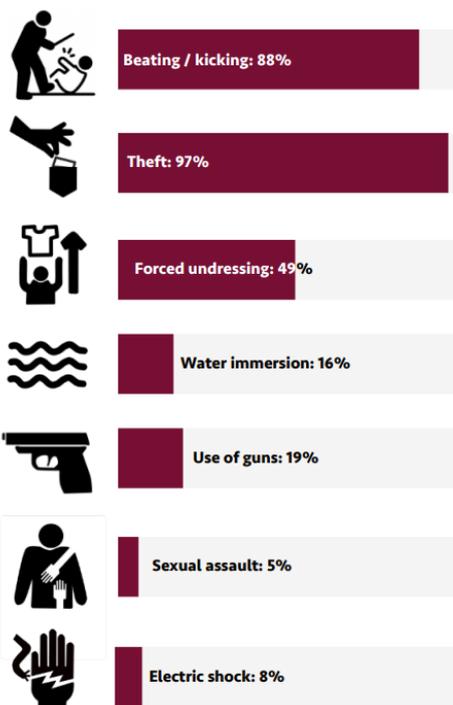
"Those who manage to make the crossing of the Evros come out of the river cold and wet. They then get lost in the surrounding mountains. They hide from the police. They die of the cold."

This year already, 38 bodies have been recovered from the Greek side of the Evros river. Many bodies recovered from the river and surrounding area are unrecognizable as they may not be found for weeks if not months. Further, there is no aggregate data regarding deaths on the Turkish side of the river, and it is likely that many bodies are never recovered. Volunteers found that seven people had been buried anonymously in the cemetery in Erdine in September 2021 alone. Informal support groups on Facebook and other platforms have sprouted in the last few years, where relatives search for news of loved ones who have gone missing. Those that are found are often taken to the Alexandroupolis University hospital, where staff attempt to identify them using documents found, as well as recognizable traits such as scars and tattoos. Those who are not identified are buried in a cemetery in a small anonymous migrant cemetery in Sidiro.

Alongside the immediate physical violence of Greek Authorities in perpetrating pushbacks, and the increasing militarisation and securitisation of the Evros region using technology such as drones, infra-red cameras, increased patrols, and LRADs (sounds cannons), the

Pushbacks from Greece to Turkey (Meriç / Evros border)

Types of violence / excessive force and percentages:

Beating / kicking: 88%

Theft: 97%

Forced undressing: 49%

Water immersion: 16%

Use of guns: 19%

Sexual assault: 5%

Electric shock: 8%

No violence used: 2%

BVMN noted that almost 98% of all Greek pushback testimonies contained one or more types of torture or ill-treatment.

Minors involved in pushbacks from Greece to Turkey

Of increasing concern is that 68% of pushbacks at Greece's land border include minors who are equally subjected to torture and ill-treatment.

Percentage of testimonies which referred to the involvement of minors in the pushback:

Unknown: 13%

No: 18%

Yes: 68%

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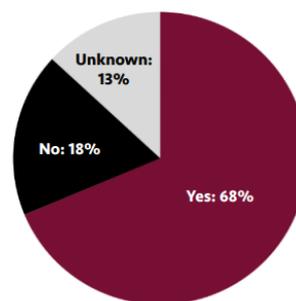
use of the landscape itself as a method of deterrence for those trying to cross has become an increasingly important factor. Speaking about a similar phenomenon along the US-Mexican border, where the architecture of border fences and controls push people-on-the-move to attempt crossings through the most dangerous parts of the desert, anthropologist Jason de Leon uses the term "hybrid collectif" to describe how a range of human and non-human actors (desert predators/wildlife, treacherous terrain far from any kind of infrastructure, shelter, or source of water, vigilante violence, etc) do the "brutal work" of the border patrol. In Greece, something very similar happens, particularly with regards to

the ecology of the Evros river which has been explicitly manipulated to create more hostile conditions for people crossing. Intentional flooding of the river basin throughout the opening of the Ivaylovgrad Dam on the Ardas river (a tributary of the Evros) at the request of the Greek government is entangled with strategies of border defense. In the context of pushbacks, "Islets"—large temporary sediment deposits in the middle of the river—have been used to strand people-on-the-move in an unofficial "no-man's-land, with little choice but to brave strong currents and attempt to swim or walk to Greek or Turkish shores at the risk of drowning.

ROMANIAN PUSHBACKS AND DEVELOPMENTS IN MAJDAN

Located a few kilometers away from the tri-border area which connects Romania-Hungary and Serbia, Majdan has quickly become a key transit point in Northern Vojvodina. As the surveillance measures along the Hungarian-Serbian border make it extremely difficult for people-on-the-move to successfully cross to Hungary, attempts to reach this country through its shared border with Romania have dramatically increased over the past year or so. There is no physical barrier between Romania and its two neighbours, making it more viable for transit groups on foot.

The local population and the number of people-on-the-move in Majdan both stand at around 300. Police presence in the Majdan vicinity has been high in recent months. In early October, occupied houses in the village were all evicted by authorities, pushing groups of people-on-the-move further from away from the centre, which has the highest concentration of locals in the area. Yet, one month after the last eviction, the number of people-on-the-move in Majdan and Rabe are back to where they were, after a temporary dip in the aftermath of the eviction.

As a consequence of the last police operation, access to essential needs has further worsened: transit groups are now scattered around Majdan's outskirts, several kilometers away from the only market available, in abandoned buildings or in rural areas that do not have any water or electricity supplies. Access to the village is highly restricted and under strict surveillance from Serbian Border Police. Commissariat mobile teams are patrolling the new informal settlements, trying to deter people from staying in the area or transiting through the village.

At the border people face further violence. Pushback practises from Romania to Serbia seem highly similar to those in use by Hungarian forces: pictures and videos taken by pushback victims show insults, beating, and transport in overcrowded vans. Extortion of money and personal belongings seems also very frequent, as well as destruction of cellphones.

In most testimonies taken between the 24th and 31st of October, minors were involved and treated as violently as other victims. One young Syrian boy reported that a Romanian Police officer used a taser on him (1.1), which was also reported in August by Afghan minors. Most pushbacks involved either Romanian Border Police or Jandarmeria (an armed national law enforcement taskforce), the latter being often present in rural areas. People in the area also state that Romanian Special Forces have also been highly involved in pushbacks. Their members wear balaclavas and black uniforms, and are notoriously violent towards people apprehended at the border. Most people subject to pushbacks that were interviewed close to the Romanian border were not detained during the process, but were rather taken back to Serbia shortly after their apprehension. Recent videos published by Lighthouse Reports attests to the actions of armed Romanian officers marching people over the border into Serbia in this fashion.

Following a period of suspension due to the Covid-19 pandemic, mixed patrols along the Italian-Slovenian border resumed on the 30th July 2021, around which there is still an air of opacity after months. The agreement protocol signed by the directors of the Italian and Slovenian border police services, on the 15th July in Rome and on the 21st July in Ljubljana, provides the legal basis for the deployment of mixed patrols composed of personnel from the host country and personnel from the police force of the other country.

The objective declared by Rome and Ljubljana is to strengthen the surveillance activities along the border of the two countries in order to "*fight more effectively cross-border crime, with particular reference to the activity of aiding and abetting irregular immigration*". For this purpose the joint patrols are technologically equipped and also rely on drones. However, the lack of transparency on the purposes and methods of this agreement implies a set of ulterior motives: to implement a widespread control of the territory to further hinder the entry of transit groups. In fact, the rejection of people attempting to cross the Italian border, and who are blocked very close to it, is still ongoing.

There were a further 47 people reported as being pushed back from Slovenia (via Croatia) to BiH or Serbia in the last month according to BVMN data, with several caught in close proximity to the Italian border. In a recent event hosted by network members InfoKolpa and Are You Syrious in Ljubljana, extensive data on these illegal removal patterns were discussed at length with a delegation of The Left in the European Parliament.

The recent high number of testimonies of chain-pushbacks from Slovenia, as highlighted in last month's report, was further analyzed in an article published in Altreconomia. The author argues that there might be a possible correlation between the recent peak of apprehensions in Slovenia according to the BVMN database and the collaborative patrols with Italian authorities. When BVMN record testimonies, one of the central challenges is always to obtain the precise

locations – eg. of the apprehension or the pushback points – which is hindered by the nature of the transit condition, possible traumatization and the fact that people-on-the-move regularly have their phones stolen or broken during the pushback process. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that sometimes only approximate locations can be provided, however they can still indicate insights on the radius from which Slovenian chain pushbacks are occuring.

In a case collected from September, the respondent (later chain-pushbacked to BiH) could assure that he was apprehended in Slovenia very close to the Italian border in the area of Trieste. Likewise, other cases from October saw respondents apprehended around 15km southeast of Trieste in Slovenia's northern border area and mocked when they tried to ask for asylum before being pushed back to BiH (see 5.3).

In these testimonies respondents only mention Slovenian officers involved in the apprehension. Likewise, on the other side of the border, the volunteers working in Piazza della Libertà in Trieste report that there are still no known incidents of Italian police officers involved in the apprehension of groups in Slovenia prior to pushbacks. Nevertheless, joint patrols include increased surveillance, for example by drones, which means the role of Italian officials in the border area must still be clarified.
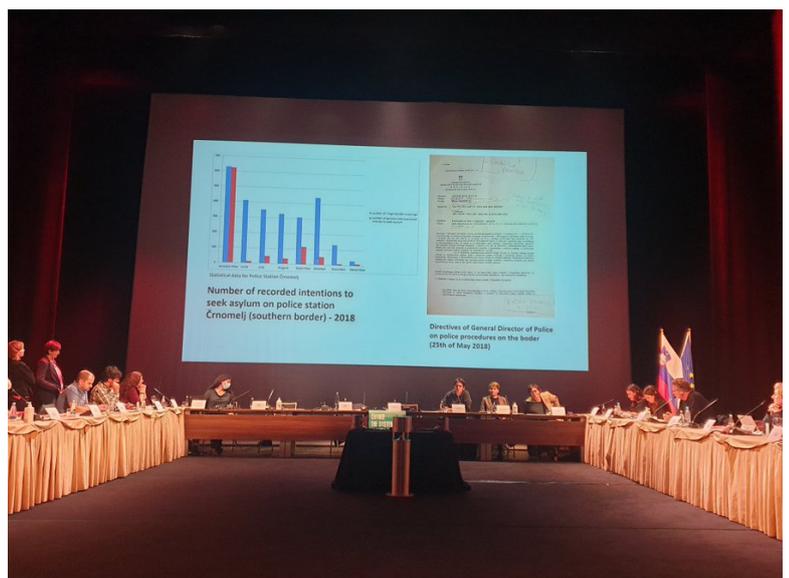
Statistics on chain-pushbacks being presented in Ljubljana (Source:Are You Syrious?)

CROATIA

LIGHTHOUSE REPORTS VIDEO AND MINISTRY RESPONSE

This month, a media investigation into push-backs at several of the EU's external borders was published by major outlets in multiple European countries. The reporting project, led by Lighthouse Reports (several former BVMN affiliates were involved in the investigation), removed the last remnants of plausible deniability from the allegations that pushbacks are perpetrated by state forces directed by the national government. The stories generated by this collaboration highlight the brutality and cynical lines of denial that invariably accompany the pushbacks — whether in Greece, Romania, or Croatia.

The evidence implicating the Croatian police, and in particular its elite unit "Interventna Policija" or Intervention Police, is damning. Drone footage shows a white van halting at an infamous "pushback spot" close to the Croatian-Bosnian border. Officers exiting the van can be seen "leading" people-on-the-move towards the border. Another video, this one shot from the undergrowth, shows a man wearing sunglasses beating people-on-the-move and pushing them into the Korana river that marks the Croatian-Bosnian border. Forensic analysis revealed that the jacket worn by the man matches jackets issued to the Intervention Police and that those jackets were likely funded by the EU's Internal Security Fund. Reporters further corroborated the visual evidence by interviewing both people-on-the-move, confirming that they were indeed seeking international protection in Croatia, and by talking to sources within the Croatian security apparatus. These Croatian police sources claim the pushbacks are called operation "*Koridor*" and that the orders come from "*way up the command chain*".

Together, the visual material, the forensic analysis, and the human sources, have left the Croatian government no choice but to admit that the evidence indeed showed pushbacks. According to media reports, three officers, who could be seen in the videos, were suspended and further disciplinary action may be taken. However, the Croatian government's response appears to be little more than window-dressing. Rather than addressing the issue of collective expulsions head on, Croatian President Zoran Milanović was quick to emphasize that the pushbacks filmed by Lighthouse and its partners were an "isolated case", contradicting years of evidence gathered by BVMN and other human rights groups, focusing instead on the "tough job" done by the police who should not be "stigmatized". This fits into Croatia's long-held strategy to deny that pushbacks are even taking place. The willingness of the Croatian government to maintain this narrative was recently illustrated when Croatia blocked the publication of a report by the Committee on the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment of the Council of Europe (CPT). The report likely provides further evidence of Croatia's mistreatment of people-on-the-move at its border. By denying publication, Croatia is the only European Union member country to have done so in ten years.

Footage dating back to 2018 showing Interventna police carrying out pushbacks in Lohovo (Source:BVMN)

Unfortunately, it seems that the European Commission is happy to accept Croatia's window-dressing response in lieu of real accountability. While Commission spokespersons have said that sanction could follow if Croatia did indeed use equipment bought with EU funds for illegal purposes, Ylva Johansson, European Commissioner for Home Affairs seemed satisfied by the investigation into the issue undertaken by the Independent Monitoring Mechanism. However, this mechanism is neither independent, as it includes multiple groups hand-picked by the Croatian government, nor is it able to do much monitoring, having to inform Croatian authorities if they want to surveil activities at the border. All this makes it hard to believe that positive change is coming; instead, several EU members recently signed a letter asking for the partial legalisation of pushbacks in clear violation of international law.

BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

EVICTION OF 'HELICOPTER' SQUATS TO SARAJEVO CAMP

On the morning of 29th October, the so-called 'helicopter', a makeshift settlement in Velika Kladuša, inhabited by hundreds of people-on-the-move, mainly Afghan families of the Hazara minority, was evicted. Local security agencies and the BiH police in cooperation with International Organisation for Migration (IOM) evicted the area, destroying with bulldozers and excavators the tents and structures where families were living. The move came without any notice and people were given no chance to collect their personal belongings.

Some people managed to escape and hide in order to avoid being transported to temporary reception centres (TRC), while others were loaded onto buses and transported against their will to the family camp in Bihać – the TRC Borići – or Sarajevo to the TRC Ušivak. All of them were taken without their consent and taken to transit centres that restrict the freedom of movement of individuals – the Borići camp restricts the freedom of individuals since people-on-the-move cannot leave the center after 4pm, while the Sarajevo camp is far from the Croatian border area where families are waiting to try and cross to reach sanctuary in EU countries. Ostensibly, the move to Sarajevo forces many families to wait until the end of winter there before heading back to the north-western part of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Tellingly, the evictions coincide with the opening of the new container section within the existing Lipa camp. People currently living in tents in the adjacent site will be moved into this new area. Moreover, the police and local institutions are expected to continue evicting those living in informal settlements, such as tent structures and abandoned self-contained buildings. People-on-the-move will be moved to the camp, in a remote rural area far from infrastructure, where they will be forced to live in inhuman conditions, especially during the winter when temperatures will drop below zero.

Bulldozers destroy tents in the field (Source:No Name Kitchen)

GREECE

CARGO-SHIP INCIDENT

On the 29th October, Aegean Boat Report shared information about an ongoing pushback of around 400 people by the Hellenic Coast Guard (HCG). While local news reported on the 28th that the Coast Guard was unable to find the new arrivals in distress. However it is almost impossible to believe that a fully equipped Coast Guard boat could not find such a large group of people on a cargo ship.

Initially heading towards Italy, the ship faced problems regarding the engine and had to issue a mayday call on the 28th October. It seems odd that the Coast Guard told local media that they haven't found any of the 'alleged' new arrivals as Aegean Boat Report received pictures of a Coast Guard ship on scene – which ultimately means that the authorities were lying to the press in order to perform yet another pushback. This position is further amplified by the fact that the border guards towed the cargo ship towards Turkey.

As another move in the ongoing political game between Athens and Ankara, Greece initially refused to assign a port for the ship as it bears a Turkish flag, hoping for Turkish port officials to intervene. However, this never happened.

Whilst being towed back and forth for 24 hours by the Hellenic Coast Guard without any clear plan in sight of where to bring the passengers, no support or even water was given to those present on the boat. The fact that the people on the vessel had already been travelling for a few days without food, water, or other necessities, makes the lack of support provided by the HCG even more inhumane.

After four days at sea, people were finally brought to Kos on 31st October, though no further information was shared about this disembarkation. Following all the uncertainty about the fate of the boat's passengers, it seems ironic that the Minister of Immigration and Asylum, Notis Mitarakis, stated that "Greece has proven once again that it protects human lives at sea and provides protection, at a time when others are indifferent to their obligations." The only thing Greece has proven once more is that they are not willing to respect European and international law.

PUSHBACK FROM IKARIA

On the 17th October, a boat carrying 23 people arrived in Ikaria – an island close to Samos. It was reported by local media that 21 people were met by the Ikarian port police, and hence two people remained missing. It is understood that the 22 people were eventually found by police and were informed that they would be transferred to Samos.

However, the transit group never arrived in Samos, and in the afternoon of the 17th, 22 people were found drifting in life rafts by the Turkish Coast Guard (TCG). Aegean Boat Report confirms that the same individuals who arrived in Ikaria were on the boat which was rescued by the TCG.

NATIONWIDE EVACUATION EXERCISE

On the 22nd October, the General Secretariat for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, alongside the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), organized a nation-wide evacuation exercise. Key participants of this test were the Reception and Identification Centres on the entry points to Greece such as Evros Fylakio, Lesvos, Samos, Chios, Kos and Leros.

The new 'Closed and Controlled Access Center' on Samos came once more in the spotlight, as a large-scale evacuation, including the camp residents, was conducted on the island as part of the Promahos exercise. Part of this training are scenarios like mass flows, forest fire, uprising, earthquake and maritime accidents. Whilst recognising the necessity of an evacuation exercise, it seems strange that the Ministry saw the need of livestreaming the whole evacuation on social media, making an event out of it.

Continuing on the same concern, it is clear that filming camp residents without their consent is clearly a violation of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Another quite strange part of the exercise was the staged reaction in case of new arrivals. Here, Frontex and the Hellenic Coast Guard demonstrated how they would safely board refugees arriving at Greek shores. This seems even more bizarre, given the fact that, as mentioned in the previous sections, pushbacks are far from being rare practices in the Aegean.

The most outrageous part of this whole livestreamed and nation-wide evacuation exercise is however that they staged online a suicide of a refugee, stating 'TRAGIC END UP FOR REFUGEES IN THE JAIL KYT LOOKING FOR HOW TO BURY HIM.' At the end of the day this whole 'exercise' seems like nothing more than a publicity stunt.

UPDATE FROM MARE LIBERUM MISSION

Mare Liberum's most recent monitoring mission began on 21st October 2021, after a nearly two year absence due to efforts in both Greece and Germany to hinder their operations at sea. Even before the mission started, it was clear that Greek authorities were intent on keeping a close eye on the team, visiting and telephoning them several times before departure.

Mare Liberum were initially planning to monitor the situation north of Lesvos – the site of a high number of pushbacks during the last year. En route to this location the team had several encounters with a spectrum of authorities present in the Aegean Sea including the Port authority, Hellenic Coast Guard, Frontex and Greek Navy) – a telling sign of the level of securitisation at this part of Europe's external border. The monitoring vessel was checked, followed, photographed and ultimately ordered to leave the area. After several email exchanges with the competent authorities, the team were forced to return to leave the anchoring spot at 02:00am the following day and make the six hour trip back to the port.

The initial argument given by the authorities was that the vessel posed a threat to the operations of the Hellenic Coast Guard and a danger to other boats by anchoring in the sea. Later, however, they invoked a recently adopted law that requires NGOs operating in

Greek waters to be registered by the government and operate under the command of the Hellenic Coast Guard. This is an extension of a law passed in 2020 that requires all civil actors working in the field of migration to register with Greek authorities, a nearly impossible task that has been used to restrict NGO and solidarity activities. Despite arguing that this law should not apply to the monitoring of human rights violations, Mare Liberum was ordered to return to port and discontinue monitoring activities with immediate effect.

Although the team were only at sea for around 24 hours and were not able to properly monitor or actively prevent any pushbacks, the team still observed several manoeuvres by the Hellenic Coast Guard, including irregular patterns of movement, the use of searchlights and one ship quickly moving towards Turkish waters and turning off its positions lights.

The vessel was allowed out of port only once more, with the specific purpose of holding a commemorAction in honor of the people who died at sea as a result of the European border regime. The authorities' permission, however, came with a list of strict conditions, requiring the crew to abstain from monitoring, stay far away from the border and call the authorities every hour, stating that "any deviation" from their orders would result in "criminal sanctions."

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As a result of the countless reports of systematic atrocities committed against people-on-the-move by Greek and European authorities, the European Commission and numerous civil society groups have demanded that Greece implement an independent monitoring mechanism at its borders. The Greek government, however, continues to adopt laws that guarantee them total control of the sea and inhibit any civil society groups from monitoring human rights violations.

Monitoring vessel on the Aegean (Source: Mare Liberum)

TURKEY

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

In Turkey, anti-refugee sentiment is at an all-time high, fuelled by the economic crisis and (opposition) parties preparing for the upcoming elections. After the escalation in Ankara in August, in mid-October, the illegal deportation campaign reached new bizarre levels with a "banana craze" sweeping across Tik Tok in Turkey. A local complained on camera blaming migrants for rising food prices claiming "I can't eat bananas, you buy kilos of bananas". The audio has subsequently been used by Syrians in Turkey posting videos of themselves making fun of the racist claim on social media platforms. In response, and exemplifying the xenophobic atmosphere in the country, the Turkish General Directorate of Migration announced at the end of October that at least 7 Syrian nationals had been detained due to their "provocative" social media posts and deportation and judicial procedures were ongoing.

Still in response to the (fear of) increasing arrivals of Afghan nationals in the country, Turkey has completely halted all procedures regarding humanitarian residence permits and temporary protection status for Afghans. With these orders from the Turkish Ministry of Interior, and because there are no formal deportation procedures at the moment to Afghanistan, pushbacks have become a systematic practice to expel Afghans and other asylum seekers entering the country from Iran.

Because of the impossibility to legalise their stay, when undocumented people are apprehended, they are taken to remote detention centres where their asylum procedure should be processed. But, instead, they are being held temporarily before being taken to military outposts in remote locations on the borders of Turkey with Syria and Iran. At the Iranian border, the people are then forced across the border in the middle of the night in illegal pushbacks. At the Syrian border, people are coerced to sign return agreements before being taken to Idlib. These expulsion occur both from the immediate border areas as well as from city centres – such as within Istanbul and Izmir – and taken across the country to be pushed back to Iran. Additionally, in October an Iranian dissident revealed another kidnapping attempt by Iranian agents on Turkish territory, this time thwarted by the Turkish authorities.

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SERBIA

SQUAT DISPERSALS FROM THE NORTH

Over the past month, the Collective Aid team has reported on at least three large evictions, mostly targeting groups living around Sombor Transit Centre, Majdan and Rabe, by the Romanian border. While similar operations are quite common in the region, especially in Subotica, what is striking in these recent cases is the scale and the means at disposal of authorities. All clearance operations involved a large number of police officers, as well as 6 to 7 passenger buses.

The rate at which evictions are currently being carried out is also startling: happening almost weekly, it is the highest rate recorded by the Collective Aid team this year. The trend is likely to be a tool of deterrence, linked to the rising numbers of people-on-the-move transiting through Serbia, as highlighted by the last UNHCR monthly report.

At the local level, the situation in Sombor in north west Serbia is quite unique. The centre of town is potentially the most overcrowded in all of Serbia, and anger among the local population has been growing. In mid-October, a hotel owner who had people-on-the-move among his customers, was threatened with death by a right wing group and had to shut his establishment. Such incidents are common, and anti-migrant demonstrations are happening on a weekly basis in the town.

The recent crackdown on this location, as well as on Majdan and other locations (see Trends section above) indicates a clear will from the Serbian authorities to displace people from Serbia's border areas, frustrate and deter movement with the onset of winter. This has a further impact on access to basic amenities, distancing people from cities and transit hubs they have been using, and forcing cyclic internal journeys for groups to return to the north.

POLAND

FAMILIES STUCK ON THE BORDER WITH BELARUS

Thousands of people, including families with small children, remain trapped in the no man's land between Belarus and Poland. Obtaining exact numbers is difficult, because neither Poland nor Belarus are allowing humanitarian aid workers or journalists into this zone. People trapped on the border, however, are calling for help to friends and families in Western Europe.

These reports, some of which are shared on Facebook and others of which reach only individuals, speak of men, women, and children stuck in limbo. They are trapped between Polish and Belarussian forces. Most people-on-the-move arrive in Belarus on planes with visas, issued to persons from countries like Iraq. In their home countries, they have been promised easy entry into the European Union via Belarus. Groups then take taxis or other forms of transport to the border with Poland where Belarussian authorities allow and even encourage entry into Poland.

Once there, however, people are trapped at the border. Contrary to what they have been told, Polish border guards are not admitting people to the country, nor following EU law on asylum access. Instead, the EU member state has deployed around 10,000 personnel to secure the border and there are reports of violent pushbacks, including against families. Poland recently passed legislation to effectively legalise pushbacks, in a move reminiscent of Hungary. This new legislation directly contradicts EU and international law, which both assert every person's right to claim asylum and safeguards for fair and proper treatment. This sharp deviation only adds formal trappings to the existent policy of pushbacks which Polish authorities have been applying over the last months, creating a violent buffer zone at the border with Belarus in which numerous people have already died.

For those unable to enter and seek sanctuary in Poland, the conditions are only worsening. Awira is a 23 year old Kurdish Iraqi woman living in Germany, her parents, along with her eleven year old brother and eighteen year old sister are trapped on the Belarussian side of the border. She has been receiving daily pleas

for help from them. They have been on the border for two weeks now. They have no food and nothing to drink nor do they have warm clothes or tents. They have only been able to keep in touch because some members of the group they are with have powerbanks. Awira and her family have reached out to every aid group they can find as well as to UNHCR and the Red Cross. So far no one has been able to help them. The family have asked to be allowed to return to Iraq, but thus far the border guards have refused to let them through.

This speaks to the entrapment of many of the people stuck on the border on the Belarus side, because while they cannot go forward into Poland, they are also not being permitted to go back into Belarus. This persists even when individuals and groups expressly state that they wish to return to their home countries. Groups report that the Belarussian forces ask them to pay large amounts of money (including up to 800 Euros) for taxis back to Minsk, for flights to return, for example, to Iraq. Many groups report pressure from Belarussian guards to continue to try and enter Poland, even at great risk to themselves. Among those trapped at the border are not only Iraqis, Afghans and Syrians, but also Belarussian refugees fleeing Lukashenko's regime.

When people reach Poland, they continue to face dangerous conditions, including the increasingly cold temperatures, that have already cost lives. A three kilometer swath from the border into the country has been declared a "zone of emergency" into which humanitarian aid workers, journalists and medics may not enter. This cuts off people-on-the-move as well as hampering the movement of local Polish people in this area. Local people have started a "green light initiative" that allows people who have crossed the border to identify homes where they can find warm clothes or a warm meal, though locals cannot do more without risk to themselves. Polish people across the country have been protesting the regime's hardline stance. Yet as winter sets in, the violence of the border is likely to claim more lives unless substantive access to asylum and emmediate material assistance are introduced.

Family stuck in the woods on the Belarus–Poland border (Source:Anon)

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GERMANY

FASCISTS MOBILISING AT THE BORDER WITH POLAND

Right-wing extremist groups, including the Identitarian movement as well as the neo-fascist party "Der III. Weg" (The Third Path) have rallied their supporters in Germany for self-organized border patrols. This comes as people transiting through Poland from Belarus reach Germany´s eastern border. On 24th October 2021, police stopped 50 supporters of The Third Path in the state of Brandenburg, close to the town of Guben, who were planning to patrol the forests near the border. Pepper sprays, a bayonet, a machete, and batons were seized during the ID checks.

Calls to "protect the border" were circulated via several far-right Telegram channels throughout October. Users also boasted about intercepting people-in-transit and handing them over to police. For instance, the Twitter user @Marius1094 wrote on 24th October at 00:27a.m. "Border patrol in Görlitz. 3 migrants handed over to police". In another post shared in a Telegram channel, the Aktionsgruppe Zittau (action group Zittau) claimed to have intercepted 30-35 individuals. It remains unclear whether these statements are mere bragging or if and how these interceptions have actually taken place.

The Saxon police denied cooperating with the self-proclaimed border guards. In a statement, the mayor of Guben, Fred Mahro (CDU), rejected any form of vigilante justice.

At the same time, he described the situation for the residents of his city as absolutely unsatisfactory, as the "massive" entry was damaging the sense of security of the people of Guben and called for an increased police presence.

To protest the right-wing border patrols and show solidarity with people-in-transit as well as those in the region who experience frequent racist attacks, around 150 antifascists held a 24-hour vigil in Guben on 24th October.

This raises serious concerns about the safety of people-on-the-move entering Germany via Poland, an issue impacting people across Europe both during their journeys and arrivals. BVMN network members in Serbia for example, have reported repeated threats and attacks by far-right groups against people-on-the-move as well as volunteers. In 2020, self-proclaimed patrols started harassing people-on-the-move in Belgrade trying to remove them from public spaces at night.

The German government bears responsibility to ensure human rights and access to due process and asylum are respected. Instead, the prominent narrative used by politicians dehumanizing people fleeing to Germany via Belarus and stirring fear of "another 2015", plays into the hands of far-right extremists.

ITALY

AN UPDATE FROM PIAZZA DELLA LIBERTÀ

At a time when MEPs from the European Parliament are engaging in a "mission" along the Balkan Route, starting from the city of Trieste, the climate of repression against solidarity activists remains high in this area of north east Italy. Activists of Rete Solidale Pordenone face trial for helping new arrivals to the city, part of a worsening trend for solidarity associations and NGOs who are supporting people-on-the-move. This criminalisation is even more concerning, set against the backdrop of another year where no effective winterisation plan has been prepared, and the advancing cold weather will only make people sleeping on the streets more precarious.

In Piazza della Libertà where volunteers and activists support new arrivals from the route 345 men, 7 women, 2 families (4 people) and 66 unaccompanied minors arrived in October asking for assistance. This is a drastic decrease in numbers compared to the previous months. New arrivals also face a renewed emphasis on police checks at the border and at the train station in Trieste. The expanded role of transport police is part of a wider state action, operation 'Safe Stations', which seeks to block the transit of people west across Italy to Milano and other bigger cities.

In the city of Udine there have also been large police operations, resulting in the capture of

up to 50 people in one night. Those caught by police are said to be taken to quarantine structures before undergoing the procedures for asylum requests. The continued issue of quarantine and vaccination facilities intersects with protests across Italy about the implementation of a "Green Pass". Yet as usually, the mobility of people-on-the-move is being most harshly controlled under the pandemic conditions.

GLOSSARY OF REPORTS, OCTOBER 2021

In October, BVMN shared 36 testimonies of pushbacks impacting 986 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, Sudan, Morocco, Iraq, Algeria, Pakistan, Balochistan, Gambia, Kashmir, Kurdistan, Palestine and Tunisia.

- 20 pushbacks to Bosnia-Herzegovina (16 from Slovenia, 4 from Croatia)
- 7 pushbacks to Serbia (1 from Romania, 1 from Croatia, 1 from Slovenia, 4 from Hungary)
- 1 pushback to Greece from North Macedonia
- 8 pushbacks to Turkey (3 from Greece, 5 from Bulgaria)

LINK	INCIDENT	RECORDED	GROUP	DEMOGRAPHIC
ROMANIA TO SERBIA				
1.1	15th October	20th October	36	Afghanistan
HUNGARY TO SERBIA				
2.1	5th October	7th October	2	Iran
2.2	9th October	15th October	16	Afghanistan
2.3	10th October	23rd October	25	Afghanistan, Syria, Sudan
2.4	27th October	28th October	16	Afghanistan, Syria, Morocco, Iraq
CROATIA TO SERBIA				
3.1	7th October	7th October	1	Algeria
SLOVENIA TO SERBIA				
4.1	12th October	18th October	3	Afghanistan
SLOVENIA TO BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA				
5.1	7th October	8th October	21	Afghanistan, Algeria, Pakistan
5.2	12th October	30th October	5	Afghanistan
5.3	13th October	20th October	9	Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan
5.4	14th October	18th October	9	Afghanistan, Pakistan
CROATIA TO BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA				
6.1	14th September	4th October	2	Morocco
6.2	29th September	6th October	12	Balochistan, The Gambia
6.3	29th September	16th October	1	Pakistan
6.4	30th September	5th October	4	Afghanistan
6.5	1st October	2nd October	8	Afghanistan

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LINK	INCIDENT	RECORDED	GROUP	DEMOGRAPHIC
6.6	3rd October	5th October	10	Pakistan
6.7	3rd October	5th October	30	Pakistan
6.8	3rd October	12th October	5	Kashmir
6.9	5th October	19th October	5	Afghanistan
6.10	12th October	1st November	3	Afghanistan
6.11	13th October	15th October	70	Afghanistan, Pakistan
6.12	15th October	29th October	30	Afghanistan, Pakistan
6.13	17th October	17th October	20	Afghanistan, Pakistan
6.14	24th October	1st November	15	Pakistan
6.15	26th October	1st November	27	Afghanistan, Kurdistan, Pakistan
6.16	18th September	11th November	12	Palestine, The Gambia
NORTH MACEDONIA TO GREECE				
7.1	22nd October	25th October	6	Afghanistan, Morocco
GREECE TO TURKEY				
8.1	6th October	7th October	200	Afghanistan, Syria, Morocco, Algeria, Morocco
8.2	9th October	11th October	160	Afghanistan, Syria, Morocco
8.3	14th October	15th October	200	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Algeria, Kurdistan, Tunisia
BULGARIA TO TURKEY				
9.1	3rd October	4th October	1	Tunisia
9.2	9th October	11th October	4	Morocco
9.3	9th October	10th October	3	Morocco, Tunisia
9.4	15th October	16th October	3	Morocco, Tunisia
9.5	21st October	22nd October	13	Syria
FIND ALL REPORTS ON THE DATABASE HERE				

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M	O	N	I	T	O	R	I	N	G
N	E	T	W	O	R	K

BVMN is based on the horizontal participation of member organisations in the field of documentation, advocacy, media and litigation. The Network receives funds through charitable grants and donations from supporters. The funds primarily cover transport subsidies for volunteers in the field and staff costs.

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

Border Violence Monitoring Network