Border Violence
Monitoring Network

ILLEGAL
PUSH-BACKS AND
BORDER VIOLENCE
REPORTS

BALKAN REGION
APRIL/MAY 2020

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*In this report, the stories of 736 people subject to pushbacks in the Western Balkans and Greece are told. The Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) continued to record high levels of illegal cross-border removals throughout the COVID-19 lockdown period and into the relaxation of measures. First hand accounts of these actions - carried out by both police, state militaries and Frontex - come from a range of different borders stretching from the Evros river between Greece and Turkey, to the Italian-Slovenian border. This publication provides field updates from April and May, relaying the situation along the EU external border and it's persistently violent character.*

*Analysis focuses on some of the most startling violations that occurred in recent months, most notably the spray tagging of transit groups by Croatian police. Testimonies from the people targeted confirms the wider understanding of Croatian border practices as acts of torture, inhumane or degrading treatment. Meanwhile, on the other side of the border in Bosnia-Herzegovina, hard evidence has emerged of the systemic internal violence in the EU funded camp system with beatings by police and security filmed on camera. With renewed pushbacks from Italy, under an "informal readmissions" process with Slovenia, yet more people are being subjected to this cycle of violence at the border and in the camps.*

*In Greece, the extension of pushbacks - initiated from across the mainland and Aegean islands - continues to be a prime focus of field reporting. Twelve separate incidents, accounting for almost 600 people, are published here detailing the transport, detention and violent removal of people to Turkey. The respondents represent a wide demographic and were seized from a range of urban sites, camps, detention centres and coastal areas: denoting the systematised way that Greece is carrying out mass pushbacks. This report also considers pushbacks into Greek territory from neighbouring Albania, highlighting gross misconduct and violence on the part of the Frontex mission operating on the border. This evidence firmly implicates the European agency in illegal border practice and violence against people-on-the-move. Recent developments such as the court proceedings against Hungary and Croatia are also the subject of analysis. Litigation news comes alongside other insights, such as updates from Serbia where army garrisoning, fenced reception centres and fascists attacks have marked a steep increase in violence against transit communities. The report also covers an investigation into a shooting by the Greek military, logging by Croatian authorities on the green border, accomodation pressure in Una-Sana Canton, an analysis of ad hoc "chain" pushbacks from Serbia, and updates on housing evictions across Athens and Thessaloniki.*

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

# TRENDS IN BORDER VIOLENCE

## SPRAY-TAGGING ABUSE BY CROATIAN AUTHORITIES

In April, evidence emerged of spray tagging carried out by Croatian police officers as a means of degrading treatment, marking out crudely the victims of a systematically violent border regime. A series of photographs of people-on-the-move showed orange crosses had been marked on the crown of their head by police during pushbacks to BiH. The violations were first investigated by network member No Name Kitchen, leading to a report in the Guardian which covered several separate incidents where tagging was used. Amnesty International has since gone further in defining these acts as "torture", gross allegations which have been evidenced for several years by BVMN documentation work.

> **"THROUGH THE TRANSPARENT PARTITION THAT SEPARATES THE DRIVING CABIN FROM THE REAR AREA, THE RESPONDENT SAW THAT THE OFFICERS HAD GOT OUT TO BUY BEER FROM THE SHOP"**

Information from locals on the ground, and sources from inside Miral camp confirm the abuse occurred across several different locations (close to Poljana and Sturlic), affecting separate transit groups. In the aftermath, questions were raised about motivation of the offending officers and whether any accountability existed. Refusing to answer, the Croatian Ministry of Interior (MUP) denied all knowledge of the event, instead accusing the activists and journalists of defamation. Yet BVMN spoke to a person affected by these attacks who could describe in detail being pushed back by drunken Croatian police officers who mocked and laughed while smothering their heads with paint (see 4.2).

The respondent shared how after being caught near the Slovenian border by Croatian police, the group had been taken to a police station where they were denied the right to asylum, despite making verbal requests. The group were then loaded into vans and driven away. During the journey the Croatian officers stopped to buy alcohol:

"Through the transparent partition that separates the driving cabin from the rear area, the respondent saw that the officers had got out to buy beer from the shop"

A number of the cases recorded by BVMN show references to drunken officers during illegal cross-border



**CROSS SPRAYED ON THE HEADS OF PUSHED BACK TRANSIT GROUP (SOURCE: GUARDIAN)**

removals by Croatian police, highlighted by an incident reported in May (see 4.5). In the latest case, the officers drove under the influence of alcohol to a stretch of river close to Poljana, robbed the detained group, beat them, removed clothing and shoes, and used spray canisters to mark crosses across the tops of their heads and faces. Despite the drunkenness of officers, the weight of evidence showing consistent rights abuses at Croatian borders would suggest that alcohol was not the driving factor behind these attacks, but only a catalyst to their execution. The recent Amnesty report states spray tagging is congruent with the "routine

CROSS SPRAYED ON THE HEADS OF PUSHED BACK TRANSIT GROUP (SOURCE:GUARDIAN)

violent pushbacks and torture by the Croatian police" occuring at the border. Furthermore, a feature report by BVMN on pushbacks from Croatia during 2019 found that across 12 months of data, over 80% or recorded cases amounted to "torture or cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment". Thus the latest development of paint tagging is yet another in a long line of torturous practices, some of which include:

-Excessive and disproportionate force
-Electric discharge weapons (EDWs)
-Forcing to undress
-Threats or excessive force with firearms
-Inhumane treatment inside police vehicles
-Detention with no basic facilities

Clare Daly, MEP for European United Left–Nordic Green Left, decried the abuses in the LIBE committee of the European Parliament, particularly the way groups were "branded": a description which matches the dehumanising actions relayed by the respondent. He described the officers laughing, and states the painting of heads was used to make them look "like monkeys". The treatment illuminates the perverted actions of the Croatian police, which mediates it's racist and islamophobic stance through a growing array of physical and psychological violence. The way paint

markings are conferred onto bodies, additional to the blunt injuries from batons and punches, bears all the hallmarks of the kind of branding used by fascist governments to denote those they deem sub-human. This dehumanising treatment, specifically against people-of-colour and Muslims, then lays the basis for the kind of ultra-violence that was also witnessed in this incident. For example, one family marked with orange paint told the Guardian how they were also:

> *"forced to place their heads between the body and the door of a police vehicle, while police officers kicked the vehicle door"*

Such acts - particularly against parents and their children - do not occur without structural racism, a well developed system of anonymity for perpetrating officers and a state which firmly supports the use of torture as a form of border control. To redress the absence of accountability, network member Centre for Peace Studies have now filed a criminal complaint with the state attorney's office based on the evidence of torturous practice and illegal pushback. But while the pressure mounting around this case seems to have stemmed the use of spray tagging, yet more incredibly violent and torturous practices continue to this day, directly at the behest of the Croatian state and unchecked by it's EU patrons.

# FRONTEX PUSHBACKS FROM ALBANIA

In May, BVMN received first hand accounts of push-backs along Albania's land border with Greece. This border has gradually become an alternative for those travelling the dangerous Western Balkan Route into Europe. UNHCR statistics for Albania from 2018 show a fivefold increase in arrivals, and a 14 fold increase in asylum requests. In response, in May 2019 Frontex launched their first mission on the sovereign territory of a non-EU member state. 50 Frontex officers were deployed to strengthen border security in Albania and early reports indicated their "success", reporting that people crossing from Greece were being apprehended on a daily basis. This is supported by information from the Department of Border and Migration which confirms that 11,344 irregular migrants had been detained at the Albanian border between January 2019 and February 2020. While Germany pulled their Frontex officers out of Albania during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mission has continued to carry out patrols and removals to Greece, evidenced by testimony published recently by BVMN (see 8.1).

The latest case involved the violent removal of Moroccan men found by a Frontex patrol in south eastern Albania. The officers - reported to be wearing masks - used excessive force to apprehend the transit group and disproportionately beat those trying to evade capture with metal batons. Offering a description, one man shared how the officers were:

*"big, strong, and not ashamed to hit you".*

Frontex officials were linked to this case because of a visual identification made the interviewed group on the uniforms. When stationed on Frontex missions officers wear the uniform of their sending state, but are marked out specifically with a blue armband with the European agency's insignia. The group believed the officers were from Hungary and Germany (Frontex has officers from 15 different sending states based in Albania). Notably, the transit groups recall being taken to a police station in Bilisht where they were questioned by Frontex officials on their origins and how they had arrived in Albania. Bilisht is a border town close to Korçë, which hosts part of the Frontex mission in conjunction with the Gjirokaster base in the south west. The group were then pushed back close to Trestenik where last year news reports saw Frontex boasting about the number of apprehensions it was making of people trying the mountainous foot crossing from Greece.

Less present in Frontex's outward PR image is the underlying fact that cross-border pushbacks are often the outcome of these apprehensions, and wide stretches of the green border are being used to illegally return people to Greece.

Certainly Albania shares a responsibility for the fair treatment of transit communities, underlined by a recent article by Balkan Insight citing overcrowded reception facilities, with violent gangs, insufficient food, and dire conditions. However, the development of a Frontex operation which is carrying out systematically illegal practice positions the EU, and it's migration strategy, as the primary actor in redrawing the access to safe passage through this border. In what might be considered an inherently neo-colonial fashion, Frontex is playing an instrumental role in embedding patterns of violence and neglect of international protection mandates: seen in the violent pushback recorded recently by BVMN. Whatsmore this is being carried out with immunity from the Albanian judicial system, a feature of the new status agreements that Frontex has signed with various non-member states in the Western Balkans, most recently Serbia and Montenegro.
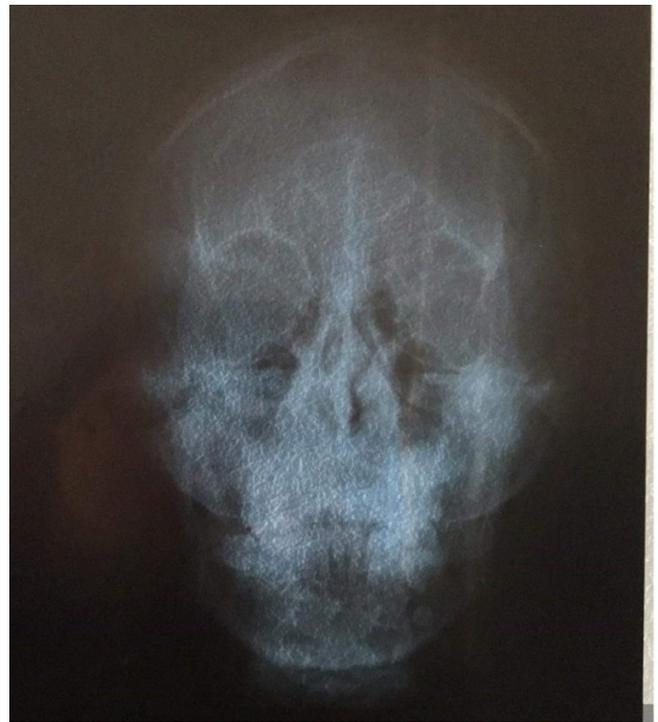


FRONTEX OFFICERS FROM SLOVENIA WEARING THE AGENCIES BLUE ARMBAND (SOURCE: FRONTEX)

# DISAGGREGATED "CHAIN" PUSHBACKS

Since April, BVMN has observed a growing phenomena in disaggregated "chain" pushbacks from Serbia, via North Macedonia, to Greece. "Chain" pushbacks refer to cross-border removals which involve three or more national territories. In the new cases, which have impacted at least 49 people, the initial pushbacks originated from camps in Serbia (three from Preševo and one from Tutin). The Serbian authorities misled camp residents, promising new camp cards or a transfer on the basis of COVID-19, but instead used force

> **THESE VIOLENT COLLECTIVE EXPULSIONS OPERATE IN INCREASED SILENCE, ESPECIALLY WITH GLOBAL ATTENTION PREOCCUPIED WITH THE PANDEMIC AND HUMAN RIGHTS OBSERVERS UNABLE TO MONITOR IN THE FIELD DUE TO HEALTH RESTRICTIONS.**

to remove them through the southern border to MNK, some at gunpoint (see 1.1). The "chain" aspect of these cases was completed when the groups were eventually apprehended by MNK police and removed to Greece, occurring between 1-11 days after the initial removal. These sequential pushbacks differ in their organisation from the "traditional" chain pushbacks carried out by Slovenian authorities in collaboration with Croatia, which result in expulsion into either BiH or Serbia. These sequences are initiated through bilateral readmission agreements, and the Slovenian officials use a legal framework (albeit heavily abused) in order to transfer transit groups back into Croatia through official border crossing points. Within the disaggregated chain pushbacks noted recently, there have been no reports of direct contact between Serbian, N. Macedonian or Greek officers. Serbian authorities conducted the aforementioned push-backs in the region of Lojane (MKD), taking advantage of the nearby green border (see 1.2), whilst the N. Macedonian authorities conduct them at unofficial points on the border fence with Greece in the region of Gevgelija (MKD), using small gates referred to by respondents commonly as "the door" (see 3.2). Comparatively, Slovenian officers are repeatedly described as handing over apprehended transit groups to Croatian authorities as evidenced by an incident on the 16 February 2020. Network member InfoKolpa has examined these practices in-depth, showing how Slovenia illegally implements the readmission agreement while ignoring requests for asylum. This



SKULL INJURY FROM ROMANIAN PUSHBACK (SOURCE: BVMN)

affirms the fact that these formal "chain" pushbacks are no less illegal than their adhoc counterparts, and are regularly mediated through gross administrative malpractice such as signing minors as adults. As "chain" pushbacks have grown as an institutionalised, and now informal, part of migration management in the Western Balkans, a worrying geographical trend is beginning to emerge. A proverbial "snakes and ladders" effect is being played with transit groups who risk not only to be removed from one territory to the next, but end up being violently refouled through several countries. A respondent recently pushed back from N. Macedonia to Greece (see 3.4), echoed this concern by asking the police: "If I go to Greece maybe the police send me to Turkey?" This legitimate concern is born out by evidence from Greece, which proves people to be at severe risk of expulsion to Turkey, particularly under the extraordinary powers carved out by the Greek government during the COVID-19 period. Already cases have emerged showing people have suffered ad hoc removals from Romania, through Serbia and N. Macedonia, and on into Greece (see 1.1), including high levels of violence. How far these chains can stretch relies on the permanence of the illegal border regime being cultivated by the EU and other states. Latest links in these cycles of border violence include countries such as Italy, who have begun an intensive, and unlawful, application of readmissions to Slovenia. Evidence from April and May suggests pushbacks, through organised and disaggregated means, are having an increased impact on the lives of people trying to navigate Greece and the Western Balkan Route.

## COUNTRY-WIDE REMOVALS FROM GREECE

Now that the national lockdown is easing and Greece's borders open up to international travelers, the government has also anticipated increased arrivals via the Evros region. While original plans to send 400 newly recruited border guards to the area have been put on hold, last week another 14 police riot units were sent to bolster security. ELAS (Greek police) also plan to send another 125 police officers from various departments across the country to strengthen the local border police departments; and there have been renewed commitments from Foreign Minister Dendias to extend the border fence across the Evros river.

During April and May, BVMN have published testimo-

nies that recount the pushback of almost 600 people from Greece to Turkey, a figure which accounts for only a fraction of the violent removals occurring at the border every day. It is clear that pushback practices have been considerably stepped up in recent months. Another development which has proved worrying for field workers, and human rights advocates more broadly, is the increasing frequency of collective violent expulsions from locations deep into the mainland. At the beginning of May, BVMN published first hand testimonies and photographic evidence documenting collective expulsions from state-run institutions close to the urban centre of Thessaloniki.

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BRUISES FROM BEATINGS DURING PUSHBACK (BVMN).

Not long after it became clear pushbacks of large groups were also happening in Igoumenitsa as well, on the Western coast of the mainland. The first testimony (see 6.9) reports that 17 persons were taken from the "jungle", an informal settlement near the port, and driven for around 10 hours in a locked police bus "with separate cells which you cannot run away from… you cannot see outside". The second (see 6.12), concerning a group of 15 persons, reports the same transportation, and both reports detail the use of excessive violence by officers. The respondent in the latter testimony had been documented by the Greek Asylum Office and UNHCR, and was awaiting an appointment to receive his International Protection Application Card; the pushbacks of documented individuals is also a concerning new development.

The breadth of pusbacks, and the locations where people are at risk of removal seems to have expanded dramatically in recent months. These latest reports show that persons living on the opposite side of the country can be violently refouled to Turkey within 24 hours, no matter what their status in Greece is.

New developments in current Greek practice include:

• The apprehension and subsequent pushback of groups from inner-city locations
• Targeted police raids of humanitarian sites and distributions
• Members of the transit community being used by police to drive boats in pushbacks
• Pushbacks carried out on increasingly large groups
• Rise in attacks on street homeless groups
• Pushbacks of documented individuals, including asylum applicants
• Police officers promising regularisation of stay prior to pushback

Unfortunately these changes are not only confined to the mainland. Monitoring groups on the Greek islands have also noted that pushbacks in the Aegean have reached a new level of severity. Network member Mare Liberum reported pushbacks of those who had already landed on the shores of Chios, as well as those with documentation. In spite of all this evidence, Greek police continue to deny the existence of pushbacks.

One particularly shocking case recorded in May is clear evidence of the punitive border regime that is emerging in Greece. The individual reports being apprehended and pushed back to Turkey from Thessaloniki (see 6.7). After returning to Greece a second time, he was the victim of a hit and run by a Greek driver which caused a severe break in his leg (see 6.11). In Xanthi hospital, his leg was fixed with a metal bolt that would later need to be removed, and his wounds were covered by doctors. Once deemed "fit for transfer", he was immediately pushed back to Turkey, despite being unable to walk. Now essentially bedridden, the patient is struggling to access adequate wound care in Istanbul, and the early discharge from hospital put him at severe risk of infection, even potentially leading to sepsis.` This case is exemplary of two things: firstly the disregard for human life occuring at this stretch of the EU external border, secondly the precarious existence of people across the Greek mainland who are always at imminent threat of pushback to Turkey, even when being treated in an emergency department.

## CROATIA: ECHR CASES CALL CROATIAN STATE TO ACCOUNT

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) is now hearing two cases filed against Croatia for carrying out illegal pushbacks from its territory. The plaintiffs are seeking accountability for their violent removal into BiH during autumn 2018. One case concerns the expulsion of three Syrian people, including a minor, centering on three major violations of the European Convention of Human Rights. The latest evidence from the Croatian border shows gross violations remain a systematic part of border enforcement, supporting the filling of these two historic cases.

The legal team coordinating the cases, Berlin based European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, cite clear violations of "Article 4 Protocol 4 (prohibition of collective expulsions) and Article 13 (right to an effective remedy)", alongside "Article 3 (inhuman or degrading treatment)" for the summary return to BiH where the claimants were subject to inhumane living conditions and lack of asylum access. BVMN welcome the development of these legal challenges to pushbacks at Croatian borders, especially in light of the protracted efforts made by the MUP to destroy evidence and deny wrongdoing in the face of multiple charges of human rights abuse.

> **UNFORTUNATELY THE COURT IN STRASBOURG WAS PREVIOUSLY FOUND TO BACK EU MEMBERS STATES IN THEIR APPLICATION OF ILLEGAL COLLECTIVE EXPULSIONS.**

The landmark findings from the Spanish enclave of Melilla produced in February of this year have certainly come under scrutiny again with these new court proceedings. Unfortunately the court in Strasbourg was previously found to back EU members states in their application of illegal collective expulsions. With Croatia now being examined for it's abuses, those that have been monitoring the escalation of pushbacks to Bosnia-Herzegovina since 2018 are hopeful that a favourable judgment will be passed, so that violent and illegal practices against people-on-the-move can finally be called out for the crimes that they are.



FORCED DISPERSIONS IN BIH. CONDITIONS WHICH BREACH ARTICLE 3, ECHR (SOURCE:BVMN

LOGGING CARRIED OUT ON THE HR/BIH BORDER (SOURCE: CRNAHRONIKA)

Fences and man made obstacles are a common fixture of the EU external border, used to interrupt safe passage and injure people as they circumvent ever harder borders. Less common is the logging of entire sections of pinewood forest for the purpose of detecting "irregular" crossings. However, this has been the recent approach taken by the Croatian state who commissioned forestry workers to clear trees from an eight kilometre stretch of border with BiH.

The act was initiated to "better control the border zone", creating lines of visibility where manual and technologically assisted surveillance operations could pick up transit groups entering the country. However, discrepancies between the maps used by the loggers and the geodetic administration caused a minor scandal about incursions on sovereign territory, as Croatian workers were seen to be cutting trees from the BiH side. This is not the first time such issues have been raised, in August 2018 Croatian police shot live rounds into Bosnian farmland near to Glinica. Many respondents also allege being chased into BiH territory by Croatian police with batons as they are violently ejected at the border.

> AS SEEN IN THE LATEST LOGGING SCANDAL, IT IS PHYSICAL LANDSCAPE RATHER THAN THE LANDSCAPE OF ASYLUM ACCESS AND SAFE PASSAGE, WHICH IS CURRENTLY BEING REMOULDED WITH THE AIM OF HARD BORDERS.

In this latest dispute, the use of border geography as a weapon against people-on-the-move comes to the fore again. BVMN have observed in the past how trees have been used to effect violent pushback scenarios choreographed by the Croatian police. These include trip hazards made from logs and beatings with improvised batons made from large tree branches. Meanwhile, rivers and ditches are regularly selected as the setting for violent attacks at night, where water immersion can cause hypothermia or steep slopes cause impact injuries from falls. As seen in the latest logging scandal, it is physical landscape rather than the landscape of asylum access and safe passage, which is currently being remoulded with the aim of hard borders.

# BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA: VIOLENCE INSIDE MIRAL CAMP

Further grievous bodily harm has been uncovered in the EU funded camps in BiH. In the previous report BVMN followed an incident in the Usivak Temporary Reception Centre in Sarajevo where one man was killed in an altercation, his family reporting this to be the result of a fatal attack by a camp security guard. Recent footage proves categorically that such violence is occurring, and is being carried out in unison by police and privately contracted employees in the Temporary Reception system. Released by Transbalkanska Solidarnost, the video shows how Bosnian police and private security hired to work in the Miral centre run by International Organisation for Migration (IOM), "randomly enter containers and beat people". As Transbalkanska Solidarnost comments: "For the last two years the authorities of this [Una-Sana] Canton have been systematically violating human rights of the people-on-the-move and acting in contravention with the international treaties signed by Bosnia as well as the Bosnian constitution." The footage is proof of these long standing allegations, and shows multiple baton strikes being used to injure people indiscriminately. In February, Miral camp residents led a protest against the conditions they were being held in, sharing slogans such as "stop beating us", both in reference to the Croatian police, but also the camp authorities themselves. Conditions in the Miral, like all other centres, have been dire, particularly during the COVID-19 period. Structural violence is an everyday reality for camp residents who have access to limited food and health care, sleep in overcrowded containers and are subjected to disproportionate curfew controls.

> **IT IS ALSO IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL INJURIES BEING INFLICTED INSIDE CENTRES SUCH AS MIRAL ARE AVOIDABLE.**

Alongside this, the level of visceral bodily violence has reached an intolerable peak in recent months. This was highlighted by the overcrowding which led to the death of one man who had tried to scale the perimeter fence overnight. Alongside the recording of targeted beatings, deaths like this are a coarse reminder of the realities inside Bosnia's camp system. It is also important to note that the psychological and physical injuries being inflicted inside centres such as Miral are avoidable. But rather than anomalies, these are conditions willfully enacted by an EU led migration policy which has outsourced violence to local actors such as the police and private security, epitomising modern border externalisation.

THE ENTRANCE TO MIRAL TEMPORARY RECEPTION CENTRE. (SOURCE: FENANEWS)

## BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA: CAMP CLOSURES & PRESSURE ON SOLIDARITY WORK

Officials jointly agreed to find a solution to close the Temporary Centres of Bira and Miral in Bihać and Velika Kladusa. According to Danish Refugee Council and local media, the IOM is required to prepare the new Lipa site for the reception of Bira residents, and the Municipal Council of Velika Kladusa is requested to cooperate with the Task Force and UN agencies to determine the location for the urgent establishment of a transitional camp outside the city and relocate people from makeshift accommodation sites. This comes after successive reports of violent interventions by Bosnian police and dispersals from squatted settlements which culminated last month in a fire in an informal shelter.

Under the new order the owners of residential and abandoned buildings where transit groups are staying are also required to take measures to physically protect the buildings, increasing the level of pressure on locals who continue to support people-on-the-move. Activities in informal settlements are also prohibited to all unauthorized organizations and individuals not approved by UN agencies, their partners or the local Red Cross. The convergence of international NGO monopolies and the crim-

inalization of solidarity at the local level is a notable pattern across the Western Balkans. The exclusive access rights also denote the efforts to prevent independent monitoring of internal displacement and police violence. The Lipa site, where many are suspected to be moved, still maintains consistently poor living conditions for residents. Forced transfers continue despite the site being over capacity, often resulting in more than 150 people remaining outside of the camp pending entry. Inside, BVMN spoke to anonymous staff working for NGOs who declare water access also to be chronically limited. With the rising number of residents, this lack is only set to get worse, and poses a direct hygiene risk. A further issue is the isolation of groups from urban centres due to the remote location of Lipa, which is around 25km from the city of Bihac. Even local government official Minister Nermin Kaljic acknowledged that people "want to be in the city center because of shops and gas stations where they buy mobile cards". Denied basic access to amenities, this back-and-forth is set to continue, and the new restrictions brought in relating to accommodation and solidarity work are only likely to subject people to more cyclical violence.

## SERBIA: FASCIST ATTACK IN OBRENEVAC CAMP

On 7th May 2020 a far right activist made a targeted attack on the Obrenovac Temporary Reception Centre on the outskirts of Belgrade. Filip Radovanović, a member of the fascist "Leviathan" movement, drove his vehicle at speed into the refugee camp. Fortunately no-one was injured, though the assault was filmed by Radovanović himself and audio clearly shows him to be declaring violent, racists and islamophobic sentiments which marked his motivation to cause physical harm. In spite of the army checkpoints installed due to the COVID-19 outbreak, Radovanović was able to break through a section of the perimeter fence and almost mow down residents standing near the main gate.

The Leviathan movement emerged as an animal protection group, but has quickly shed this front, and devoted recent months to racist provocations and attacks such as this assault in Obrenovac. Recently Leviathan have been at the centre of a scandal around the registering of candidates for the upcoming general election, but political analyst Luka Božović describes "where they are most visible are chases against activists, attacks on Roma, attacks on the LGBT community". Members of the group were also pictured displaying

Nazi insignia at a war memorial in Novi Sad, fascist imagery that has been outwardly present in the attacks led by Chetnik groups against transit squats and No Name Kitchen volunteers in the western city of Šid.

The latest anti-migrant attack was quickly endorsed by the movement and a rally was organised the following day by Leviathan activists outside the camp in Obrenovac. Concerningly, it is not only the urban actions which are putting people at risk of fascist violence. Leader of the group, Pavle Bihali, recently published footage on Twitter of Leviathan activists carrying out border patrols close to Romania and harassing people staying in informal accommodation. In a video they intimidate an Afghan man, demanding his passport and telling him he and others are not allowed to stay in the abandoned building they are using for shelter. The following day they returned to the site, visibly armed with improvised batons and bragged about the absence of squat residents, intimating they had collaborated with the police in evicting the group. These well publicised actions set a worrying president, and marry up with the escalation of attacks in urban centres against Serbia's transit population.

# ARMY DEPLOYMENT AND FENCED CAMPS

During May, the Serbian military were deployed to the western border area with Croatia, and are now stationed around the camps of Adaševci, Šid and Principovac. This comes alongside news that the army is also procuring around 2.5 tons of razor wire to build perimeters around several temporary reception centres in Serbia.

Rados Djurovic, from Serbia's Asylum Protection Centre, told Balkan Insight that guarding camps and deterring informal transit is "by no means the role of the army". However, during the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, security forces across the Balkan Route - such as in Slovenia - have come to the fore as prime actors in the management of migration flows. In Šid this trend had already begun with the installment of Special Police in February, framed by the Serbian Interior Ministry as a move to ensure "safety of our citizens".

This narrative has been stoked in recent weeks in the build up to the general elections in Serbia. A hardline conservative stance on migration has been a reliable electoral route for current President Vučić, who is set to run uncontested with opposition to the Serbian Progressive Party boycotting the polls. Contrary to the projected narrative of transit communities as a "security threat", the majority of violent incidents recorded in the Šid area have been carried out by far right groups and police divisions, as previously evidenced by BVMN reports. Yet, this false rhetoric around transit populations has successfully beckoned in more draconian policies, and the preconditions for the fencing of camps: sites which have already come closer to looking like prisons during the COVID-19 lockdown period. A joint statement from Women in Black, A11 - The Initiative for Economic and Social Rights, and Info Park shared that these latest developments were "militarizing the refugee tragedy in Serbia".

Gulzars clothing (Source:Bellingcat)

An open source investigation lead by Bellingcat, Lighthouse Reports, der Spiegel and Forensic Architecture released a summary of it's findings in May, implicating Greek authorities in the killing of Muhammad Gulzar. The investigation relates to the period in early March, when thousands of people attempted to reach Greece, believing that Turkish leader Recep Erdogan had "opened" the border. Gulzar, who was fatally wounded on the 4th March 2020, was one of eight people that the investigation identified as gunshot victims who sustained their wounds as Greek authorities fired across the border. BVMN, among others, reported on the events at the time, interviewing people who had been targeted with live rounds in the Kastanies-Pazarkule border crossing point.

Through analysing a wealth of footage taken on the 4th March 2020, the investigative alliance were able to successfully identify the events leading to Gulzar's killing. Matches were made between clothing recovered from the scene, and footage of Gulzar's injured body being removed. Meanwhile, a schematic mapping of the movements caught on multiple frames of footage was able to illuminate the movement of Gulzar on the Turkish side of the border, including the points where Greek au-

thorities hit and wounded him and others as they stood in the farmland area due south of the border crossing. Ballistics from Gulzars postmortem indicate a 5.56mm bullet was used in the killing. The use of these live rounds, though firmly denied by the Greek state, is backed up by audio evidence from the day. The investigators sought analysis from audio forensics expert Steven Beck who identified "the distinctive acoustic signature of live rounds" in footage filmed at the time of the killing.

Greek police and army were both bearing automatic assault rifles and mini machine guns during the standoff at the border. Notably, this use of firearms extends into the regular pushbacks reported from the Evros border (see 6.2). In these cases arms are often used more as intimidation than for actual discharge because Greek police avoid making noise while removing people across the Evros river in order not to alert Turkish forces. Yet the presence of this weaponry in BVMN reports on "regular" pushbacks supports the investigation's findings: namely that armed Greek authorities patrolling the border use live weapons and in early March turned these on unarmed transit groups which resulted in the death of Muhammad Gulzar.

# GREECE:    MASS HOUSING EVICTIONS

The position of both transit communities and settled asylum seeker groups in Greece has been impacted deeply by decisions made by the right-wing Mitsotakis government since 2019. Pushbacks and narrowing access to international protection represent two initiatives that have expanded under his leadership. Aligned with this, housing is also a contested field where the government has made recent efforts to dislodge what were already limited provisions.

In May the government announced the movement of over 11,000 people from their subsidised accommodation sites and reception facilities. Though framed as a "transfer" by the Migration Minister Notis Mitarakis, the act has widely been seen as a thinly veiled eviction of a large swathes of the refugee and asylum seeker population in Greece. People took to the streets in Athens to decry this move, citing it as a clear attempt to force the refugee population into destitution and homelessness, given that many do not have financial resources to support themselves in private rented accommodation.

> **BVMN RECORDED ALMOST 600 PEOPLE BEING ILLEGALLY REMOVED TO TURKEY FROM GREECE IN APRIL AND MAY**

The Mitsotakis government has reduced the tenure of housing from six down to one month for those who receive their protection status. The latest closures and evictions are in line with this move to remove basic accommodation services in Greece, and make it harder for people to stay in the country. The enforced homelessness also has a direct link to the risk of being pushed back to Turkey. BVMN recorded almost 600 people being illegally removed to Turkey from Greece in April and May. Notably, the vast majority were seized by police from the street, squatted sites or informal settlements close to the official camps. It is concerning that an additional 11,000 people are now also at risk of this fate.



A FAMILY FROM IDLIB, SYRIA. ONE OF THE MANY SUBJECT TO THE NEW EVICTIONS (SOURCE: EDNHUB)

# ITALY: ABUSE OF READMISSIONS TO SLOVENIA

During the last month, large numbers of people have been removed from Italy, through Slovenia and Croatia, into Serbia or Bosnia. Italian authorities, who are fast becoming the final link in the "chain" of the pushback phenomenon on the Western Balkan Route, have been illegally expelling new arrivals apprehended in the border area under an "informal readmissions" agreement with Slovenia. The violations even impacted those found in the urban zones of central Trieste, notably including asylum seekers who have already registered their claim for international protection. According to media reports, around 30 people appear to have been re-sent to Slovenia in just a single day. This is not the first time cases have been recorded from the Italian/Slovenian border. In August last year when BVMN, via its parnter organization No Name Kitchen, recorded the pushback of a group from the area near Fernetti, who were subject to an equal level of malpractice by attending police forces. However, the development of the practice has shown a sharp rise in application during the COVID-19 period.

The removals are being justified with an old agreement made in 1996 that allows Italian police to readmit in Slovenia those who were found next to the border (previously it was 5 km, now within 10 km) within 24 hours from their arrival. One of the grounds used to remove people from Italy is their right to apply for asylum in Slovenia where they transited. This illusion, which BVMN, through its partner organization InfoKolpa, have evidenced to be consistently false, was also supported by a recent court finding in Genoa where an Italian judge stayed a removal order under the Dublin Agreement. The court found "the conditions of receiving refugees in Slovenia and systemic shortcomings in the asylum procedure" strong enough grounds to halt the removal, raising questions as to how authorities in the border area can now effect such readmissions with impunity. The Italian Consortium of Solidarity (ICS) and Caritas Trieste challenged this abuse of the bilateral agreement with Slovenia, arguing that "readmissions or other forms of rejection at the border of those that intend to claim asylum are illegal".



MEDICAL VOLUNTEERS TREAT NEW ARRIVALS FROM THE BALKAN ROUTE (SOURCE: DANIELECAPPALLETO)



ITALIAN POLICE PATROLLING CENTRAL TRIESTE (SOURCE: LINEAD'OMBRA)

Yet Italian authorities have been firmly in support of the violations, the vice mayor of Trieste stating:

"We have to pushback as in all the other States that care about their own inner protection. We need to give the order to pushback so that not a single person can cross our borders. The only right policy towards this problem is the use of pushback"

Such statements echo the level of cross-national collaboration between Italy, Slovenia and Croatia in order to violently refoule people in this essential "domino effect". Volunteers from Trieste - Linea d'Ombra and La Strada Sicura - spoke to some people affected by this process, who had shared their experience in an online video. The incident concerned a 34 year-old person that gave fingerprints in Italy on 19th May 2020 and was asked by the police to attend the station the following morning. However he was taken later that day by Italian police, along with 20 other people, and pushed back to Slovenia. Slovenia then carried out a chain removal to Croatia where the group were robbed and issued death threats

by officers. Finally the group were ejected into Serbia, completing the third successive removal in the chain, despite lodging asylum requests on several occasions.

A video published recently states that Italian police forces will continue these push-backs in collaboration with Slovenia (another 40 police agents from Rome were dispatched at the border as a marker of intent). Since this rise in border controls, the number of arrivals has stayed constant, with the difference that almost everyone is intercepted at the border, diminishing the number reaching the streets of Trieste. Whether they will be accepted or re-admitted is unknown, but the threat of pushback is heightened under this new order. Meanwhile on the Slovenian side, recent news coverage of personnel in military uniform harassing members of the public who were hillwalking close to the border suggests that authorities demanded "if you see migrants call us". In sum, the regressive controls on the Italian-Slovenian border seem to be shifting its management ever closer to its counterparts further south on the Balkan Route.

# HUNGARY

## TWO HUNGARIAN TRANSIT ZONES CLOSED

The last two months have thrown the Hungarian asylum system into turmoil. As laid out in previous reports, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) has ruled that Hungary's practice to reject almost all asylum applicants based on inadmissibility, if the applicant has transited through a "safe" country, is incompatible with European law. In a second case, the ECJ decided that the transit centers at the Hungarian border, the only entry point to the Hungarian asylum system, constitute unlawful detention. In effect, this means that the ECJ has overturned some of the most important elements of Hungary's inhumane asylum system.



**Rozke Transit Zone where people were recently released from unlawful detention (Source:GlobalDetentionProject)**

Hungarian politicians grudgingly followed the ECJ's rulings in May. While senior politicians pointed out that they still believed in the legality of Hungary's inadmissibility criteria and stressed "security" implications of the ECJ's judgments, Hungary did close the transit centers in Röszke and Tompa. More than 300 asylum seekers, some of whom had been unlawfully imprisoned for more than a year, have been freed as a result. Clearly, BVMN welcomes the closure of Röszke and Tompa, which mark the end to some of the most outrageous human rights violations within the European

### ┃ HUNGARY IS MOVING TO REPLACE ITS FRAUDULENT ASYLUM SYSTEM WITH NO ASYLUM SYSTEM AT ALL.

Union. At the same time, there is cause for concern as Hungary is moving to replace its fraudulent asylum system with no asylum system at all. In response to the ECJ's rulings, Hungarian government spokespersons have announced that all asylum seekers would need to apply for protection at embassies in surrounding countries – a clear violation of the Geneva Convention. If Hungary actually implements this policy, it will become virtually impossible to receive asylum status in Hungary. In this context more litigation is sure to follow.

The Network covered the pushback of 736 people across 30 separate incidents in April and May. The reports account for a wide demographic of people including men, women and minors, those in official camp accommodation and others in informal settlements. The respondents also originate from a broad set of countries, including: Syria, Egypt, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Iran, Kurdistan, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Eritrea and Somalia.

The cases involved:
- Twelve pushbacks to Greece (three chain pushbacks from Serbia, six direct pushbacks from Northern Macedonia, two direct from Italy and one direct from Albania).
- One direct pushback from Serbia to Northern Macedonia.
- Four direct pushbacks from Croatia to Bosnia.
- One direct pushback from Croatia to Serbia.
- Twelve direct pushbacks from Greece to Turkey.

| Link | Incident | Recorded | Group | Demographic |
|------|----------|----------|-------|-------------|
| **SERBIA TO GREECE** | | | | |
| 1.1 | 3rd April | 14th April | 16 | Iran, Morocco, Algeria |
| 1.2 | 17th April | 23rd April | 20 | Afghanistan, Pakistan, Morocco, Algeria |
| 1.3 | 19th April | 23rd April | 12 | Algeria |
| **SERBIA TO NORTHERN MACEDONIA** | | | | |
| 2.1 | 17th April | 4th May | 6 | Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco |
| **NORTHERN MACEDONIA TO GREECE** | | | | |
| 3.1 | 22nd April | 23rd April | 4 | Morcco, Palestine, Tunisia |
| 3.2 | 26th April | 4th May | 10 | Morocco, Algeria |
| 3.3 | 2nd May | 5th May | 4 | Morocco |
| 3.4 | 6th May | 10th May | 1 | Algeria |
| 3.5 | 11th May | 12th May | 9 | Morcco |
| 3.6 | 30th May | 31st May | 16 | Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India |
| **CROATIA TO BOSNIA** | | | | |
| 4.1 | 6th April | 11th April | 16 | Afghanistan |
| 4.2 | 6th April | 28th May | 20 | Pakistan |
| 4.3 | 20th May | 25th May | 6 | India |
| 4.4 | 28th May | 1st June | 3 | Morocco |
| **CROATIA TO SERBIA** | | | | |
| 5.1 | 15th May | 22nd May | 5 | Morocco, Algeria |

| Link | Incident | Recorded | Group | Demographic |
|------|----------|----------|-------|-------------|
| GREECE TO TURKEY |||||
| 6.1 | 31st March | 13th April | 40 | Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Morcco, Algeria, Tunia |
| 6.2 | 16th April | 2nd May | 50 | Afghanistan, Morocco, Algeria |
| 6.3 | 17th April | 4th May | 50 | Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Algeria |
| 6.4 | 18th April | 26th May | 40 | Morocco, Afghanistan, Pakistan |
| 6.5 | 23rd April | 29th April | 22 | Afghanistan, Pakistan, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia |
| 6.6 | 23rd April | 3rd May | 24 | Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia |
| 6.7 | 25th April | 9th May | 50 | Algeria, Morocco, Pakistan, Syria, Iran, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan |
| 6.8 | 28th April | 4th May | 30 | Afghanistan, Syria, Morocco, Algeria |
| 6.9 | 3rd May | 8th May | 60 | Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria |
| 6.10 | 6th May | 12th May | 70 | Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia |
| 6.11 | 14th May | 18th May | 30 | Eritrea, Somalia, Syria, Palestine, Morocco |
| 6.12 | 16th May | 23rd May | 120 | Afghanistan, Kurdistan (Iraq) |
| ITALY TO GREECE |||||
| 7.1 | 23rd April | 25th April | 2 | Afghanistan |
| 7.2 | 24th May | 28th May | 1 | Kurdistan |
| ALBANIA TO GREECE |||||
| 8.1 | 1st June | 1st June | 7 | Morocco |
| *Find all reports on the database here. |||||

## NETWORK STRUCTURE AND CONTACT

BVMN is a volunteer led endeavour, 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 tes

timony 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