

ILLEGAL PUSH-BACKS AND BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS

BALKAN REGION



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General

Methodology

The methodological process for these reports leverages the close social contact that we have as independent volunteers with refugees and migrants to monitor push-backs in the Western Balkans. When individuals return with significant injuries or stories of abuse, one of our violence reporting volunteers will sit down with the individuals to collect their testimonies. 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 65 persons. We have a standardized 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.

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.

Abbreviations

BiH - Bosnia and Herzegovina

HR - Croatia

SRB - Serbia

SLO - Slovenia

EU - European Union

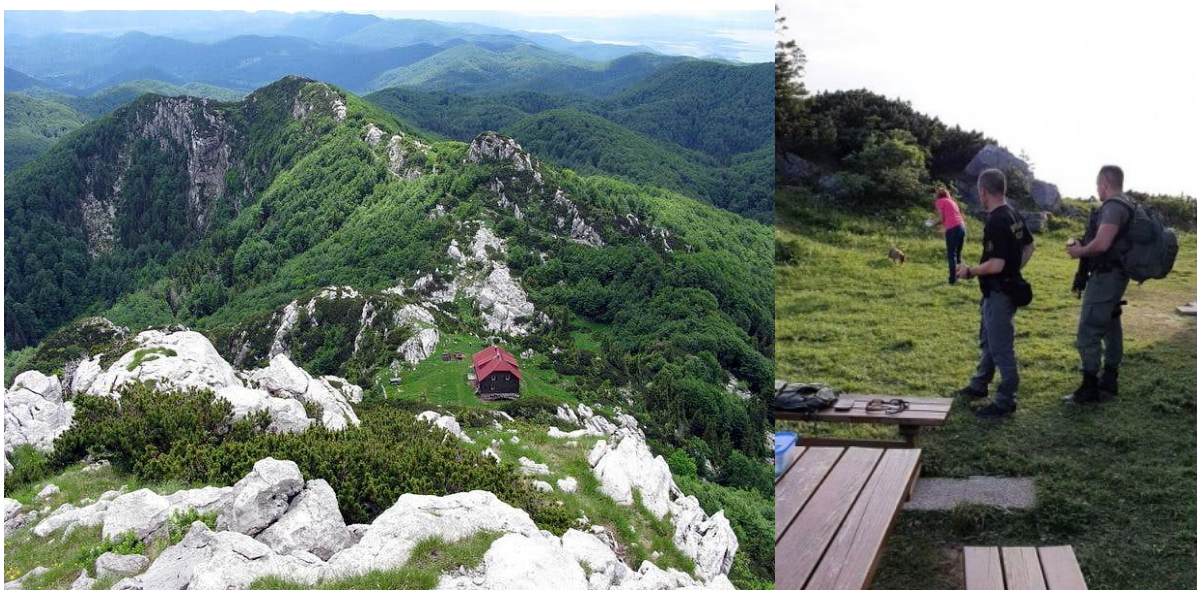
MNE - Montenegro

Update on the situation

The situation in Croatia and BiH

Croatian hiker witnesses action against a transit group

In mid-June, an [open letter](#) written by a hiker who witnessed an operation by *Specijalna Policija* against a transit group was published in Croatian media. The incident took place in the mountains of Risnjak, in the forested region in between Rijeka and Karlovac. The text provides a unique, first hand account of Croatian police using the mountain range as a base for "hunting" groups attempting to transit through Croatia. Furthermore, the letter offers a valuable insight into the methodology of *Specijalna Policija* patrolling this region, corroborating the many testimonies of such violence gathered in BiH.



Left image - The hut on Risnjak where the incident took place [Source: [Outdoor Active](#)]; Right image - Picture of the Specijalna Policija present during the event, taken by the hiker [Source: [H-Alter](#)]

With the mountain hut as a backdrop, the letter describes how a group of hikers became the audience for two *Specijalna* officers who warned the group about the dangers of migrants and told them stories of their past apprehensions. Believing they were in sympathetic company, the pair were forthcoming in providing descriptions of their work, offering corroboration to the hundreds of testimonies gathered from the people subject to Croatian "push backs". As the author recalled:

"We found out that they constantly patrol the forests, that the whole Risnjak was under the cameras and that they were there to "hunt" the refugees and migrants. They work in coordination with the Bosnian police. When asked what they do when

they "catch" them, they replied that they take their belongings and return people to Bosnia and Herzegovina".

The roles they described were soon put into practice as a transit group arrived at the mountain hut to ask for water. Exhausted and thirsty, the small group were met by some hikers sat outside, who offered them something to drink. Soon after, the two armed officers emerged from inside and accosted the refugees who had sat down on the floor to rest:

"They came outside with batons, screaming "lay on the ground" and started to hit them. Migrants began to flee, and one (or more) police officers started shooting from their weapons, just above their heads."

The tasks outlined by the officers and the violence they used in the apprehension of refugees are particularly pertinent in this account. They highlight a set of recurrent practices used by Croatian authorities, giving only more credence to the prior testimonies of police violence in Croatia collected by activists in the field. These tactics include:

Camera Surveillance - Observation equipment, as outlined in a later section of this report, is frequently used to detect people, both with the assistance of distance, thermal and heart rate calibration.

Property Theft - "Pushback" victims often have their phones, money and personal belongings removed or damaged. The officers also boast how they "cut their backpack straps as soon as they catch them".

Physical Assault - Batons attacks are regular, often delivered by the assailants from a vertical plane to persons ordered to the ground or physically thrown to the floor.

Firearms Intimidation - Rifles (as in this case) along with pistols are often used, fired at close range over the heads of refugees to scare them and cause them to drop to the floor.

Abrogated Asylum Law - As described by the officers, the "migrants already know the procedure", meaning they will not have access to the asylum process, and are instead returned to BiH.

It is also important to note that this event was carried out in front of multiple eyewitnesses. The witness giving the account rightly notes their concern in this regard, wondering "what they [the Croatian Police] do when there are no witnesses".

In addition to providing contextual evidence for the practices of apprehension in the Croatian interior, the account also draws a unique picture of the political terrain being contested in Croatia around migration. Although initially shocked by the behavior of the police, conversation with the officers and the hut owner began to change the other hikers' narrative. After being fed the idea that the officers were there to protect them, some hikers began to refer to the victims as "the beasts" and described them as those who came to fight against "us Christians". The author notes the ease with which the other hikers re-interpreted the people asking for water as a *physical* threat and as a threat to national identity. The depiction of the refugees as "beasts" who "devastate homes" is part of a rhetoric that, as the author notes, makes it easy for politicians and citizens "to justify violence against other people, even when it happens in front of our eyes."

Within the story, the hut owner suggests that people-in-transit have ransacked many homes and mountain huts in the area, and are a threat which should be dealt with by the *Specijalna Policija*. Nonetheless, an [online review](#) of the Risnjak Mountain Hut advertises how the ground floor of the building has “two dining rooms, kitchen and hallway - which is used as emergency shelter and it is always open.” The open letter posits this question, whether those that seek rest and water are a threat, or people acting out of an instinct of survival, and worthy of “emergency shelter”. In this sense, this piece is a poetic supplement to the testimonies of Croatian police violence which have been conducted in BiH and Serbia, adding texture to the political narrative being employed and contributing information to the processes used by the Croatian Police.

New settlement in Vučjak

With more people arriving to the Una-Sana Canton (USK) from the south, and with Croatian authorities continuing to push people back to BiH around Velika Kladuša and Bihać, the political dialogue surrounding migration in the region became even more intense. Faced with mounting pressure to achieve a solution to these problems, politicians from the USK [made a decision](#) to relocate people on the move from Bihać to the hastily prepared and poorly equipped Vučjak camp. Soon thereafter, USK authorities [decided](#) to “relocate migrants and refugees from the Bira and Miral TRCs to a less urban area”. Starting in mid-June, authorities began to forcefully relocate people-on-the-move to the new camp, before it was fully built. During the first three weeks of the camps existence, there were [“no sanitary facilities available on the site and no access to running water or electricity”](#). Criticism of the new camp has been rampant since its introduction. Two days after the beginning of the removal, the UN made a [call](#) upon the authorities to “immediately cease this relocation until a more suitable place is available.”

Vučjak is an area nestling at the foot of the Gola Plješevica mountain bordering the Croatian territory. Accordingly, increasing numbers now begin their [transit attempts](#) from this area. This location is an advantage for smugglers based in the camp. According to [one](#) media report, the presence of minefields in the area, as well as the camp’s close proximity to the Croatian border, has been a boon to smugglers:

“The area is also known for minefields and people are now paying extra to the so called ‘guides’ through the minefields who provide them with a map and lead them through the Plješevica area.”

In a recent media event held across the border in Grabovac (HR), officials from the Croatian Ministry of the Interior refer to the areas around Vučjak as one of the main entry points to Croatia from the USK and that in response to this development, they were forming a unit of all branches of the police forces.¹ Ministry of the Interior Chief Davor Božinović mentioned that in their fight to securitize the border, they had “everything” at their disposal, “from thermal cameras to the ones that can see from miles away.”

¹ [See section below, “Grabovac Media Event” pg. 10]

The situation in Bosnian camps for refugees and migrants

Ušivak camp, located 20 km outside of Sarajevo, the camp is currently filled to over twice the official capacity of 400, with 900 people currently living within the premises. While some are allowed in despite the overcrowding, many are left [to sleep outside the camp for days](#), lacking the necessary papers from the SFA. Over the weekend of June 28-30, a family of nineteen individuals, including nine children, were left sleeping in the grass without shelter, blankets or food.



A family of 19 individuals forced to sleep rough outside of Ušivak

Aside from the ongoing concerns of access, there are reports from Ušivak camp about the excessive use of force by the security guards. On June 18 at 9:00PM, the security guards denied a 23 year old man from Algeria entry into the camp because he arrived after the gates were locked at 8:00PM. The respondent explained to the guards that he was in the hospital taking care of his friend. When he handed the security guard his camp ID card, the respondent alleges that the guard punched him in the face, torso and arms. A second security guard arrived and together with the first they threw him over the guardrail at the entrance of the camp. When the respondent landed on the ground his money (400 Euro) and mobile phone fell out of his pocket and he claims that the guards took these items from him and would not give them back.

“When I was on the ground the guard kicked me in the face”

The respondent reported the incident to IOM but, to his knowledge, nothing had been done to punish the security guards.



Left image - Victim of excessive force in Usivak; **Right image** - Waiting for food at Usivak camp (shown above) can take up to 2 hours and on most days not all are fed even after waiting in the line for 2 hours. The security guards often push people and shout at them to go to the back of the line.

More residents inside the Ušivak camp report on the excessive use of force displayed by security guards while the residents line up for food. In interviews with ten camp residents, all explain the same situation. The line for food is long and invariably there are people who push and cut in the line, as a response the security guards use their force to start pushing and shouting at the refugees to go to the back of the line. After the refugees receive their food, which can take up to two hours of waiting in line, there are reports the security guards will interrupt their eating and check the refugees' IOM ID cards to make sure they have the proper documents that allow them to eat in the camp. If they do not have proper documentation the security guards take their food and the refugees are thrown out of the cafeteria.

At Borici and Bira camp there have also been reports of the excessive use of force by security guards. In the past, people staying in the camps report the use of taser against them to stop fights. In Bira, many people wishing to enter the camp have said that they have to bribe the security guards with two packets of cigarettes or two energy drinks, whether they have their registration card or not. If they don't do this, they are threatened with a call to the police to alert them of their "misbehavior", often leading to a relocation to the Vučjak settlement by the police. Similar reports of excessive force used by camp security guards have been [published](#) regarding treatment in Miral Camp, outside of Velika Kladuša.

Grabovac Media Event

On June 21st, the Croatian Ministry of the Interior (MUP) held a media [event](#) along the Bosnian-Croatian border in Grabovac (HR), presenting the equipment that they utilize in the apprehension of groups attempting to either seek asylum or transit through Croatia. Moreover, the event was used to outline the different strategies and divisions used to secure its section of the EU's external border. There were a [number](#) of media outlets which covered the event. Al Jazeera Balkans, for instance, published a [video](#) outlining a number of interesting points.

Officials outline a border strategy

During the event, representatives from the MUP made several ostentatious statements, denying the use of excessive force and claiming that there was yet to be any evidence to the contrary. Rather, they claimed, more often than not migrants [transit groups] return to BiH from Croatia by themselves. Finally, the officials framed their efforts against transit groups as a test for Croatia to be worthy of Schengen membership.



Davor Božinović and Nikola Milina at the event [From: [Al Jazeera Balkans](#)]

There were a number of officials present at the event which form the backbone of the push-back/violent border apparatus in Croatia. The most prominent being **Davor Božinović**, the Interior Minister of Croatia for over a year. He was previously the Croatian Minister of Defense, between 2010 and 2011. He has been politically active in Croatia since its independence and has personally written two books about integration into NATO and the EU. He is often vocal on social media about "defending the EU border". In a recent [tweet](#) from 28 June, he touted how a specific border protection project in Croatia was 75 % funded by the EU.



Left Image - “Croatia seriously protects its EU border which will soon become the outer Schengen border. We are investing in personnel and equipment, today we put in to service 23 out of 49 vehicles for transport of service dogs [K9 unit] which will be used for protection of the border. 75% of finances for this project comes from EU Internal Security Fund.” **Right Image** - “A visit to Gabrovac an operative place for coordination of the work of police forces and protection of exterior border towards BIH. The border is controlled by extra police forces who have at their disposition superior technical equipment...Croatia will protect its exterior border and will not become a hotspot.”

During the event, Božinović answered a [question](#) as to the allegations of Croatian police officers denying individuals the right to seek asylum. His [translated] answer follows in full:

“What is concerning the asylum seekers- these people actually do not want asylum in Croatia because they do not want to be evident in Croatia, because they know they will be returned to Croatia if they go elsewhere. Their goal is to go to Western Europe, but Europe does not display any desire or intention to take them. So we took this new European attitude in consideration with our strategy towards migrants. This situation is different than the one in 2015 and 2016, as at the time we just needed to transport them across the territory of Croatia... Then there were families and children now there are only men in their best age who say they want to go to Western Europe to work. Europe says it doesn't want them. Croatia will not become a hotspot.”

Alongside Božinović at the event was **Nikola Milina**, the General Director of Police (Chief of Police) in Croatia. He was appointed by the government based on the proposal by the Ministry of the Interior. He is a decorated war veteran, and has spent the entirety of his post-independence professional life in various police roles. From 1998 he has been focused on border issues in various roles, not least as the Chief of Border Management from 2005 to 2012.

He has been at the center of various scandals recently, first last year when [he fired Nikola Kajkic](#) from his post as an [investigator](#) on the war crimes, in which Kajkic found that a member of the SDSS, a party supporting the government of HDZ, was involved in the crimes. Furthermore, in March this year, Milina's resignation was [requested by a police union](#) because of his role in the case of the journalist Durdica Klancir who alleged political intimidation from Milina's colleagues. The episode was considered, [by various sides](#), a violation of media independence. This led Milina, alongside other high profile government employees, to be questioned about their role in the case. During the event, Milina, who has experience working in Macedonia on controlling migration flows, framed the securitization of the Balkan route as a communal effort: "We control the entire Balkan Route."



Mladen Matovinović and Goran Matijević at the event [From: [Al Jazeera Balkans](#)]

Goran Matijević, the Chief of the Korenica Police Station, was also at the event. As the chief of the Korenica police station, Matijević has previously received media attention for the station's use of unsanitary detention facilities used to hold transit groups before they were illegally returned to BiH. Several people were illegally detained in a garage behind the police station building itself, in unsanitary conditions. During the event, Matijević made the remark that "the migrants return by themselves when they sense that we are coming"

The comparably less known **Mladen Matovinović** who is the Head of State Border Control in Croatia was also featured in media coverage of the event. Matovinović was previously the head of the border police station of Lika-Selj. While there has been very little media coverage about Matovinović's role in Croatia's push-back system, it should be understood that as the head of border control in Croatia, he plays an important part in this system.

There were a spectrum of police officers present at this event, representing the diversity of units within the Ministry of the Interior's forcing involved in the push-back system. As seen below, there were *Specijalna, Interventna, Temeljna, and Granična Policija* at the event.



Top left image - Specijalna Policija present at the event; Top right image - Interventna Policija present at the event; Bottom image - Officers from the spectrum of different police divisions engaged in border security in Croatia [From: [Al Jazeera Balkans](#)]

The presence of these officers underscores the statements made by Mladen Matovinović during the event regarding the cross-divisional nature of the border work being done in the region. In previous interviews, Goran Matijević has made similar [comments](#) on the cross-divisional work being conducted in the field. These statements ultimately corroborate the testimonies and previous video evidence collected on push-backs from Croatia which largely allude to the segmentation of roles in border securitization within the different police divisions of Croatia. Most often, *Interventna* officers are described as being the final facilitators of push-backs, whereas *Specijalna* officers are more frequently described as being engaged in the detection and apprehension of transit groups within the interior of Croatia. As evidenced in the event, border police, or *Granična policija*, are most often engaged in the surveillance of the physical border and those attempting to cross it, through the use of surveillance technology. *Temeljna* officers, or “regular” police officers are generally described as actors who fill in the gaps between the more intentionally deployed *Interventna*, *Specijalna*, and *Granična* officers.

Equipment on display

There was a plethora of equipment on display at the media event, outlining the technology that the Ministry of the Interior has at its disposal to track and control transit groups.



Left image - iSS Thermal Camera, T-iV ²; **Right image** - A K9 unit; The MUP recently put into service [23 new vehicles](#) for the transport of k9 units to be used in border management [From: [Al Jazeera Balkans](#)]



Left image - A “mobile stations” on display during the event. These are vans equipped with surveillance equipment largely manufactured by FLIR, a multi-national company specializing in surveillance and security systems based on infrared technology; **Right image** - “There is also a special vehicle for identification and a device that recognizes heartbeat that is also in the van. Everything is financed by the EU. “ [From: [Al Jazeera Balkans](#)]

An AW139 helicopter was also on display at the event. The Croatian MUP ordered a new AW139 in February, 2019 to be “[operated mainly in border control operations, including maritime tasks](#)”, bringing the total number of these helicopters owned by the MUP to three. This complemented the two other AW139’s that the MUP had obtained in 2016 - the first in January of that year and the second in July. These two helicopters were also obtained for a “[primary role as border protection](#)”.

The purchase of the AW139 helicopter on display at this event was co-financed with EU Internal Security Funds 2014/2020. “[The contract includes a significant training package,](#)

² [infrared Security Solutions](#), is a UK-based company specialised in producing uncooled thermal imaging cameras since 2004

[including the licensing of six pilots and 13 technicians.](#)” Each AW139 helicopter costs approximately [15.7 million](#) EUR.

“The AW139 is fitted with a Trakkabeam A800 searchlight³ to port, an EO/IR⁴ turret under the nose and a winch to starboard - the border role extends to its marine borders and thus an SAR role. Both will have the new higher 7,000kg gross weight.

Arriving on the Italian test registration I-EASM, the helicopter will become 9A-HRP in due course. It is serial 31715 from the Finmeccanica⁵ production line in Italy. The Croatian Police also operates three [JetRangers](#), one [AB212](#) and a pair of [EC135P2](#)”



AW139 Helicopter on display at the event [From: [Al Jazeera Balkans](#)]

While the AW139 may have been one of the more ostentatious displays of EU-funded border technology at the media event, the EU’s role in the advancement of Croatia’s technological securitization of its borders should be understood in its entirety. In December of 2018, the European Commission awarded an additional 6.8 million EUR to Croatia to help “reinforce border management at the EU’s external borders, in full respect of EU rules.” The funding was intended to strengthen border surveillance capacity by covering “the operational costs of 10 border police stations through the provision of the daily allowances, overtime compensation and equipment”. According to the grant, a monitoring mechanism would be put in place to ensure that the behavior applied at the EU external borders in the name of this grant “are proportionate and are in full compliance with fundamental rights and EU asylum laws”. This award brought the overall funding for migration and border management allocated to Croatia by the European Commission to more than 23 million EUR. This is not including the nearly 108

³ [“A high-intensity, high-power searchlight designed for airborne platforms](#), the TrakkaBeam A800 is a “fully automated multi-mission searchlight that includes an *integrated filter wheel*”. Trakka is a multinational company with headquarters in Sweden, Italy, Florida, and Dubai

⁴ Electro-optical/infra-red - likely the FLIR SAFIRE® 380-HDc which can detect humans between 10 and [20 km](#) away at night time or through fog

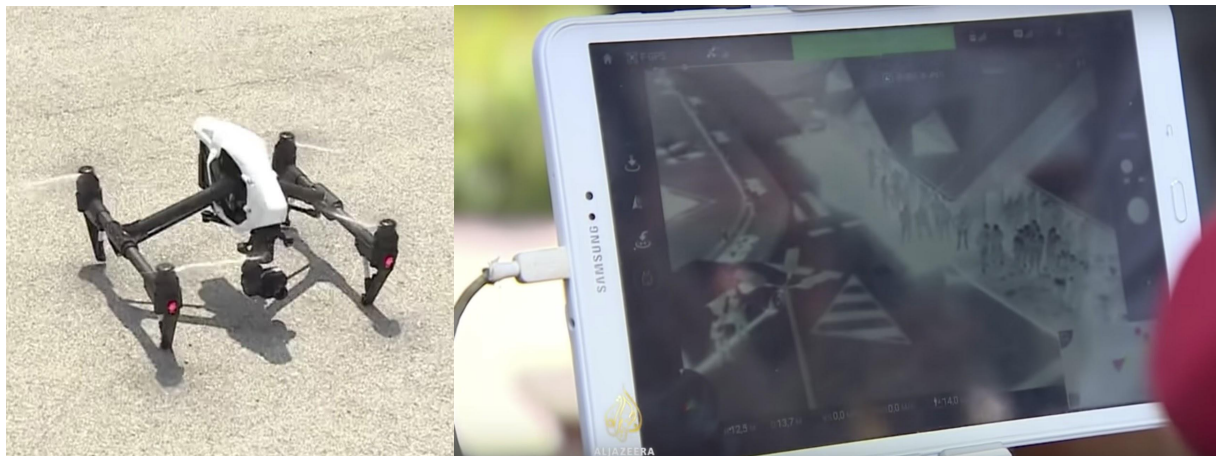
⁵Italian manufacturer headquartered in Rome, now renamed as “Leonardo”. Italian government owns 30% stake in the company. The AW139 helicopters active in Croatia are [manufactured](#) in Samarate, Italy

million EUR allocated to Croatia under the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund and the Internal Security Fund 2014-2020.

Ultimately, this event was intended to demonstrate the strength of the Croatian state's ability to protect and control the European Union's external border with Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the demonstration of its equipment and personal at the event, the Croatian Ministry of the Interior provided an important window into the intentions and modalities behind the violent and illegal acts which occur along its borders.



Left image - One of the FLIR infrared cameras situated on top of the mobile surveillance stations, the camera is most likely an adapted FLIR Ranger HRC-MS. Marko Dulic, an officer within *Granična Policija's* mobile team [described](#) being able to detect a man up to 10 km away with the camera; **Right image** - The monitoring screen of the above-mentioned FLIR camera [From: [Al Jazeera Balkans](#)]



Left image - One of the drones operated by Croatian authorities in their surveillance of the border; **Right image** - The tablet-adaptable monitoring screen of the drone [From: [Al Jazeera Balkans](#)]

The situation in Serbia

Šid

There are currently 30-40 people living in the abandoned factory squat outside the city of Šid, Serbia, where No Name Kitchen (NNK) is providing daily dinner distributions. However, there are around 60 people who come each evening to eat. Most of them live in forests near the squat. It is mainly single men and unaccompanied minors living and attending distribution at the factory squat. No Name Kitchen also provides a second food distribution site near the Šid train station, where they serve about 65 portions of food each day, mostly to single men coming from North Africa.

Access to health care for people-in-transit outside of the camp system remains extremely limited in Šid. NNK has a psychiatric nurse currently volunteering with them who comes to the main factory squat every day to treat skin infections, however those with more serious injuries and illnesses have limited access to medical attention from Serbian hospitals. There have been multiple claims that doctors inside the camps have refused to see people arbitrarily and have been neglectful and inhumane towards patients. This has led many people to give up on getting treatment through this system. The hospital in Šid is under direct orders from the Ministry of Health not to treat migrants, unless it is a life threatening illness. This forces people in Šid who require medical attention to travel to a hospital 40 kilometers away, however this hospital has also refused to examine migrants on occasion. The only place in Serbia where migrants can receive certain medical attention is the Medecins Sans Frontieres clinic in Belgrade, which is a two and a half hour train ride from Šid.

Subotica

The population of the people-in-transit staying in northern Serbia has grown in the past month. Currently, approximately 70 people are staying around Subotica. They are mainly from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. The population is mainly composed of young single men and unaccompanied minors but also more families are coming, the youngest child staying in one of the spots is only 4 years old. It is of note that vulnerable people are arriving to the area, such as unaccompanied minors, three single women, and a pregnant woman. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) came to the area in June to check the situation. In particular, they treated the many cases scabies which had spread throughout the transit community. Larger groups of 30 or more people have been observed attempting to traverse through Hungary in recent weeks.

Trends in border violence

Family push-backs vs. male push-backs

When in September 2015 the picture of Aylan Kurdi drowned in the Mediterranean Sea made global headlines, the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo published a cartoon that one might either find tasteless or not. It was revealed the way that the image of refugees and migrants in the current public discourse as either a threat or overly innocent objects of salvation is constructed along gender differences. The cartoon suggested that the drowned toddler would have grown up to be a “boob grabber” like those immigrants allegedly involved in the assaults in Cologne. The dichotomy between the suffering, helpless and passive imagined body of the refugee child/woman versus the hyper-masculinely portrayed single man becomes very clear here. While the refugee family/woman is imagined as one(s) without any agency or choice, forced by external circumstances to emigrate, the prototype of the “male economic migrant” has the audacity to take the decision about his place of residence into his own hands. The women and families earn pity while the single men cause anxieties.

What is the distinction between the treatment that single men receive from Croatian police officers to the treatment that women and families experience during these same procedures? This question has become more relevant during the summer months as warmer temperatures have caused more families to attempt transit through the Balkans towards central Europe. In the reports involving women and/or children conducted in the last few weeks, there are several patterns we can identify in how gender may, or may not, influence the use of violence during these operations.

- A) More common: The women in the group are treated in favor (meaning no direct violence, less probability to be body searched, get personal belongings destroyed or other forms of indirect violence), but the male individuals are treated equally to individuals from only-male-groups. In some cases, single men try to profit from the favorable treatment of their relative women/children by hiding their belongings in the women’s/children’s clothes (see [1.13](#) or [1.8](#)) In two reports conducted this month, children were injured during the use of force against their male relatives (see [1.8](#) and [1.7](#)). It is hard to determine the intentionality behind these incidences, however should be understood that the direct target of the violence in these cases were adult male group-members.
- B) Less common: The presence of women and children makes the whole group being treated in favor, *including* the single men accompanying the family/women (meaning no direct violence, less probability to be body searched, get personal belongings destroyed or other forms of indirect violence). ([1.9](#) and yet unpublished case reports conducted in July)
- C) Less common: All individuals of the group are likewise treated with violence, regardless of their gender (see [1.7](#)). One might hypothesize that the women experiencing the same violence than their male relatives/friends/partners are somehow perceived as masculinized by the officers for reasons that we can only speculate about. For instance, having the courage to protest against the treatment done by the officers might cause this kind of treatment, or being a young, rather boyish woman without children could have the same effect (see [1.3](#)).

Interestingly, though it seems that the privileged treatment of women/family-groups applies while being apprehended or pushed back, in the often very dire conditions of detention, gender seems to play less of a role when it comes to favorable treatment (see [1.13](#) or the following report from [April](#)). Male minors are, in most cases, no exception and are treated like male adults without considering their vulnerability (see [2.3](#)).

Balaclava as an accessory to violence

Looking back on more than a year of testimonies conducted in the Una-Sana Canton with push-back groups returning from Croatia, the use of balaclava masks by Croatian authorities as an accessory to push-backs is pervasive. In particular, respondents often describe balaclava, or black ski masks, as being worn by those officers committing the most direct instances of violence during their push-backs. One [report](#) from December describes a push-back wherein only the masked officers present at the site committed violence

“While around eight officers were present during the push-back, only four or five of them committed violence against the group. All the latter wore black balaclavas.”

It is of interest that in this testimony, not all of the officers present during the push-back covered their faces. Rather, only those who committed violence protected their identities. Another [report](#) from the same month described a similar procedure:

“All of them had to get off the van and was surrounded by a group of nine Croatian officers wearing black balaclavas and black uniforms... After they left the car, the officers started to punch and hit them with batons.”

Again, a different [report](#) from January demonstrates the violent, strategic practices often described by officers wearing balaclava masks:

“There were six officers wearing balaclavas waiting for them. The thirteen individuals had to get off the police van and had to walk one by one through two parallel lines of officers. As they moved through, the officers hit them with batons. One of the respondents describes being hit on his head by a baton. The last officers in line then pushed them towards a stream, marking the border between Bosnia and Croatia. When they reached the water, they were pushed by an officer into it.”

A report from this last month demonstrates the continuing usage of these masks as an accessory to violence (see [1.5](#)):

“When the car stopped, they were let out two by two. In front of the door there were seven police officers with balaclavas and sticks waiting for them. They took everything from them: backpacks, sleeping bags, food, smartphones, power

banks...Then they hit them from every side with batons and also kicked them and told them to go to the Bosnian side of the border.”



Images of Croatian *Interventna Policija*, from [ICV](#)

The way in which violence is most directly communicated onto the bodies of refugees and migrants during push-backs attracts a weighted scrutiny. Much thought is given to the batons wielded by *Interventna* police officers, which leave very visible and very identifiable testaments to the violence processes which they enable. Swollen lips, black eyes, and broken

bones are their immediate legacy. It is very easy to see how these weapons are an accessory to the violence of Croatia's external EU border. A line of complicity is likewise relatively easy to draw between the myriad of advanced surveillance equipment which the Croatian government has at its disposal in order to track and control transit attempt.

Less visible, however, are the instruments within the Croatian authorities metaphorical toolbelt which enable this violence on a psychological level. In recent weeks, Croatian authorities have been vocal as to the pride they feel over the effect that their enforcement of borders has on the emotional strength of transit groups. The fear with which these groups have of Croatian border authorities is portrayed as a point of pride. The *Specijalna Policija* on Risnjak mentioned in the Croatian hiker's [open letter](#) bragged how transit groups were "afraid of the police more than anything else". Similarly, during an event in Grabovac in June, the head of the Korenica police station made the [remark](#) that "the migrants return by themselves when they sense that we are coming". In this sense, the intentional deployment of psychological stressors during the push-back process cannot be overlooked. Put simply, given the intentions of these actions, the cultivation of fear is a useful tool and the use of balaclava. As evidenced by the following quote from a [report](#) conducted over the winter, the use of black balaclava masks certainly contributes to this effect:

"Me, I am afraid because he wore a ski-mask. I'm wondering: will he beat me, won't he beat me? I am scared when they opened the door"

It is of note that the way in which people-in-transit have described these balaclavas in their own words has often reflected their own cultural and historical memories. One respondent in December [described](#) the balaclavas as follows:

"The masks were special for commandos, like when I worked for Americans in Iraq".

Originating from Syria, another respondent from a different push-back likened an officer's uniform and tactics to those used by the Islamic State back in his home community:

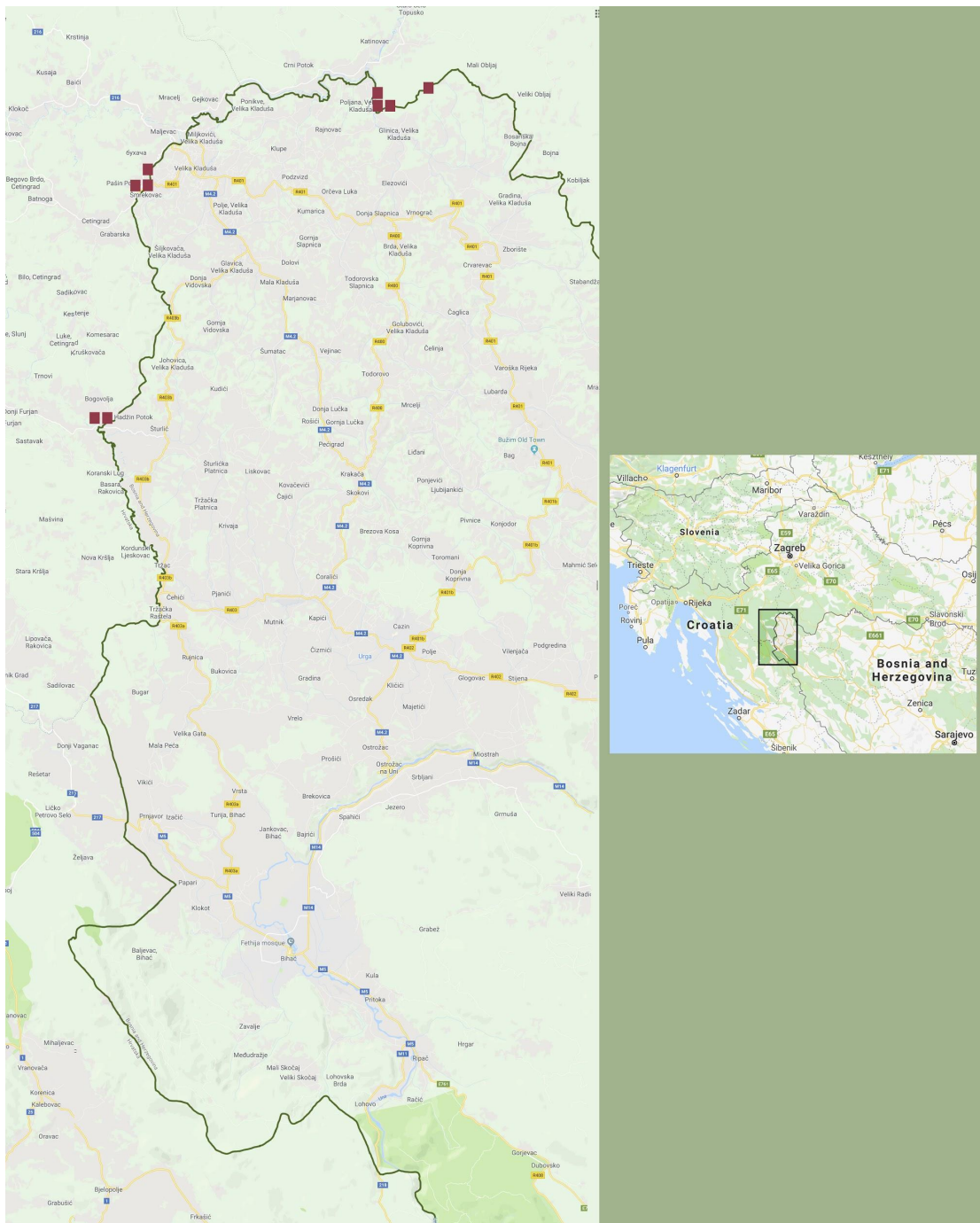
"[He wore a] black mask. Same D'aesh"

"This D'aesh man [was dressed in] all black, he doesn't show any of his body, just his eyes"

"What you think D'aesh make in Syria, he make like this here" (see [1.13](#))

While balaclava masks may serve to intimidate transit groups, we must consider their ability to protect the identities of the perpetrators of these illegal push-backs. Given that there is often no attempt to cover the faces of Croatian authorities otherwise involved in the push-back process, just not the direct violence, the exact benefit of the masks for the perpetrators is difficult to identify. Still, one could conjecture that it is easier to convince yourself to commit such direct acts of violence against the bodies of refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers with the knowledge that they cannot remember your face.

Map of pushback locations in the Una Sana Canton within the last month⁶



⁶ This map only utilizes location data which we have deemed accurate within a one kilometer radius. More reports on push-backs to the Una-Sana Canton have been conducted within the past month than are shown on this map

Šturlić

The month of June saw the return of higher number of transit group to the areas surrounding Šturlić (BiH) during the course of their push-backs [1.11]. This is a trend that, on the one hand, could be linked to the concurrent development of higher numbers of transit groups embarking from Šturlić on their “games” [see 1.12 & 1.11]. On the other hand, other groups described being returned to the Šturlić area this past month despite being apprehended in otherwise unrelated locations in the Croatian interior. As evidenced in the picture above, a number of push-backs to Šturlić in the month of June were particularly severe.



Left image - Injury sustained during a push-back from Croatia to Šturlić (BiH) in early June; **Right image** - Šturlić in relation to Velika Kladuša

The geographic location of Šturlić is interesting insofar as it is more than 20 km from both of the transit hotspots of Velika Kladuša and Bihac. To this end, transit groups returned to this area must walk long distances after their push-backs to the area, even after enduring physical and materially taxing push-back procedures. Transit groups which attempt to take buses from these locations back to Velika Kladuša or Bihac are often refused.

Overall, one might find parallels between the push-backs zones near Šturlić to those which exists farther northeast near Gradina, which is also approximately 25 km away from Velika Kladuša. Like Šturlić, transit groups pushed back from this area must walk long journey's back to Velika Kladuša, making continued transit attempts more time consuming and costly. It is of note that both of these remote push-back sites have been used in higher numbers within the last four months, resulting in a gradual dispersion of push-back locations surrounding Velika Kladuša.

Šid

Routine push-backs continue in the border areas around Šid ([3.1](#), [3.2](#)). This past month, Balkan Insight [covered](#) the pervasive system of push-backs along the Balkan and paid particular attention to those occurring in Šid.

Additionally, it is of note that Volunteers from No Name Kitchen met with representatives from the UNHCR and the Frontex representative for the West Balkans, who expressed concern relating to the reports of border violence coming from Šid. The UNHCR representatives at the meeting discussed how slow change can often be when dealing with police practices. The Frontex representative encouraged volunteers conducting violence reports to file complaints about border violence through the Frontex complaint form.

Montenegro

People-in-transit attempting to cross into BiH from Montenegro remarked this past month on increased surveillance by the Bosnian police. In their own estimates, several persons-in-transit believe that somewhere around half of all transit groups that headed north were pushed back in May and June. These apprehensions were much lower previously. It is important to note that these personal observations are not reliable statistics. This trend may be also explained due to the fact that with the warmer season, many more people are have headed north overall, leading to higher overall numbers of push-backs.

As previously mentioned, the presence of BiH authorities at the border with Montenegro has increased in the past two months, whereas the Serbian border with Montenegro is still relatively quiet in comparison. Therefore, an increased number of people have been attempting to cross into Serbia instead of BiH, particularly families and those who already experienced pushbacks from Bosnia.

Many people-in-transit in Montenegro talk about the possibility of detention in Bosnia. One rumor circulating in recent weeks has been that the more often someone gets caught close to the border between BiH and Montenegro, the more likely this person will be detained for a period of time in BiH. According to the rumor, this detention period can last from one night (on the first two attempts) to two months (after the third attempt). It must be investigated more thoroughly in the next reports if such an event actually occurs, especially given the difficulty for anyone to identify with a high degree of accuracy a migrant. That being said, there is at least one report from the last month that appears to partially confirm this phenomenon. (see [4.2](#))

To this end, one might observe a shift in BiH border tactics towards a more intentional approach to push-backs. While these trends may still represent a lower degree of systematization than those along the Croatian borders, the gradual optimization of border control represents the powerful hegemony of the EU's border regime in the Western Balkans. For now Montenegro continues to be a relatively quick transit point along the Balkan Route.

Reverse flows along the Balkan Route

There has also been a growing trend developing in reverse migration from BiH back to points further south on the Balkan route ([4.3](#), [4.4](#)). Observations from both Montenegro and Subotica allude to a number of individuals and groups attempting transit back to Greece or other parts of the Balkan Route after multiple failed attempts to travel through Croatia and Slovenia from Bosnia. Moreover, other transit groups described the presence of the police in the city of Bihać and the violent evictions of many transit-residents in the city as another motivating factor in leaving the country. Corroborating these observations, volunteers in Bihać and Velika Kladuša report hearing many transit groups discuss the option of returning to the relative safety of Greece.

Perhaps unrelated to the trends in BiH, it is worth observing that, in Montenegro, transit groups describe that in recent months many have decided to return all the way back to Albania after their push-backs from BiH. After taking some rest in Albania, they then pass through Montenegro again towards BiH, reinforcing the county's position as a transit point with very short periods of stay.

Glossary of June, 2019 reports

This month we conducted 29 reports of push-backs in total involving 237 people in transit. 21 of these were incidents of push-backs to BiH (15 directly from Croatia, 6 chain push-backs from Slovenia), 4 of these were incidents of push-backs to Serbia (2 from Croatia, 2 from BiH) and 4 of these were incidents of push-backs from BiH to Montenegro. The reports were conducted with a wide demographic variety of respondents ranging from families to single men to unaccompanied minors. The respondents to these reports also originate from a wide variety of countries such as Tunisia, Kurdistan Iraq, Syria, Pakistan and Algeria to name a few.

Report link	Date of Report	Date of Incident	Group Size	Countries of origin
<i>Push-backs from Croatia to BiH</i>				
1.1	17/06/2019	May 1, 2019	4	Morocco
1.2	02/06/2019	May 30, 2019	13	Iran, Irak, Turkey
1.3	02/06/2019	May 31, 2019	14	Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia
1.4	02/06/2019	May 31, 2019	4	Morocco, Algeria
1.5	23/06/2019	June 5, 2019	4	Morocco, Algeria
1.6	08/06/2019	June 6, 2019	6	Kurdistan Iraq
1.7	09/06/2019	June 7, 2019	11	P a k i s t a n , Afghanistan
1.8	08/06/2019	June 8, 2019	14	Iraq
1.9	11/06/2019	June 8,2019	11	Kurd
1.10	13/06/2019	June 13, 2019	3	Iraq
1.11	21/06/2019	June 13, 2019	11	Morocco, Algeria

1.12	15/06/2019	June 13, 2019	12	Morocco, Algeria, Egypt
1.13	30/06/2019	June 20, 2019	9	Afghanistan
1.14	01/07/2019	June 22, 2019	14	Syria, Iraq
1.15	26/06/2019	June 24, 2019	3	Algeria
<i>Push-backs from Slovenia to BiH</i>				
2.1	09/06/2019	May 28, 2019	3	Algeria
2.2	07/06/2019	May 29, 2019	20	Syria, Palestine
2.3	02/06/2019	May 31, 2019	8	Syria, Iraq
2.4	01/06/2019	May 31, 2019	6	Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia
2.5	23/06/2019	June 5, 2019	4	Morocco, Algeria
2.6	19/06/2019	June 7, 2019	6	Morocco
<i>Push-backs from Croatia to Serbia</i>				
3.1	25/06/2019	June 7, 2019	9	Afghanistan
3.2	01/07/2019	June 27, 2019	2	Algeria
<i>Push-backs from BiH to Montenegro</i>				
4.1	21/06/2019	May 6, 2019	7	Syria, Morocco, Algeria, Somalia
4.2	02/07/2019	June 6, 2019	4	Morocco, Algeria

4.3	24/06/2019	June 13, 2019	2	Morocco
4.4	20/06/2019	June 18, 2019	8	Palestine, Syria, Iraq
<i>Push-backs from BiH to Serbia</i>				
5.1	01/06/2019	June 5, 2019	20	Pakistan
5.2	27/06/2019	June 24, 2019	2	Iraq, Morocco