



Border Violence
Monitoring Network



ARE YOU
SYRIOUS



MOBILE
INFO TEAM



[RE]ports
SARAJEVO



ILLEGAL PUSH-BACKS AND BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS

BALKAN REGION
JUNE 2020



Mrežnica



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Border Violence Monitoring Network* (BVMN) published 20 cases of illegal pushbacks during June, documenting the experience of 351 people whose rights were violated at the European Union's external border. Volunteers in the field recorded a variety of cruel and abusive acts by officers, representing at least ten different national authorities. This report summarises the data and narrative testimony shared by people-on-the-move, highlighting the depth of violence being carried out in the service of hard borders.

Special focus is given to the Croatian context where a sequence of brutal knife attacks have furthered calls by multiple international watchdogs challenging the use of systematic torture by the Croatian police. First hand material is shared here on these cruel assaults, presented alongside fresh evidence of a huge EU-led coverup regarding pushbacks. In June, Croatia's failing to implement an independent border monitoring mechanism - for which they had been funded - was uncovered alongside correspondence from Brussels officials engaged in hiding this fact. While people continue to drown in Croatian rivers, and are stripped and beaten at the border, the prevailing evidence points towards a gross misuse of EU funds in the implementation of this violence.

Further analysis covers the way an "informal readmissions" agreement is being abused by Italy to pushback groups to Slovenia, where they are then chain refouled into Bosnia-Herzegovina or Serbia. Alongside updates from the Western Balkans, attention is also given to the growing level of pushback violence at the Serbia's eastern border where families are regularly being beaten by Romanian police. Meanwhile, at the south of the transit route in Greece, a unique attack by police on a humanitarian distribution site is considered through the lens of recent legislation on NGOs working in the territory. The continued accounts of mass apprehensions across mainland Greece matches with ongoing evidence being gathered at the Evros land border of violent pushbacks.

New in this report, BVMN also investigates several cases of pushbacks across the Aegean sea where the Greek authorities used tow-boats and knives to push dinghies into Turkish waters or sink them. Further analysis is also given to the use of weapons and specialised vehicles by Frontex in their Albania mission. Legal developments in both Hungary and Serbia are also noted, showing how processes of alignment and deviation from EU law are impacting asylum seekers rights. Five years on from the "summer of migration", physical and system based violence at borders remains incredibly high in the Balkan Region and Greece.

**BVMN is a network of watchdog organisations active in Greece and the Western Balkans including No Name Kitchen, Rigardu, Are You Syrious, Mobile Info Team, Josoor, [re:]ports Sarajevo, InfoKolpa, Escuela con Alma, Centre for Peace Studies, Mare Liberum, Collective Aid and Fresh Response.*

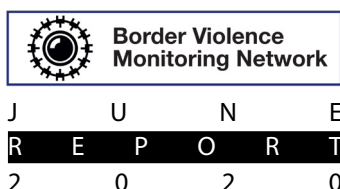


TABLE OF CONTENTS

2	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
4	GENERAL
4	4 REPORTING NETWORK
4	4 TERMINOLOGY
4	4 METHODOLOGY
4	4 ABBREVIATIONS
5	TRENDS IN BORDER VIOLENCE
5	5 KNIFE ATTACKS BY CROATIAN POLICE
7	7 PUSHBACK FROM A HUMANITARIAN DISTRIBUTION SITE
8	8 VIOLENCE BY ROMANIAN POLICE
9	9 CHAIN PUSHBACKS FROM ITALY
9	9 EQUIPMENT USED BY FRONTEX IN ALBANIA
11	UPDATE ON THE SITUATION
11	11 CROATIA
11	11 // DEATHS IN RIVERS
12	12 // FRAUDULENT USE OF MONITORING FUNDS EXPOSED
13	13 BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA
13	13 // VIEW FROM THE BORDER
14	14 HUNGARY
14	14 // APPLICANTS FORCED TO APPLY FROM EMBASSIES
15	15 SERBIA
15	15 // PUSHBACK AND INTERNAL VIOLENCE AT THE SERBIAN-HUNGARIAN BORDER
15	15 // LAWS CHANGE ON ASYLUM AND REMOVALS
16	16 TURKEY
16	16 // VIOLENCE AT THE EVROS BORDER
17	17 GREECE
17	17 // MORE LIFE THREATENING PUSHBACKS AT SEA
18	GLOSSARY OF REPORTS, JUNE 2020
19	NETWORK STRUCTURE AND CONTACT

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.

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.

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
ROM - Romania
HUN - Hungary
ITA - Italy
MNK - North Macedonia
ALB - Albania
GRK - Greece
TUR - Turkey
EU - European Union

TRENDS IN BORDER VIOLENCE



SITE OF ONE KNIFE ATTACK - BLATA, CROATIA (SOURCE: [GORAN VRCEL](#))

“HE KNIFED THE INDEX FINGER OF MY LEFT HAND, AND BLOOD STARTED SPURTING OUT LIKE A SMALL SHOWER, THEN HE SMILED, THEN HE CUT MY MIDDLE FINGER FOLLOWED BY MY PALM WITH A LARGER CUT.”

KNIFE ATTACKS BY CROATIAN POLICE

Manual weapons like knives play a key role in the net of illegal activity at Croatian borders targeting people-on-the-move. These tools of intimidation and pain physically mediate structures of ultra-violence, masculinity, racism and state/EU hierarchies which permeate modern pushback practices. In June BVMN reported two separate incidents where respondents suffered knife attacks, wounding, torturing and scarring their bodies. Commonly the Croatian police use batons, sticks, fists and open palms to strike transit groups as they eject people across the green border. However recently reporters heard from 29 people who shared the same experience of being threatened or cut by masked officers brandishing blades. In one case from 27th May (see [4.5](#)), a group of 15 Pakistani men were caught in the Croatian village of Blata and detained by an old train station. They were then attacked by officers in black uniforms and masks, and the respondent was brutally slashed with a knife as five officers pinned him to the ground.

Only a day earlier, a group apprehended in the nearby village of Licka Jesenica (see [4.2](#)) was also assaulted with a knife as they were loaded into a vehicle pending their pushback. The report explains how they were “made to lie face down on the floor of the rear compartment” of the van as officers beat them with batons. During this attack a Croatian authority, again wearing black uniform and a mask, took a knife and cut one man’s hand. Occurring just 5km from the other incident, the account offers a matching description of perpetrators and practices, suggesting this may have been carried out by the same police unit. What appear to be Croatian Interventna officers - infamous for their masks and black jumpsuits - are conspicuous in both cases, making identical slashing motions on people’s hands while they are immobilised on the floor.

In both cases, while the entire transit group was beaten, one person in particular was singled out for the most aggressive attack with the knife, marking the use of blades as a form of summary or performative punishment which inflicts both severe pain to the victim, but also creates psychological fear for the witnesses

Beyond the incidents, the deep lacerations left in the men's flesh also serve as a means of broadcasting the act, creating an enduring and public message to the transit community of the violence they can expect when crossing the Croatian border. This message was amplified within the [context of COVID-19](#), because some of the injured people made their painful recovery in Miral TRC and the other residents became enduring witnesses during the lockdown of the camp.



PHOTO TAKEN INSIDE MIRAL TRC OF INJURED TRANSIT GROUP (SOURCE: [FACEBOOK](#))

Since the initiation of pushbacks to BiH, the Croatian police have used communicative acts of violence to instil fear into transit populations and deter crossings. Speaking in 2019 [Goran Matijević](#), the Chief of the infamous Korenica Police Station, bragged that “the migrants return by themselves when they sense that we are coming”, echoing the harrowing impact such physical abuse has on prospective victims running the gauntlet of the Croatian border. Reports recorded by BVMN also refer to this climate of fear instilled by officers, respondents often sharing that perpetrators [threaten further reprisal or even death](#) to those who dare reenter Croatia. Knives are both a physical instantiation of these threats and a metaphorical

weapon used to emphasise the risk of crossing state borders. While knives are latent in most cases, the knowledge of their prior use - alongside other tools like guns and tasers - forms part of the imaginary of those facing contact with law enforcement in Croatia. Parallel to the recent knife attacks [Amnesty](#) and BVMN also spoke to a group affected by an incident where police used rifle butts to strike their heads till they bled (see [4.3](#)). Officers compounded the attack by rubbing ketchup and mayonnaise into the wounds, serving to denigrate the injured bodies. These reports contribute to the growing understanding of pushbacks as acts of state sanctioned torture, a lens through which BVMN has analysed Croatian border practice before, both around the use of [firearms](#) and [a myriad of other practices](#).



FOOD SMOTHERED INTO WOUNDS ON A MANS HEAD (SOURCE: [AMNESTY](#))

The [UN Special Rapporteur, Felipe González Morales](#) also released a statement in June saying that Croatia had “subjected migrants to torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment as prohibited under international law”. Knife attacks are part of this schema of torture and show how a consistently cruel pushback apparatus is sustained by symbolic cases of extreme violence. These are critical contours in the geography of the EU external border, shaping the acceptable threshold of corporal violence that can be conferred onto the bodies of people-on-the-move.

PUSHBACK FROM A HUMANITARIAN DISTRIBUTION SITE



POLICE ON THE SCENE IN THESSALONIKI, BLOCKING ROADS DURING THE PUSHBACK (SOURCE: [BVMN](#))

The climate in Greece, never warm for NGOs, has turned positively icy over the last month. In a bid to make the state a less attractive destination for people-on-the-move, the government has clamped down on groups working in camps, requiring them to [register on a central database](#) controlled by the Ministry of Migration. Whilst this has been touted as a move for greater transparency and coordination, the reality is starkly different. [Refugee Support Aegean](#) and [Terres des Hommes Hellas](#) have criticised the requirements for stigmatising solidarity work and creating “exorbitant costs” for government approved audits. The Expert Council on NGO Law also found the new legislation would require [substantial revision](#) to be in line with European standards.

Whilst the majority of media focus has been on the implications of these new rules for organisations working in camps, last month BVMN received worrying reports regarding the repression of sites where NGOs are working with transit populations in the street. At the beginning of June a humanitarian distribution spot was targeted in an [orchestrated raid by police](#) in the city of Thessaloniki. Police reassured the aid workers and beneficiaries present that those arrested would be taken to get a “khartia” - a document regularising stay in Greece for up to 30 days. Yet later reports received by BVMN (see [6.4](#)) indicated that the apprehended group had been subject to a direct and violent removal to Turkey.

One person affected by the pushback was a new arrival to Greece and had been promised a regularisation document upon arrest. He shared with BVMN the perverse nature of the pushback:

“15 DAYS [TO ARRIVE TO THESSALONIKI] AND THEY TAKE US TO TURKEY IN FIVE HOURS”

While exploitative changes to the [Greek asylum system](#) are putting existing communities at risk, these swift collective expulsions for new arrivals highlight the two-pronged approach being taken by the Greek government. This has dire implications for the transit population who now have no safe space to access essential services such as medical care, food supplies and NFIs, and are at permanent risk of arrest and expulsion. Whilst such a brazen attack directly on people accessing aid has not been repeated, observers in the area say two other mass arrests have occurred nearby during the distribution time. The threat of being apprehended on the street is creating a crude dilemma between access to food and the likelihood of detention or removal to Turkey. In this climate more and more people go hungry, or suffer illness unaided. The trend of rendering essential services inaccessible to those most at need in Greece continues and remains worryingly tied up in the pushback process.

VIOLENCE BY ROMANIAN POLICE

For groups trying to circumvent the hard border between Serbia and Hungary, the eastern route via Romania has become an emergent, but equally violent alternative. Four reports from June show how 23 people were illegally removed by Romanian police to Serbia, despite requesting asylum.

As transit through the region rises during the summer, this less well profiled border has brought forth several jarring cases involving brutal pushback practices against transit groups including families. In one instance (see [1.2](#)) the respondent reports how “both the men and women were hit with cables and with batons” before being threatened with guns. The beating took place in front of children as young as seven years old, a pattern that links several of these cases which saw young families brutalised by police. In another incident (see [1.3](#)), a mother’s heart medication was robbed as a means of deterrent and the officers, who had already stolen the families clothes declared:

“DO NOT WORRY, WE WILL NOT WEAR YOUR CLOTHES, WE WILL BURN THEM; YOU WILL SEE THE SMOKE IN THE SKY.”

Local Serbian organisations such as the [Asylum Protection Centre](#) state that as many as 200 people are being violently removed every day from Romania into Serbia. A [military ordinance](#) was issued during the COVID-19 state of emergency, mandating the Romanian authorities to continue receiving claims for international protection, as per domestic and EU law. However, recent months have seen a marked rise in violent removals in contravention of these rights. This was picked up by the [Financial Times](#) in March, describing how Romanian forces drove “migrants back into the Serbian forest, donned masks and beat them with batons before speeding away”. In one case recently recorded by BVMN, a beaten family was even told “Romania is full” (see [1.4](#)), denoting the informal closure of asylum access that border authorities are applying. While neighbouring Hungary has sought to achieve this through legislative change, Romanian authorities have ramped up the level of physical violence to all but choke off access.

The four new cases published by BVMN in June also add an additional nuance to the understanding of removals from Romania. In three of the cases, the perpetrating officers alerted the Serbian police and returned transit groups into their custody at the border, which stands in contrast to the way that Hungarian officers commit pushbacks out of sight of their Serbian counterparts.

Ways to control borders



Sources: Transnational Institute; FT research © FT

USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN BORDER MANAGEMENT (SOURCE: [TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE - FT RESEARCH](#))

Other commonalities remain however, such as the use of [drone surveillance](#) in Romania and Hungary in order to track and apprehend groups. While there is some diversity in practice along the EU external border, it can be seen that the object of summary removal and violent deterrent are a unifying objective for authorities.

CHAIN PUSHBACKS FROM ITALY

Since an [agreement](#) that entered into force in 2011, Italy and Slovenia have organised joint training, cross-border surveillance and pursuit, as well as mixed patrols in the border area of the two countries, in order to prevent people-on-the-move from crossing into Italy. Previous cases of removals to Slovenia from Trieste and Gorizia, have been noted by Italian legal network [ASGI](#) as occurring “without any formal procedure or decision”. Since May 2020 there has been a renewed emphasis placed on carrying out expansive readmissions under the bilateral agreement between ITA-SLO, a policy driven by the [Italian Ministry of Interior](#) and involving the deployment of the army to the border.

BVMN reporters spoke to several people removed under this “[informal readmission](#)” process, who had not only been returned to Slovenia, but subject to a “chain” pushback over two other borders. In a report from 25th May (see [3.1](#)) a group of 14 people were “fingerprinted and given the indication they would be able to pursue an asylum claim in Italy”, before being illegally pushed back to Slovenia, then Croatia, and finally Bosnia-Herzegovina. In another case from 11th June (see [3.2](#)), five Indian men apprehended in Muggia (ITA) were taken to a facility in the border area to claim asylum and be fingerprinted, but then were subject to the same triple pushback process.

What is unique in these cases is that the respondents describe being able to lodge their intent to claim asylum, which differs to the usual gatekeeping activity seen most [violently in Croatia](#) and [at a bureaucratic level in Slovenia](#). Bizarrely, in some cases this was even done without the consent of the applicant. Some people held in custody during the [COVID-19 measures](#) claim they were not even “aware they had even asked for asylum” in Italy. However in the two cases published by BVMN, those who expressed intent for international protection were simply fast-tracked through the “informal readmission” procedure to Slovenia - activated within the first 24 hours after arrival.

[The Italian state](#), counters criticism of these removals, claiming they remain legal while the “readmitted migrant is not deprived of the possibility of applying for asylum, as Slovenia is part of the European context”, something [Italian legal experts](#) contest. These hurried procedures spiked in May when as many as [30 people](#) appear to have been [returned to Slovenia](#) in just a single day.



JOINT PATROL OF SLOVENIAN AND ITALIAN POLICE
(SOURCE: [INFOMIGRANTS](#))

In a [public speech](#), during a hearing at the Italian parliament in front of the Schengen Committee, the Italian Minister of the Interior, Luciana Lamorgese, declared that from 1st January to 25th June 2020, 343 people whose fingerprints appeared in the [EURODAC](#) system were readmitted to Slovenia. However, EURODAC serves as the identification process linked to the Dublin Regulation, and its connection to the bilateral agreement with Slovenia has yet to be fully established. This inconsistency, among other willful violations, have led to the illegal expulsion of hundreds of people from Italy - where they had a right to claim asylum.

EQUIPMENT USED BY FRONTEX IN ALBANIA

In the [May report](#), BVMN published information regarding Frontex involvement in pushback operations on Albania’s land border with Greece. One [testimony](#) taken by field reporters documented excessive force used by Frontex officers during violent expulsions to Greece. Contrastingly, at the beginning of June, Frontex signed an [agreement](#) with the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), committing to help set up effective fundamental rights monitoring during their operations at the EU’s borders. In spite of this, further reports gathered by BVMN

detail events that confirm Frontex’s continued involvement in pushback operations on the Albanian border. In one report, the interviewee refers to the Polish license plate of the 4x4 vehicle used by Frontex officers to apprehend them. This corresponds with information regarding Frontex’s use of a fleet of new [Land Rover](#) vehicles registered in Poland. Other vehicles used in the Albania mission include [specialised surveillance vans](#), which may have been used in a recent case (see [5.2](#)) where a transit group alludes to the use of night vision equip-



FRONTEX VEHICLE USED IN ALBANIAN MISSION (SOURCE: [TWITTER](#))

“NEXT TIME IF YOU RUN WE CAN SHOOT ON YOU, IF WE SAID ‘STOP’, YOU STOP”

equipment define Frontex’s aggressive approach to stemming the movement of the transit communities from Northern Greece, impacting people primarily from the Middle East and Maghreb regions. This is particularly pertinent at a time when the [UN’s Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism](#) is investigating the intersection of new technologies and racial discrimination. Reports gathered by BVMN highlight the way extensive weaponry and technical equipment at Frontex’s disposal streamlines illegal pushback operations, negating the asylum rights of people-on-the-move. These violations deeply contrast the outward image of the agency as upholding fundamental rights.

ment to detect them. Procedures relating to the use of force also appear to have been ramped up with interviewees (see [5.1](#)) maintaining they were threatened with firearms, a development in line with new regulation allowing Frontex personnel to [bear arms](#). Firearms, response vehicles and surveillance



SURVEILLANCE VAN USED FOR SPOTTING TRANSIT GROUPS AT NIGHT FROM OUTSIDE & INSIDE (SOURCE: [ARTE](#))



UPDATE ON THE SITUATION

CROATIA DEATHS IN RIVERS

The number of people who die on the Balkan Route will never be fully known. For instance, the bodies of people who drown often disappear into rivers along the route, forming a hidden list of fatalities. In June alone, several people-on-the-move drowned while crossing stretches of Croatia's [Mrežnice](#) and [Korona](#) rivers. According to [No Name Kitchen reports](#), at least six people were killed. This senseless human cost comes as a direct result of the covert routes groups are forced to take in order to avoid the Croatian police. The death and disappearance of these people is therefore the responsibility of the EU, and the system of violence that leaves them no option but to ford deep rivers, or cross mountain passes and live train tracks to avoid illegal pushbacks.

The Mrežnice and Korona are located in mid Croatia, marking the halfway point for those travelling from BiH to Slovenia. People taken fatally by their courses in June are a telling example of the reflexive way migration policy has weaponised the whole breadth of national interiors, bringing the border into the operation of everyday life. This borderisation of interiors can be seen across the experience of transit communities. It is overt in the way that police stations all over Croatia [falsify records](#) in order to pushback transit groups as if they had never entered the territory. Likewise, one can also observe it in the way linguistic borders are constructed by [the abuse of translation services](#) in custody, or the way [racial profiling](#) guides the apprehension of people in towns and cities.



RIVERS IN CROATIA (SOURCE: [CROATIA.EU](#)).

Rivers are perhaps the starkest example. Fearful of being spotted while using bridges, groups continually have to risk their lives to cross fast flowing and cold rivers. People often drown, either unable to swim or brought into shock by the temperature of the water. Sometimes these deaths occur at border rivers,

like on the [Kolpa](#), [Drina](#), [Danube](#) or [Evros](#). Like the fatalities in Croatia's interior, these deaths remain entirely avoidable, but are part of a border system which puts undocumented persons in a terminally precarious state.

FRAUDULENT USE OF MONITORING FUNDS EXPOSED

Following months of investigation, Irish member of the LIBE committee MEP Clare Daly confirmed she found enough evidence to prove [misuse of the EU funds](#). The funds were allocated for establishment of an independent border monitoring mechanism in Croatia under EMAS funding granted on 20th December 2018. At the time the [press release](#) from the European Commission (EC) stated:

“THE COMMISSION IS AWARDDING €6.8 MILLION TO CROATIA TO HELP REINFORCE BORDER MANAGEMENT AT THE EU’S EXTERNAL BORDERS, IN FULL RESPECT OF EU RULES. (...) A MONITORING MECHANISM WILL BE PUT IN PLACE TO ENSURE THAT ALL MEASURES APPLIED AT THE EU EXTERNAL BORDERS ARE PROPORTIONATE AND ARE IN FULL COMPLIANCE WITH FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AND EU ASYLUM LAWS”

Full implementation of the funding agreement, including establishment of the independent border monitoring mechanism, was seen as a prerequisite for Croatia to get a technical green light to enter the visa-free Schengen Area. In October 2019 this was given, despite blatant violations of [Article 4 of the Schengen Border Code](#) at Croatian borders, breached daily with the application of illegal pushbacks. To top this off, it also transpired that the EU-funded border monitoring mechanism was never even established.

Faced with a series of questions from LIBE members, Director General Matthias Oel and a DG Home official Olivier Seiffahrt, as well as the Croatian Minister of Interior Davor Božinović, falsely claimed EMAS money was used for the non-existent independent border monitoring mechanism. They said the mechanism was implemented through UNHCR and their local partner Croatian Law Center (CLC). Both UNHCR and CLC officially denied such claims.

Out of the €300,000 (from the €6.8 million) allocated for the monitoring mechanism, a total of €84,672 was given to Croatian police and NGOs working with them, and the remainder reallocated for other purposes or not spent at all. These findings lead to stark questions about the role of EU funding. Which, rather than supporting the implementation of checks and accountability, has directly supported a police force implicated in illegal pushback practice. MEP Clare Daly's investigation also revealed the attempt of the Commission officials to help cover-up Croatia's failure to establish the aforementioned mechanism. In a [leaked internal correspondence](#) from the Commission, EC officials discussed how underspending of the €300,000 would be seen as a "scandal", and discussed possibilities of putting some "final touches" to Croatian final technical implementation report for EMAS funding.

In correspondence with a LIBE member in April, regarding the lack of a border monitoring mechanism and the subsequent cover-up, commissioner Ylva Johansson confirmed the Commission received a final technical implementation report from the Croatian authorities on 28th February. According to the letter obtained by the BVMN, Croatian authorities were "promptly requested to submit additional information" to assess whether



PUSHBACK INJURIES CAUSED DURING THE EMBEZZLEMENT OF THESE FUNDS (SOURCE: [AMNESTY](#))

implementation has fully respected fundamental rights and complied with EU asylum rules, something BVMN's 2019 report on the [treatment of asylum seekers](#) in Croatia clearly refutes.

Johannsson has announced the Commission will organise a [fact-finding mission to Croatia](#), as soon as the restrictions imposed in the COVID-19 context are lifted, into similar activities financed under a different, ongoing grant. "This will be an opportunity to assess how this mechanism ensures that the Croatian border guard officers control the border in full

compliance with fundamental rights", commissioner Johansson concluded. The announcement of this investigation was followed by [the arrest of two police officers](#) for misconduct during the capture of an Afghan man in Karlovac, Croatia. Yet within the context of ongoing illegal removals and torture practices at borders, it remains to be seen whether isolated attempts at accountability by the Croatian state and institutional whitewashing carried out by the EC can be overturned by such a probe. Until substantive action is taken, pushbacks will persist with the financial aid of the EU.

BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

VIEW FROM THE BORDER

The first witnesses to the EU sponsored pushback regime were, and remain, the local populations living in border areas. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Una-Sana Canton represents the final departure point for people attempting foot crossings through Croatia. Here the regular sightings of transit groups, and the help given by local people to pushed back groups, is a facet of daily life. For over two years, inhabitants of border villages in the areas around Velika Kladusa and Bihac have seen tens

of thousands of people removed illegally from neighbouring Croatia, a process occurring night and day at the direction of the Croatian Ministry of Interior (MUP). Network member [No Name Kitchen](#) works with people in this area and heard from some of those whose homes face out onto the Croatian border. Most recently in the Trzac area, locals have reported a high volume of incidents where groups approached them for clothes, having been stripped down to their underwear by Croatian police:



PEOPLE STRIPPED BY THE CROATIAN POLICE - NEAR TRZAC, BIH (SOURCE:ANON)

"IT DIDN'T JUST HAPPEN TO ONE GROUP OF IMMIGRANTS THAT THEY TOOK ALL THEIR CLOTHES. MY SISTER HAD THREE GROUPS KNOCKING ON THE DOOR LATE AT NIGHT AND LOOKING FOR CLOTHES AND FOOD"

This is an all too familiar trend, mirroring evidence gathered by BVMN since 2018. That being: violent pushbacks from Croatia stranding people half naked, and often beaten, at the Bosnian border, seeking out help from the first people they can find. A report published in June (see [4.1](#)) also alludes to this practice occurring in nearby Sturlic. A respondent from India stated:

"AND THEN DEPORTING TIME AT ŠTURLIĆ, NEAR A RIVER, THEY TELL US: '[TAKE] OFF YOUR ALL CLOTHES' AND THEN THEY BURNED EVERYTHING"

Alongside the physical assaults, these acts describe the material deterrence being witnessed at the Croatian border. The Croatian police place a physical check on people's movement, particularly as they struggle to recoup essential items such as clothes and shoes prior to making a further attempt at crossing the border. While pressure has been ramped up on the [informal support](#) provided by locals and independent groups, the frontline of material assistance is still often being handled far from the centralised camp structures. Many Bosnian residents still provide food, clothes, shoes and often a

nights rest to pushback groups returned to BiH. In a recent case (see [4.5](#)), locals moved by the sight of a bleeding and beaten group of Pakistani men, came to their aid with water and money, the respondent explaining how "they were so upset at seeing us like this". Such an onus on these villages to deal with the physical impact of migration policy at the EU external border hits at the heart of the hierarchical system of pushbacks. The acts radiate way beyond the incidents themselves, sharpening the divide between respect for human life and contemporary borders.

HUNGARY APPLICANTS FORCED TO APPLY FROM EMBASSIES



A FAMILY WAITING TO ENTER A TRANSIT ZONE IN HUNGARY (SOURCE: [INFOMIGRANTS](#))

UNHCR slammed the Hungarian government in a [recent report](#) on Hungary's decision to require asylum applications to be filed in neighboring countries' embassies. The UNHCR report argues that the new law is in violation of "Hungary's obligations under international refugee and human rights law" as well as EU law. Because the law requires asylum seekers to file their application extraterritorially, it also violates the Geneva Convention which prohibits punishing asylum

seekers for crossing borders without authorisation. Given the recent European Court of Justice decisions, which have overturned both [the substance](#) and [the practice](#) of the Hungarian asylum system, it appears likely that this new law would not stand in court. But that may not be the point: Legal battles are drawn out and expensive - until the law is overturned, Hungary has effectively abolished the right to asylum for any new arrivals.

SERBIA

LAWS CHANGE ON ASYLUM AND REMOVALS

In March, the Serbian NGO Klikaktive, published a report [“On the Situation of Refugees in Serbia”](#). As the report traverses the manifold humanitarian, legal, and bureaucratic challenges faced by refugees, a worrying picture emerges. It is almost impossible to access the Serbian asylum system with fewer than 3% of people-on-the-move in Serbia registered as asylum seekers. On the one hand, this extraordinarily low number appears to result from bureaucratic complications: separate bureaucracies are tasked with running the camps and administering asylum claims. At times it appears that even camp workers do not understand the rules asylum seekers have to follow in order to retain their status. On the other hand, legal hurdles are clearly designed to keep people-on-the-move outside the asylum system: deadlines are short, documents have to be filed in Serbian, and there is a lack of legal aid and redress mechanisms.

For the longest time, the low number of registered asylum seekers among people-on-the-move was no serious issue. Both the Serbian government and people-on-the-move saw Serbia almost exclusively as a transit country. Registering as asylum seekers seemed pointless to many people-on-the-move (and few knew about the possibility), even if that meant having a precarious legal status. Since the border with Hungary has been firmly shut, however, an increasing number

of people-on-the-move have found themselves unable to leave Serbia (just in the official camps, there are at least 6,000 people-on-the-move at the moment). Recently, Serbia, unwilling to host such high numbers of people-on-the-move, is in the process of initiating multiple legal initiatives to alleviate themselves of this perceived burden. A “Law on Foreigners” has been adapted to make deportations easier. Additionally, Serbia appears to be working on readmission agreements with Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The “illegal” status of the people-on-the-move in Serbia could now be exploited by the Serbian government to deport many of them to their country of origin.

But the danger is not restricted to people-on-the-move inside of Serbia. Belgrade is planning to adopt the Dublin and EURODAC directives pre-accession, opening up the opportunity for EU countries across the union to deport people to Serbia. Many of the system’s elements remain murky. It is unclear what the status of negotiations between Serbia and the EU and between Serbia and Afghanistan/Pakistan/Iraq is. The intransparency around Dublin and potential readmission agreements follows [recent revelations](#) that Serbia had a readmission agreement with Austria, which Serbian politicians continued to deny even after it was confirmed by the Austrian government. Without transparency, it will be ever harder to hold Serbia accountable to international standards.

PUSHBACK AND INTERNAL VIOLENCE AT THE SERBIAN-HUNGARIAN BORDER



After the end of the Covid-19 lockdown in Serbia, [numbers in official accommodation](#) have dropped significantly, from approximately 9,000 people at the beginning of May to less than 6,000 at the end of the month.

FENCE SEPARATING ROSZKE, HUNGARY, FROM HORGOS, SERBIA (SOURCE: [REPORTING DEMOCRACY](#))

Favorable weather and the fact that camps were on lockdown during most of the spring, have prompted an increase in people trying to cross the border to Hungary in the last weeks, and a rise in groups sleeping rough throughout Northern Serbia. Reports of violent pushbacks by Hungarian border police increased in the last weeks according to volunteers on the ground who witnessed more transit groups in need of medical attention. Some of these injuries occurred as a result of physical hazards such as border rivers, fences and rough terrain, others

were inflicted by beatings from the Hungarian border police. Inland, there have been increased reports of violence inflicted by local Serbian police, especially in Zapadna Bačka municipality, ranging from the theft of personal belongings, such as mobile phones or money, to physical violence. According to people-on-the-move staying in informal settlements there, some of them cannot afford to buy food anymore because they have had all of their money taken by police. The constant harassment in squats and at the border by respective police forces remains a daily concern for these communities.

TURKEY

VIOLENCE AT THE EVROS BORDER

BVMN published reports covering the pushback of 237 people from Greece to Turkey last month. The trends in crossings shifted during June, with a growing number of people attempting passage across the Aegean sea from the coast around Izmir (TUR). This has been reflected in the evidence gathered of pushbacks from respondents stranded on the Turkish side and their testimonies of the violence while on Greek land and especially territorial waters. Part of the reason for this changing of routes may be connected to the efforts by Athens to shore up existing fortification at the Evros land border, with [more fencing](#)



SECTION OF THE FENCE ALREADY CONSTRUCTED BY KASTANIES, GREECE (SOURCE: [VOA](#))

and the [increased militarisation](#) of the area. Network member [Josoor](#) is observing first hand the fallout of these removals and the protracted struggle of those now recovering in Turkey. People who braved the land border in recent weeks were met with a wall of abhorrent violence on the part of Greek officials. Several respondents reported to volunteers the use of electric discharge weapons and attacks with batons. Meanwhile, one transit group shares how they were thrown into the Evros river with their hands cuffed with zip ties (see [6.6](#)) - a potentially fatal tactic which has been observed in a [previous case](#). While



BRUISING INCURRED FROM BATON STRIKES (SOURCE: [BVMN](#))

some of the people pushed back in this incident were new arrivals to Greece, others were violently removed to Turkey despite their documentation as asylum seekers. One respondent, who suffered lasting bruises to his torso, was ejected even though he held a valid white card and was employed in a company in Athens. The situation for people returned to Turkey is also becoming more precarious. Rising police harassment and the reinstatement of [scheduled flights](#) to Kabul has caused Afghans in Turkey to become increasingly fearful of possible deportation. Meanwhile the wider refugee and migrant population also face a limited set of options. The possibility to settle in Turkey is nonexistent for many of them, the chances of safely reaching Europe is becoming slimmer and returning to their countries of origin is often not an option.

GREECE

MORE LIFE THREATENING PUSHBACKS AT SEA



PHOTO-STITCH OF HCG ATTACKING A DINGY
(SOURCE: [BELLINGCAT](#))

In the Aegean sea, Greece has further developed its strategies of defence and illegal returns. Very few boats manage to cross from the Turkish coast to the islands anymore according to monitoring group [Mare Liberum](#). The Hellenic Coast Guard (HCG) and Frontex have created a tight militarised net to keep vessels from reaching Greek territorial waters. Where they do, BVMN and outlets such as [Spiegel](#) have received further reports in June of boats being attacked by masked authorities who shoot guns into the air, use knives to puncture the hull (see [6.3](#)), destroying the outboard motor and forcing them back into Turkish waters (see [6.2](#)). An open source investigation by [Bellingcat](#) has gone some way in unmasking these perpetrators as members of the HCG, locating their vessels in successive attacks. Moreover, in at least 13 cases, arrivals to Greek waters (and even some who had reached land)

were [pushed back](#) on life rafts and left to drift helplessly in the sea, a new and concerning phenomena. Greece has not only made this highly criminal practice a regular way of managing its maritime border, but has also tried to integrate scope for this within new EU policy. Giorgos Koumoutsakos, the Greek Alternate Minister for Migration and Asylum, wrote a [letter](#) to the EU co-signed by Bulgaria and Cyprus calling for the addition of an emergency clause in the European Pact on Immigration and Asylum. The aim of the clause would be to give states on the EU external border the freedom to deal with exceptional migration flows with preventative and response tactics. If the current practices, which facilitate drownings at sea, are to be vindicated by the new migration pact, the Aegean and other parts of the EU external border will become host to a total void in fundamental rights.

GLOSSARY OF REPORTS, JUNE 2020

The Network covered the pushback of 351 people across 20 separate incidents in June. 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, Morocco, Algeria, Iran, Kurdistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The cases involved:

- I Five pushbacks to Serbia (Four from Romania and one from Hungary)
- II Six pushbacks to Bosnia-Herzegovina (two chain pushbacks from Italy and four direct pushbacks from Croatia)
- III Three pushbacks to Greece from Albania
- IIII Six pushbacks from Greece to Turkey

LINK	INCIDENT	RECORDED	GROUP	DEMOGRAPHIC
ROMANIA TO SERBIA				
1.1	12th June	16th June	8	Afghanistan, Kurdistan
1.2	15th June	17th June	6	Afghanistan
1.3	17th June	24th June	3	Afghanistan
1.4	25th June	28th June	6	Afghanistan
HUNGARY TO SERBIA				
2.1	20th December 2019	23rd June	3	Afghanistan
ITALY TO BOSNIA-HERZ.				
3.1	25th May	2nd June	3	Pakistan
3.2	11th June	2nd June	12	India, Morocco, Afghanistan
CROATIA TO BOSNIA-HERZ.				
4.1	20th May	25th June	6	India
4.2	26th May	1st June	14	Pakistan
4.3	27th May	5th June	5	Pakistan
4.4	27th May	5th June	15	Pakistan
ALBANIA TO GREECE				
5.1	30th May	31st May	9	Egypt, Morocco, Algeria
5.2	31st May	31st May	9	Egypt, Morocco, Algeria
5.3	4th June	8th June	15	Syria, Morocco, Algeria
GREECE TO TURKEY				
6.1	25th May	31st May	9	Syria, Kashmir
6.2	3rd June	7th June	32	DR Congo, Syria, Afghanistan
6.3	5th June	7th June	21	Iran, Afghanistan
6.4	6th June	7th June	35	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Morocco, Algeria
6.5	20th June	23rd June	60	Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Syria, Iraq
6.6	21st June	28th June	80	Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, DR Congo

FIND ALL REPORTS ON THE
DATABASE [HERE](#).

NETWORK STRUCTURE AND CONTACT

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

BVMN is a volunteer led 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 testimony archive, previous monthly reports and regular news pieces. To follow us on social media, find us on Twitter handle [@Border_Violence](#) and on [Facebook](#). For further information regarding this report or more on how to become involved please email us at mail@borderviolence.eu. For press and media requests please contact: press@borderviolence.eu

JUNE — R — E — P — O — R — T — 2020

