

SEPTEMBER 2022
BALKAN REGION

ILLEGAL PUSHBACKS
AND BORDER
VIOLENCE REPORTS



Border Violence
Monitoring Network

BLIND
SPOTS



CMS
CENTAR ZA HUMANITARNE SITUACIJE



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SYRIOUS



[RE:]ports
SARAJEVO



TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 3 **Executive Summary**
- 4 **General**
 - 4 Reporting network
 - 4 Methodology
 - 4 Terminology
 - 4 Abbreviations
- 5 **Trends in Border Violence**
 - 5 Pushbacks from Croatia to Bosnia and Herzegovina
 - 6 Increased violence in Northern Serbia
- 7 **Update on the Situation**
 - 7 **Slovenia**
 - 7 Slovene NGOs as Possible Targets of State Surveillance?
 - 8 **Bosnia and Herzegovina**
 - 8 Criminalisation of solidarity in Velika Kladusa
 - 8 Transit through Bihac
 - 9 **Serbia**
 - 9 Evictions in Sombor
 - 9 **Greece**
 - 9 Shipwrecks
 - 10 Greece claims migrant populations halved
 - 10 Yazidis barred from accessing camp
 - 10 18 years prison sentence to Iranian father
 - 11 Greece announces €3.7m EU funded project for border security drones
 - 12 Greens MEPs visit Evros
 - 12 **Italy**
 - 12 Former Brazilian volunteer pushed back to Albania
 - 13 Updates from Trieste
- 14 **Glossary of Reports, September 2022**
- 15 **Network Structure and Contact**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September, the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN)¹ shared 25 testimonies of pushbacks impacting 557 people-on-the-move (POM) across the Balkans and Greece. This report brings together first-hand testimonies from a range of countries in the region to look at the way European Union states and other actors are affecting systemic violence towards people crossing borders.

This month, the BVMN observed an increase in the number of pushbacks –and their level of violence– perpetrated by Hungarian authorities at the Serbian–Hungarian border, which currently constitutes the busiest route in the region. Pushbacks also continue to happen on a daily basis on the border between Croatia and Bosnia–Herzegovina, though the movement seems to be shifting towards the Northern Bosnian border, along the Sava river.

The rest of this report focuses on updates from the field, starting with the disclosure of a concerning article in the new Action Plan on Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism 2022–2024 that was passed in January 2022 by the previous government in Slovenia. The article, which has been removed by the current government, proposed legalizing the surveillance of NGOs under the premise of suspicion of “criminal activity.” The issue of criminalisation of solidarity is also exemplified in this report by the recent incident of harassment of the No Name Kitchen team in Velika Kladusa, perpetrated by local authorities.

In Serbia, police conducted two large–scale evictions in multiple squats in the town of Sombor. They affected around 250 people in total, including men, women, and children, all of whom were taken to different camps several hours away from the town.

Several updates are also shared regarding developments in Greece, where multiple shipwrecks have left at least 10 people dead and 7 missing in the span of two weeks. The next sections also cover the 18–year prison sentence recently given to an Iranian father for transporting undocumented people, a new €3.7m EU–funded project aimed at installing border security drones that will identify “targets of interest,” and the visit of the Green MEPs to the Evros Region, which was reportedly met with obstacles and lack of transparency from the authorities.

The last two pieces include updates from Italy. In the first, a former No Name Kitchen volunteer from Brazil was denied entry to Italy and forced to return to Albania. The second update concerns the increasing numbers of people on the move arriving in Trieste and the lack of services and pathways available for them, as well as new developments in the management of the Deportation Center of Gradisca d’Isonzo.



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 partners 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 exceed 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. Pushback 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. Pushbacks have become an important, if unofficial, part of the migration regime of EU countries and elsewhere.

ABBREVIATIONS

BiH – Bosnia and Herzegovina
HRV – Croatia
SRB – Serbia
SLO – Slovenia
ROM – Romania
HUN – Hungary
AUT – Austria
MNK – North Macedonia
GRC – Greece
BGR – Bulgaria
TUR – Turkey
EU – European Union

TRENDS IN BORDER VIOLENCE

PUSHBACKS FROM CROATIA TO BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

The No Name Kitchen team in Velika Kladusa and Bihac reported that pushbacks continue to happen on a daily basis. Our evidence suggests physical violence during pushbacks has decreased, but POMs are often insulted and humiliated verbally, locked into closed vans, and driven around for several hours before being left in the middle of the forest or mountains. This month, there were several cases of pushbacks of families with children as well as unaccompanied minors, who were exposed to [theft](#), as well as physical violence. Many of these pushbacks allegedly happened with the help of Croatian residents living close to the border, as POMs reported seeing them call the police.

Moreover, the team in Bihac also noticed an increased number of POMs traveling to Banja Luka, a city in the north of BiH, in order to enter Croatia from a point further North-East by

crossing the Sava river close to Gradiška. According to unofficial information shared between POMs, the likelihood of pushbacks in this area is lower, and Croatian authorities are more likely to issue the “7-day paper” to migrants who took this way. [This is an expulsion paper that gives POMs 7 days to leave the country](#), and seems to have replaced immediate pushbacks in some cases.

Those rumors could not be confirmed, but this new trend has been increasingly noticeable in August and September. Nevertheless, pushbacks are still happening along this route, as documented in [this report](#).



Source: No Name Kitchen
– the destruction of
personal belongings
during a pushback

INCREASE VIOLENCE IN NORTHERN SERBIA

The Western Balkans are currently the busiest route for individuals entering the European Union. The number of POM passing through the region between January and June was almost three times as high as the same period last year according to [official data](#). The route from northern Serbia into Hungary now sees the most crossings within this region, eclipsing routes through Romania or Bosnia. During this period, the number of pushbacks carried out by Hungarian border forces has also increased dramatically according to official data from both the [Hungarian police](#) and the [Council of Europe](#).

Beyond this concurrent rise in number of attempted crossings and pushbacks, there has been a marked trend of increasingly severe injuries affecting POM who have been pushed back. Medical partners on the field have seen more than 200 cases of these injuries, including fractures, dislocations, hematomas, and lacerations that are consistent with reports of physical assaults using boots, batons, belts, rubber bullets, and electric shocks, as well as the impact of razor wire or falls from the four meter high fence infrastructure along the Serbian–Hungarian border.

In addition to physical injuries, partner organizations present in northern Serbia have recorded numerous reports of abusive and degrading treatment perpetrated by Hungarian border forces. Recurrent reports account extensive use of pepper spray and tear gas in close proximity to individuals and in closed, overcrowded spaces; overnight placement within metal containers; death threats; insults; racially charged forms of

humiliation including forced shaving of heads; deprivation of food, water, and clothes; theft and destruction of personal belongings; and interruption or denial of medical assistance for the wounded.

UPDATES ON THE SITUATION

SLOVENIA

SLOVENE NGOS AS POSSIBLE TARGETS OF STATE SURVEILLANCE?

In January 2022, the now-former government of the Republic of Slovenia led by the Prime Minister Janez Janša accepted a new Action Plan on Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism 2022–2024. The contents of the plan are classified. However, as it was [reported by the Slovene weekly magazine Mladina](#), it included the establishment of mechanisms and measures of uncovering and preventing criminal groups that organize illegal crossings of state borders and transport of illegal migrants and people smuggling. The plan specifically focused on entities that outwardly present themselves as cross-border or international non-governmental organizations or their branches.

Although the Action Plan was approved in January 2022, it remains undisclosed to the public due to the concerns of the Ministry of the Interior that publishing it “might cause disturbances in the operational work of state authorities.” In the Action Plan, the inclusion of surveillance of supposedly “criminal NGOs” was made public only after the current government of Prime Minister Robert Golob removed this problematic article. The decision was made at the suggestion of the current Minister of the Interior Tatjana Bobnar. As reported by Mladina, based on the wording of the Action Plan, which puts a heavy focus on “cross-border” and “international” organizations, it could be speculated that, together with police and “other stakeholders,” SOVA (Slovene Intelligence and Security Agency) would be used in the surveillance of NGOs suspected of

“criminal activity.” Although the Action Plan was in use for 8 months, the Ministry of the Interior has stated that it has not conducted any surveillance of NGOs and has not instructed other state agencies to do so.

The inclusion of non-governmental organizations in the Action Plan under the pretext of being criminal societies was a dangerous step towards the use of police surveillance and control over the activities of organizations that publicly oppose state violence against migrants. Criminalizing the activities of organizations that act against state violations of fundamental rights is a practice which has been present in the region for several years. In Hungary, civil society has been notoriously under pressure. Organizations in Croatia have been experiencing various forms of surveillance, interrogation, intimidation, and legal proceedings [against activists](#). In 2018, PIC (the Slovene Legal-Informational Centre for NGOs) faced criminal charges of assisting migrants in “illegally” crossing state borders. The Slovene State Prosecutor’s Office did not follow up on the case as the charges were not substantiated.

On September 22nd 2022, the Bosnian Service of Foreign Affairs (SFA) entered the garden of No Name Kitchen’s (NNK) warehouse in Velika Kladuša, demanding the passports and white cards of the volunteers present there and writing down their details. This building is used to store clothes, emergency food and other supplies for distribution to POM in the region. The officers wanted to go inside the building without a warrant or further explanation, and waited there until the caretaker of the house finally arrived, and granted them permission to enter the property. During this time, the volunteers were not allowed to join the search.

After the SFA visit, the warehouse caretaker decided to expel the team from the property, demanding they leave the warehouse within 24 hours, out of fear of the police. That same afternoon, local police officers arrived at the warehouse, blocked the driveway, and wrote down names and residential addresses of the members of the volunteer team. They also entered the building. However, this time they asked a volunteer to guide them around the warehouse, and forced him to accompany them during the visit, even trying to grab his arm along the way. The officers took pictures and videos of the storage space.

UPDATE FROM BIHAC/SARAJEVO

During the month of September, teams on the field noticed an increasing trend of POM transiting through Bihac more quickly. In the past, POM stayed in squats around the town for several days; recently, though, many arrive from Sarajevo or other Bosnian cities and continue the same or the next day to the border of Croatia. A considerable number of people have been sleeping at the bus station, or in

About two hours after the first visit, SFA officers also showed up at the guest house, where volunteers live, entered the building and questioned the landlord.

On the next morning, September 23rd, the team received a message from a friendly neighbor to the warehouse, informing them that Cantonal Inspectors from Bihać had arrived and insisted on speaking with one of the volunteers, threatening to call the police otherwise. They asked where the inventory was coming from, who was responsible for it and if the volunteers were selling the items. The team decided to not meet the police at the warehouse this time and the officers left the place.

These incidents had an impact not only on NNK volunteers, but on other organizations in Velika Kladuša, as well. Volunteers were shocked and concerned about their own safety. Fear of an expulsion letter from the country or a general ban of the activities of the organization held work back. Thus, for two weeks, NNK did not conduct distribution or maintain personal contact with POM – this constitutes a massive cut in active solidarity, which is increasingly necessary in the face of falling temperatures and heavy rains.

a house under construction behind it – while work at the construction site was ongoing. Despite police presence at the bus station, most of the POMs reported they were not prevented from cooking or sleeping there, and on some occasions were able to charge their phones directly inside the bus station.

SERBIA

EVICIONS IN SOMBOR

This month, two major evictions occurred in Sombor, a town in Northern Serbia close to the Hungarian border. On the 13th of September, POM staying at an abandoned factory in the town were given notice of eviction by the Serbian Police and the Commissioner for Refugees and Migration. Approximately 130 people were forcibly bussed to Principovac, an isolated Serbian government-run camp near the Croatian border three hours away from Sombor. According to different testimonies, the police took personal valuables (e.g., phones) and also destroyed the generator used to provide electricity inside the squat. While individuals quickly returned to

the squat in the following days, the police remained vigilant around Sombor.

In the following week on the 21st of September, another violent eviction took place at a squat a few kilometers outside of Sombor. There were approximately 120 people taken on buses, including young men, families, women, and children. The police forcibly herded those who did not have proper documentation to a camp near the Croatian border. This type of eviction has been observed with increasing frequency across Northern Serbia.

GREECE

SHIPWRECKS

September was a notoriously deadly month in the Aegean Sea. Between the 16th to the 28th September, 10 deaths have been confirmed and at least 7 people are reportedly missing, although the number could be much higher.

Four shipwrecks took place during this time in the Aegean. On the 22nd of September, two commercial boats [rescued 85 people from a wooden sailing boat](#). The rescued people disembarked in Kalamata. On the same day, a [shipwreck took place on the shore of Leros](#). 49 of the 55 people on board were rescued by the local coastguard. The next day, on the 23rd of September another shipwreck occurred South of Lesbos and North of

Chios. The Turkish CG [reportedly rescued](#) 46 people and found 2 dead bodies, with one person still missing. On the 24th of September, one more shipwreck took place north of Lesbos. Reportedly, a local fisherman spotted the shipwreck and contacted the Turkish CG who later [rescued 15 people](#) and found 6 dead bodies.

Two bodies of migrants washed up on the shores of the Greek islands, the first in [Limnos](#) and the second on [Lesbos](#). It is unclear whether any of the bodies could be tied to the four shipwrecks that occurred during this period.

GREECE CLAIMS MIGRANT POPULATIONS HALVED

Greek authorities have released figures showing that the number of refugee and migrant populations in Greece have more than halved since last year – despite UNHCR data showing an increase in arrivals to Greece in the same period. Government statistics present a 56% decrease in the total migrant population across both the islands and mainland compared to 2021, with 16% of people located on the islands and 84% on the mainland. Migration Minister Mitarachi has also recently claimed that an additional 154,000 people have been prevented from entering Greece since January. However, UNHCR reported in August that there have already been 10,651

arrivals to Greece in 2022, higher than last year's official total of 9,157. It is likely that the discrepancy between the reported decrease in migrant population and the increase in arrivals can be explained by the severe lack of access to asylum registration procedures, as well as the increasingly systematic practice of illegal pushbacks which BVMN and member organizations continue to monitor.

Mitarachi's statement that the Ministry of Migration is making 'every effort to effectively manage migration' obscures the ineffective, informal and illegal means of 'management' being implemented by the Greek state.

YAZIDIS BARRED FROM ACCESSING CAMP

A group of around 120 Yazidi people were forced to sleep on the street for two weeks after being barred from joining hundreds of fellow Yazidis living in Serres camp in northern Greece. Although the violence and persecution committed against the Yazidi community has been widely recognised, their right to adequate accommodation is still being denied

by the Greek state.

This development comes as the Greek government seeks to continue closing camps across the country, with only 34 open camps compared to 121 two years ago.

18 YEAR PRISON SENTENCE FOR IRANIAN FATHER

On the 26th of September, 58 year old H. Sabetara stood trial in Thessaloniki for driving a car transporting undocumented people. The Iranian national, who has already spent a year in a pre-trial detention centre, was [sentenced](#) to 18 years in prison for the crime of smuggling. Sabetara was trying to make his way to Berlin via Greece in order to reunite with his family when he was arrested and detained while driving a car inland from northern Greece which carried

undocumented POM. Sabetara's lawyer immediately appealed against the sentence, but as the process will not begin before Christmas 2023, Sabetara is to remain imprisoned in Greece until next December. Borderline Europe and other NGOs have outwardly condemned the common and extremely excessive criminalisation of migrants.

GREECE ANNOUNCES €3.7M EU FUNDED PROJECT FOR BORDER SECURITY DRONES

At the [opening](#) of the Thessaloniki International Trade Fair this September, the Greek migration minister Notis Mitarakis announced the €3.7m EU-funded project aimed at installing drones along the Greek border to “automatically identify defined targets of interest,” which will predominantly consist of asylum seekers. Mitarakis has been known to dismiss evidence of ongoing illegal pushbacks committed against asylum-seekers along the Greek border as “fake news.” The Information Technologies Institute at the Center for Research and Technology Hellas (CERTH) will be working on this program, which they are calling REACTION or “Real-Time Artificial Intelligence for Border Surveillance.” It is due to commence in November 2022 and will be funded by the European Commission’s Migration and Home Affairs Fund. It will run for 36 months.

This is not the first time CERTH has received funding for such projects. In 2017, they worked with the European Union’s research and innovation program Horizon 2020 on an €8m scheme labelled “ROBORDER”, which aimed to develop and pilot a “fully autonomous border surveillance system” where robots would be able to identify humans and independently decide if they represent a threat. At the Thessaloniki Trade Fair, Mitarakis explained that the drone will be trained to scan an area and independently change route to track the targets it deems “more interesting,” like a person crossing the border. . The Greek police will then be alerted to investigate the target. Although it is claimed REACTION will

assist in search and rescue missions, it is unlikely that will be the case. Phevos Simeonidis has been tracking local and EU-funded border surveillance projects in Greece since 2017 and said that so far, “this ever-increasing apparatus always seems to fall short of assisting search and rescue, and also evidently turns a blind eye when footage or data could help individuals substantiate claims that they have been victims of human rights violations.” This statement is underscored by a report published earlier this month from Deutsche Welle, which stated that Greek authorities left a group of 38 asylum-seekers stranded on an islet on the Evros river, which flows between the Greek-Turkish border, despite nearby infrastructure which should have enabled authorities to locate the group immediately.

GREENS MEPS VISIT EVROS

On Monday the 19th of September, a delegation of MEPs from the Greens/European Free Alliance group visited the region of Evros to investigate illegal migrant pushbacks. According to an article by [Le Monde](#), they were met with 'deliberate silences', an 'oppressive atmosphere' and were prohibited from accessing certain areas or people. The German MEP Erik Marquardt reported that Greece is "trying to build a different reality" and to erect a "wall of lies" to deny the systematic pushback of migrants at its borders. A request by the MEPs for an interview with Greek border guards was denied, and the delegation was not permitted to visit the Evros river.

Moreover, in an exchange between MEPs and the operational officer in Greece for Frontex, Indra Medina Kano, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency seemed minimally proactive in providing aid to people in need of help along the border. "If there are very credible allegations of refoulements in certain areas, why

don't you demand to go and see?" asked Dutch MEP Tineke Strik. "How much does this Frontex mission in Greece cost? If the agency is present there, we must see an improvement."

On this, Medina Kano stated, "We act under the command of the Greek authorities, and we are deployed where they need us." "If the Greeks insist that it is on Turkish territory, we believe them," she admitted.

In a European report revealed by the media in July, Frontex was accused of knowing about the forced returns. The agency, however, insists that all human rights violations at the borders are reported to human rights officials. So far this year, only one case has been reported in Evros, irrespective of the heavy proof that illegal deportations are a common occurrence. The Green MEPs called for a freeze on funds for countries like Greece that carry out illegal expulsions of POM.

ITALY

BRAZILIAN NO NAME KITCHEN VOLUNTEER PUSHED BACK FROM ITALY TO ALBANIA

On September 26th, 2022, a former NNK volunteer from Brazil wanted to enter Bari, Italy, by ferry from Albania. Upon arrival, border police claimed his visa was no longer valid, even though he didn't need a visa to enter the country. Immediately after this, the volunteer tried to call the immigration service. He received no answer, so he decided to call the local police. They confirmed that he had the right to enter the country but argued that they could not do anything at that point

since the decision had already been made.

After this conversation, the volunteer got locked in a room of a boat with some workers for 34 hours with only two sandwiches and a water bottle. It was not until they arrived in Vlorë, Albania, that the officers let him out of the boat and gave him his passport back – at 8AM, on September 28th. On October 9th, he was still in Albania, trying to regain his energy after the incident.

I TRIESTE

In September 2022, collectives operating in piazza Libertá (Trieste) witnessed the arrival of 2021 individuals, 1634 of which were males, 40 women, 190 unaccompanied minors, 24 families with children and 3 families without children. Afghanistan is the single most common country of origin (774 individuals), followed by Pakistan (537). These record-breaking numbers are underlied by a stark year-over-year increase. During September 2021, 426 individuals reached piazza Libertá.

While there is reason to suspect that more arrivals might indicate higher rates of success in crossing borders and therefore a slightly less traumatic experience along the terminus of the Balkan Route, it is increasingly evident how the city of Trieste is chronically ill-equipped to provide decent living standards to POM. This is the case both for people who arrive in Trieste with the goal of finding a permanent home, as well as for those who are just stopping by for a few days. At least 250 people – probably more – have to sleep on the streets every night. While this situation has been ongoing since last July, the only actions taken by policymakers so far have been forced periodical transfers of groups of 40 to 100 people to other Italian regions.

Moreover, policymakers continue to provide toned-down numbers about people reaching the city and sleeping on the streets, pointing their fingers [at increased arrivals from the Mediterranean Route](#). It must be highlighted that, through interceptions carried out by police forces near border areas,

policymakers have direct access to statistics that should shield them from blatant ignorance. At this point, however, it is a perfectly reasonable conclusion to say that policymakers are willingly hiding the truth to either project control – and they are not, as freedom of movement is not a liberty kindly conceded by sovereign states but a reality that needs to be accepted – or safeguard their careers in a shifting political environment.

On the other hand, many things seem to be in motion around the nearby CPR (Deportation Center) of Gradisca d'Isonzo. Gorizia's Prefecture decided to open [a tender](#) to have a single private company manage and carry out deportations of POM. Furthermore, it still hasn't published the results of the tender that was expected to end on 31 March 2022 regarding the management of the local Cpr. In March 2022, Former Interior Minister Lamorgese [signed a decree](#) that shielded documents referring to "border and immigration management" from the Freedom of Information Act, first introduced in 2016. Access to information about the aforementioned tender, therefore, might be limited.

GLOSSARY OF REPORTS

Link	Incident	Recorded	Demographic	Group Size
Hungria to Serbia				
1.1	28th August	29th August	Morocco, Syria, Tunisia	7
1.2	3rd Sept 2022	10th Sept 2022	Syria, Iraq, Lybia, Kurdistan	29
1.3	4th Sept 2022	6th Sept 2022	Syria	4
1.4	5th September	8th September	Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Syria	30
1.5	5th September	8th September	Morocco	4
1.6	10th September	12th September	Tunisia	80
1.7	12th September	12th September	Morocco, Tunisia, Syria	150
1.8	13th September	24th September	Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia	25
1.9	13th September	16th September	Afghanistan	11
1.10	15th September	18th September	Iraq, Syria, Turkey	10
1.11	13th September	15th September	Morocco	20
1.12	18th September	19th September	Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Senegal	45
1.13	19th September	22nd September	Afghanista, India, Pakistan, Syria	20
1.14	20th September	22nd September	Syria	18
1.15	27th September	29th September	Morocco	4
Croatia to Bosnia-Herzegovina				
2.1	3rd September	8th September	Cuba	6
2.2	4th September	8th September	Cuba	6
2.3	14th September	17th September	Pakistan	13
2.4	5th September	5th September	Afghanistan	4
2.5	16th September		Afghanistan	5
2.6	20th September	21st September	Burundi	25
2.7	29th September	5th October	Iran, Afghanistan	14
Bulgaria to Turkey				
3.1	15th September	22nd September	Morocco	20
Greece to Turkey				
4.1	7th September	27th September	Syria	6
Greece to Italy				
5.1	24th September	28th September	Afghanistan	1

NETWORK STRUCTURE AND CONTACT

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

BVMN is a volunteer led endeavor, acting as an alliance of organisations in the Western Balkans and Greece. BVMN is based on the efforts of participant organizations working in the field of documentation, media, advocacy and litigation. We finance the work through charitable grants and foundations, and are not in receipt of funds from any political organisation. The expenditures cover transport subsidies for volunteers in the field and four paid positions.

To follow more from the Border Violence Monitoring Network, check out our [website](#) for the entire testimony archive, previous monthly reports and regular news pieces. To follow us on social media, find us on Twitter handle [@Border Violence](#) and on [Facebook](#). For further information regarding this report or more on how to become involved please email us at mail@borderviolence.eu. For press and media requests please contact: press@borderviolence.eu



**Border Violence
Monitoring Network**