Border Violence Monitoring Network

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ILLEGAL PUSH-BACKS AND BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS

BALKAN REGION

SEPTEMBER 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September, the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) documented 40 cases of pushbacks along the Balkan Route and in Greece. This publication analyses how these illegal and violent acts function, and how they impact people-on-the-move. In a month where the European Union released its controversial Pact on Migration and Asylum, the stories of 1548 people recorded by BVMN show how the existing border system is already underpinned by abuse.

Profiled this month is a unique case showing a chain removal from Austria to Bosnia-Herzegovina. This new pushback route is presented alongside analysis of trends in pushbacks from Croatia, improvised weapons used by the Romanian police, and Italian military deployment at the border. Upheaval in Bosnia-Herzegovina's Una-Sana Canton is also examined, alongside state-led disruption to transit communities in Northern Serbia.

In Greece, reporters documented 16 pushbacks to Turkey, impacting over one thousand people. This report dissects the way pushbacks have created an impasse on the Aegean Sea and how Greek authorities outsource pushback processes on the Evros river. Seen within the context of the devastating fire in Moria, and internal violence in cities like Patras, these pushbacks are situated in a wider climate of intensified bordering practices in Greece.

This publication also looks at trends in pushbacks from North Macedonia to Greece, and provides a full glossary of BVMN's pushback reports from across the region. As summer draws to a close, people-on-the-move remain subject to systemic violence at borders and interiors in the Balkans and Greece.

Border Violence Monitoring Network

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R E P O R T
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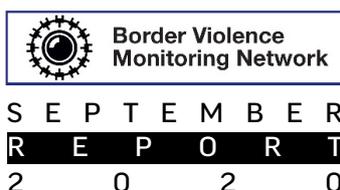
REPORTING NETWORK

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 [data-base](), 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
AUT - Austria

PUSHBACKS FROM TOVARNIK

13 SEPTEMBER PUSHBACK TO ŠID

1) On September 13th, the female respondent was taken off a train in Tovarnik by Croatian authorities and locked in a police van in front of the train station.

She repeated expressed several times an intention to claim asylum and that she had a heart condition which required her medication. She was told to "shut up".

2) The van drove towards the Serbia border, during which time the respondent fell in and out of conscious due to her heart condition. The other refugees in the prisoner-transport van, including two men from Kosovo, knocked on the front of the van for help.

The officers stopped the van and took her outside. and violently gave her the medicine, accusing her of pretending: "They grabbed me by the arms and legs, like garbage,". Only after she experienced more issues, the officers drove the van back to Vinkovci.

7) The respondent then made her way back to Šid with the men she was pushed back with

3) The van arrived to to the police station in Vinkovci. A woman checked her blood-pressure, which was very low (18/10)

4) The respondent was brought in an ambulance to the hospital in Vinkovci. Inside the hospital she was given an infusion and held for two hours before being brought back to the police station

5) After 2 hours an officer in a light blue uniform takes her back to the police station in a van. There, she was taken to the second floor and met by a woman in civilian clothes. The Croatian woman only spoke Croatian with the respondent and asked her for her personal data.

6) The officers loaded her and other refugees into another van, driven by two police officers in dark blue uniforms and took them to the railways close to Tovarnik. There she was struck by the officers with closed fists on her torso and she started crying

VINKOVCI

TOVARNIK

ŠID

CROATIA

SERBIA

Google Earth
Image Landsat / Copernicus

LOCATION OF THE PUSHBACK SITE ON THE HR/SRB BORDER (SOURCE:NNK/BVMN)

In September, BVMN published three cases of direct pushbacks from Croatia to Serbia impacting 27 people from a variety of countries. Tying these cases together was a shared pushback site on the Croatian border in Tovarnik. The town, which has a rail and road crossing with Serbia, is one of the most established locations in this area, dating back to an incident in 2017 when a 6 year old Afghan girl was killed by a train during a pushback.

BVMN have recorded a high density of cases from this site, and tracked the way groups caught across the breadth of the Croatian, Slovanian and even Italian interiors are ejected illegally in this semi-rural location. In September, two groups caught in Vinkovci and one in Senkovec were violently pushed back near the rail tracks in Tovarnik. Alongside the uniform use of this location, the physical mistreatment of the groups reveals certain institutionalised patterns. All

three cases involved the kicking or hitting of transit groups by Croatian police, and in two cases the groups were forced to undress and had their property confiscated or destroyed at the border (see 3.1 & 3.2).

Throughout the cases, both men, women and children were attacked. One case in particular saw the brutal assault of an Iranian woman who was in poor health because of an existing heart condition and diabetes (see 3.3). Having been loaded into a police van in Vinkovci she passed out in the rear detention area and was only pulled out by police when alerted by the other detainees. Outside the van, rather than receiving medical help, she was kicked repeatedly on the floor.

"THEY GRABBED ME BY THE ARMS AND LEGS, LIKE GARBAGE".

Despite attempts to continue the pushback, the officers had to return to the hospital in Vinkovci because of her urgent medical state. In the hospital, staff ignored the woman's verbal asylum request, and she was removed swiftly after treatment by the police who took her to Tovarnik along with nine other people. At the border she was punched in the torso with closed fists by a Croatian officer who believed she was 'acting'

sick intentionally. Violence against women is less well documented in BVMN's database, often because the demographic reached by field reporters are from the male transit population. However, this extreme account offers insight into the targeting of females on the route and how pushbacks intersect with gender based violence.

WHIPS AND IMPROVISED WEAPONS

Police across the Balkan Route and Greece make use of a variety of formal weaponry - such as assault rifles, pistols, batons and tasers - when carrying out violent cross-border pushbacks. But these police-issue items are also supplemented with a range of informal tools, brought into pushbacks by officers to cause injury, distress, and even to torture transit groups. In September, BVMN documented the use of an improvised whip by the Romanian police, used to lash a group of Syrian people prior to their pushback to Serbia (see 1.1). The respondent described how the weapon was made from a length of cable tied to the end of a wooden baton.

> **"[THE OFFICER] KEPT BEATING WITHOUT LOOKING WHERE THE CABLE WAS FALLING, SO MOST PEOPLE GOT HIT ON THEIR HEAD".**

Already in June, BVMN received an initial report highlighting the use of cables to whip people-on-the-move in Romania. Media outlet Euronews also published a corroborating article on whippings, alongside a case where the Romanian police took a crutch from an amputee and used it to beat him. However, when asked for a response to these allegations, the Romanian authorities maintained that their officers conducted border patrols "in accordance with national and international legislation".

Improvised weapons are not isolated to this border area. In Croatia, multiple reports document officers fashioning large clubs out of tree branches to beat people, even using them in a pushback to prod the genitals of families they had stripped naked. As in Romania, standard weapons like batons are being altered or supplemented in order to carry out crude assaults at borders, acts proved in a 2019 BVMN report on Croatia to be tantamount to torture.

The dehumanising tools used, such tree branches and whips, highlight not only the abusive nature of pushbacks, but also the way people-of-colour are treat-

ed under EU border policy. The inclusion of such weapons points at the intent of law enforcement to carry out demonstrative acts of violence which exceed regular policing practices. The racialised aspect to pushback operations is a topic often referred to in interviews taken by field reporters. One respondent attacked by the Croatian police back in 2018 described his experience as a person-of-colour:

> **"I DIDN'T KNOW WHERE THE HITS WERE COMING FROM, WE COULD JUST FEEL THEM, EVERYWHERE, ON OUR BACK, LEGS, HEAD, FACE. THIS IS RACISM."**

Recent evidence shows that mundane items like tree branches and cables continue to augment existing police resources, maximising the harm being carried out against the transit community. Whether formal or informal, the use of weapons against people-on-the-move is a cruel and racialised trend being observed across multiple borders.

INJURIES DOCUMENTED ON THE ROMANIAN BORDER (SOURCE:EURONEWS)

Austria has played a pivotal role in EU policy towards the Balkan Route. Internally, the state approach relies on a hostile environment which has narrowed opportunities for asylum seekers and a developed deportation regime. The Austrian police are not regularly implicated in the execution of pushbacks recorded by BVMN, mainly because Croatia and Slovenia act as buffer zones, which has devolved the responsibility of pushbacks to states closer to the external border. But recently, No Name Kitchen volunteers in Velika Kladusa recorded the testimony of a man who described how he and four other people-on-the-move, all from Syria and Morocco, were apprehended by Austrian authorities and chain pushed back to BiH (see 4.1).

The group was apprehended in the Austrian village of Laafeld (across the border from the Slovenian city of Murska Sobota). After being detained by Austrian police officers, the group was driven to the Slovenian border where they were transferred to the Slovenian authorities. In Slovenia, the group was again detained and taken the next day to Croatia. Finally, the group was transported by Croatian authorities near Glinica, close to the Bosnian border, and forced to walk back into BiH. Local media in BiH also spoke to a person outside of camp Lipa who shared they had been removed from as far as Austria, suggesting the practice goes beyond one isolated case.

Back in 2019, BVMN recorded the first case of a chain pushback initiated by Austrian authorities - a group that was removed via Hungary to Serbia. The respondents travelled as far as the Austrian-German border, Passau BCP, before being captured and taken to a facility near Vienna. The primary difference in this case was that the people involved remained detained in the territory for several days, rather than being removed to the neighbouring country within 24 hours. However, the group were eventually forced to sign removal documents, Austrian officials even applying a taser in the process: "They used an electric taser in his fore-arm to make him sign"

As with recent cases recorded from Italy, Austria looks to have become an additional link in the trend of "chain" pushbacks. This phenomenon is based on the shell of legal agreements, such as joint patrols and readmissions, used to carry out illegal expulsions which result in the transportation of groups across vast stretches of land, covering hundreds of kilometres, and passing through multiple countries.
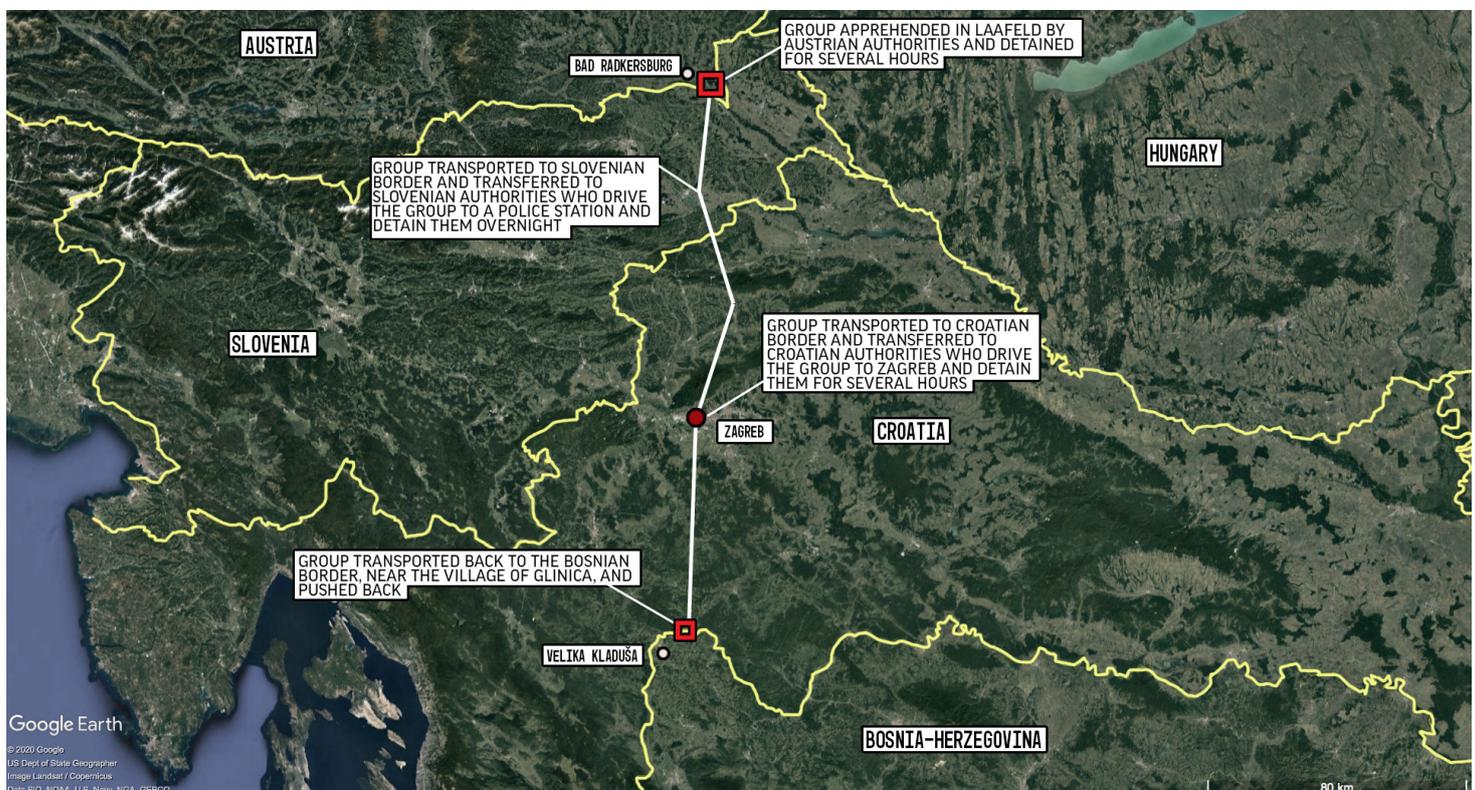
PUSHBACK ROUTE FROM AUSTRIA DESCRIBED IN TESTIMONY (SOURCE: NNK/BVMN)

Despite mounting evidence and condemnation from human rights groups including the UNHCR and Refugee Rights Europe, both Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Minister for Asylum and Migration, Notis Mitarachi, have categorically denied Greece's involvement in pushing back migrant boats in the Aegean. BVMN covered the pushback of 59 people across two separate maritime incidents in September (see 8.6 & 8.7). Common trends across these incidents included efforts by the Hellenic Coast Guard to damage dinghies by cutting holes in the inflated sections, taking the fuel, or creating large waves to try to push dinghies back into Turkish waters. In one case, the transit group was taken aboard the coast guard vessel and then put into a liferaft (see 8.6).

These reports correspond with others that have emerged in September by Human Rights Watch and international media. Coupled with the comparatively low numbers of people reaching Greek shores recently, they give the impression that maritime pushbacks in the Aegean have increased significantly.

"WITH OUR OWN EYES ON LESBOS, IT WAS QUITE CLEAR NO BOATS WERE COMING THROUGH." (UNHCR ASSISTANT HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR PROTECTION, GILLIAN TRIGGS)

When pressed on the issue, Mitsotakis argued that Greece had become "victims of a significant misinformation campaign," suggesting Turkey might be responsible. This denial was echoed by Mitarachis, who claimed that such reports were "the result of propaganda by illegal smuggling networks who are losing tens of millions of euros". In response, Turkey has accused Greece of large-scale pushbacks in violation of international law. It also accuses the European Union of turning a blind eye to what it says is a blatant abuse of human rights.

In September, the narrative changed slightly, when Minister of Shipping, Ioannis Plakiotakis (who is also responsible for the Coast Guard), boasted that Greece had successfully prevented 10,000 migrants from reaching Greece. He did not elaborate on the methods used, but also echoed Mitsotakis and Mitarachis' attacks on Turkey for "trying to make problems" and being responsible for transit attempts across the Aegean. On 25th September, the Turkish Coast Guard issued a statement, saying that it had rescued over 300 people who have been "pushed back by Greek elements to Turkish waters" that month.

Taken in the context of rising geopolitical tensions between Turkey and Greece, these developments are noteworthy on a macro level, and stand as an escalation of sorts. On the specific issue of pushbacks in the Aegean, it is clear that pushbacks are happening, in a way that is increasingly systemic and visible.

TRANSIT GROUP ON DINGHY NEAR SKALA SIKAMINEAS, LESVOS (SOURCE:BVMN)

A SUNKEN DINGHY CAPSIZED IN THE EVROS RIVER (SOURCE:EURONEWS)

In the August 2020 report, BVMN identified an emergent trend in the use of third-country nationals to perform illegal pushbacks from Greece to Turkey. In September, 14 cases of pushbacks across the Evros river were published. The majority referred to the practice of outsourcing the ferrying of groups to members of the transit community. Respondents who spoke to BVMN specified that individuals - most commonly from Pakistan (see 8.2) and Afghanistan (see 8.12) - are being compelled by Greek police to operate the dinghies which return people to the Turkish bank of the Evros.

Several rumours have circulated among the transit community that drivers are paid or receive preferential treatment during their asylum application. Meanwhile the Wall Street Journal has reported that the ferrying may be delegated by the Greek authorities to smugglers. Compensation is offered to offset the risks boat drivers face, displacing the danger and perceived culpability for Greek authorities.The average group size pushed back over the Evros in September was 74 people, with dinghies only accommodating around 10 people per trip, meaning those who drive them have to make multiple risky trips back and forth over the river. The threat of drowning as a result of boats capsizing, or facing hostility from Turkish authorities who patrol the other bank is a constant hazard.

Testimonies collected in September have shed further light on this phenomenon. One 50-year-old Afghan (see 8.15) shared how he spoke to a Pakistani dingy driver who had been offered "documentation" by the Greek authorities in exchange for two months' work ferrying people back to Turkey. Whether or not these bargains are being honoured by the authorities is yet to be ascertained.

Other respondents have evidenced the explicit nature of this cooperation. One described how Greek police asked members of their group if anyone knew English and then escorted away the three Afghani men who said they understood the language (see 8.11). These individuals later operated the dinghies during the pushback. Another respondent (see 8.2) described how Greek forces assisted the dingy drivers by pointing out good spots where they could cross the river and evade Turkish soldiers. These common features emerging in Evros pushbacks suggests that such outsourcing has become an unofficial policy at the Greek land border.
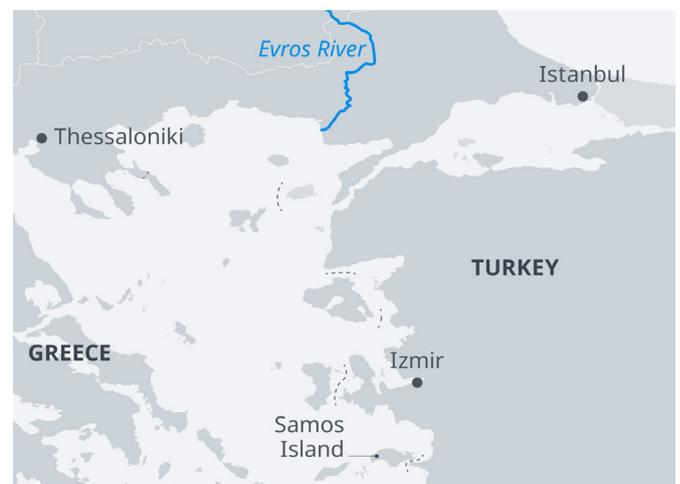
THE EVROS RIVER SEPARATING GREECE AND TURKEY (SOURCE:DW)

As indicated in the August report, there is a growing body of evidence of international police units involved in pushbacks from North Macedonia to Greece. In all reports taken from North Macedonia during the last two months foreign languages and/or insignia were noticed by respondents, primarily Czech officials. These reports also reveal some worrying patterns in terms of concrete police action. Increasingly, people-on-the-move experience excessive violence several times during the pushback process, often from different police units. For instance, in a report from 8th September 2020 (see 7.2), the respondent describes how he and three others were beaten twice by two different groups of officers upon capture. They encountered further violence at the border with Greece during their pushback, bringing the total to three physical assaults in the space of one incident.

The types of violence used against people-on-the-move by police forces in North Macedonia include beatings with batons, tree branches and other kinds of sticks, kicking, zip-tying peoples hands, as well as the use of tasers and pepper spray. In one report the respondent even stated that there were firearms used to threaten them. In multiple cases, groups were also denied medi

WRIST INJURY FROM ATTACK BY POLICE (SOURCE:BVMN)

cal assistance or other basic needs like food, water or a toilet for several hours. Additionally, in many cases personal belongings including phones, money, documents and clothes were stolen or destroyed by police officers. Officers regularly attempt to anonymise this violence by wearing balaclavas or by using physical violence to force people into a prone position on the ground.

GREECE

FIRE IN MORIA

The September fires in Moria Camp, grabbed [international attention](#) with images of burning tents and thousands sleeping on the streets. In recent years, Moria has become [infamous](#) for its inhumane living conditions, systemic neglect and state violence: a grim symbol of EU externalisation policies. Lesvos, as with many other islands in the Eastern Aegean, has been transformed into a violent [zone of exception](#) where people-on-the-move are denied basic human rights and exposed to [racialised threats](#) of violence and death.

Policies of [deterrence](#), such as allowing conditions in Moria to become unlivable in the hopes of dissuading people from trying to come to the island, have long been employed and constitute a form of border control and violence in themselves. These policies made a fire as massive and destructive as this one possible. They also facilitated a rise in punitive police repression in the fires aftermath, creating a situation where people impacted were stripped of all options and forced into a new temporary camp in the Kara Tepe area - despite clear demands for evacuation and the freedom of movement. Now, plans have been [announced](#) to build closed structures in remote locations to house people-on-the-move on Lesvos and to [close down](#) all other housing options on the island.

INTERNAL VIOLENCE IN PATRAS

The port of Patras remains the major crossing point for people-on-the-move seeking to travel from Greece to Italy through the Adriatic sea. In September, BVMN - via it network member No Name Kitchen - documented heavy police violence against people-on-the-move staying in and around the port. There have also been several instances of pushbacks of people-on-the-move who had managed to reach Italy aboard cargo ships.

Over 200 people inhabit abandoned factories near the port. Here, they live in extremely poor conditions and under constant threat of violence. In particular, a man on a motorbike, collaborating with the local Greek police, harasses groups and attempts to run them down when exiting the squats. Meanwhile, police officers patrol the area to hinder access to the port. On some occasions, officers even chase the groups with their patrol cars back to the factories.

Physical violence is also reported to occur inside the port where people-on-the-move have been forced into vans and hit with batons by authorities. Adults and minors are frequently apprehended and taken to what they call "the commando house", where they are detained for several nights. While there, they are often denied access to food, and their personal belongings (including cell phones) are damaged. There are reports of hate crimes on the part of the authorites: including the use of xenophobic and racist language. In the past weeks, the port authorities' have brought in an additional canine unit, increasing the chances of detection of people boarding trucks.
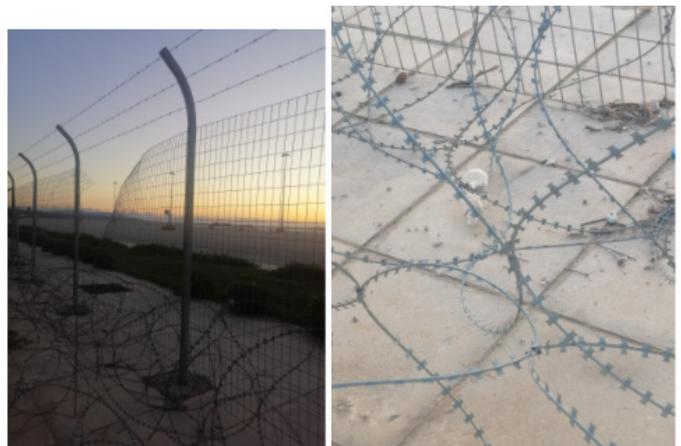
WIRE FENCES AT THE PORT OF PATRAS (SOURCE:NO NAME KITCHEN)

Ferry service between Patras and Ancona (Source:InfoMigrants)

Cross-border violence also occurs in Patras, and two incidents have been flagged to No Name Kitchen volunteers recently of people pushed back by the Italian authorities once onboard ferries. Info Migrants also reported on the death of a young Afghan man in the port of Ancona during a transit attempt from Greece. The individual was reported to have "died of asphyxiation in the hold of a Cruise Europa ferry operated by Minoan Lines" because of the poor air and heat exceeding 50 degrees celsius in the garage where he was concealed. Since this death, a further person is alleged to have gone missing on this dangerous maritime route, a telling example of the fatal risks people are forced to take with the absence of safe passage.

CROATIA

PREVENTION OF ENTRY STATISTICS RELEASED

In response to a parliamentary question, Croatian Interior Minister, Davor Bozinovic, said Croatian police had prevented over 16.000 "illegal" entries into Croatia from Bosnia-Herzegovina in the first nine months of 2020. This would mark a dramatic uptick of 60% from the 2019 figures, when the Interior Ministry (MUP) said it had prevented just shy of 10.000 entries in the same time period.

"Prevention of illegal entries" sounds mundane and appears to imply prevented crossings directly at the border. But it is plausible that many people-on-the-move in this statistic, supposedly prevented from entering Croatia in the first place, were in fact removed extra-judicially from within the country's interior. The prevalence of this practice and its human cost have been documented by BVMN reports for several years, and corroborated by a whistleblower account from within the MUP.

As a perpetrator of organised violence against transit populations, it is important to take the MUP's data with a grain of salt. The MUP has both incentives to inflate the numbers to appear tough domestically and depress them to deflect accusations of systematic pushback practices. Additionally, because many people-on-the-move attempt to cross multiple times, the number of prevented crossings does not necessarily match the actual number of people-on-the-move trying to cross (Una-Sana Canton authorities claimed there were about 7.000 people-in-the-move within the canton in August). On a more basic level, the statistics could be more reflective of Croatian police ground presence than actual trends in transit movements. The more police units are deployed, the more attempted crossings they are likely to encounter (this is similar to the effects fluctuating volunteer presence has on BVMN's data).

With these caveats in mind, the data still indicates strongly that neither Covid-induced camp-lockdowns nor Croatia's excessive use of violence and illegal returns reduce the number of crossings. BVMN recorded 20 mass pushbacks from Croatia in September affecting 447 people, one case even detailing an alleged drowning in the Korana river (see 6.1). Despite these risks, the camp closures in the Una-Sana Canton and constraints on transit communities in North Western Serbia continue to pressure people to move northwards. As such, the trend in border crossings is set to continue as winter approaches.

SERBIA

FORCIBLE RETURNS TO ADAŠEVCI & PRINCIPOVAC

In the last weeks, the military and police were very present in Sid, Serbia. The Serbian army first arrived due to a regional state-of-emergency declared with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. In this period, Serbian authorities have harassed and contained the transit population in the area, both inside and outside the camps.

Reports from the family camp in Sid state that the area is monitored by a minimum of two officers with a patrol car everyday. Residents also reported several violent encounters they had suffered at the hands of the military. No Name Kitchen noted two specific cases of

beatings and kickings inflicted by authorities in public spaces, and witnessed the officers photographing the transit groups. Generally, the military tell people-on-the-move to go back to "their" respective camps, often using physical or verbal abuse. In the case of residents from either Adasevci or Principovac, authorities frequently confiscate their money and use it to pay taxi drivers who return them to the camps. The recurrence of these forced removals is such that many people no longer come into the town of Sid, and therefore have even more limited access to resources like food.

THE ROUTE SHIFTS INTO ROMANIA

According to numbers published by UNHCR from September, pushbacks from neighbouring countries into Serbia (affecting 3115 people) are the highest they have been since the agency started monitoring in the spring of 2016. The official number of pushbacks into Serbia in September even exceeded the number of new arrivals to the country. That said, groups working with people-on-the-move have observed a lot of new arrivals on Serbia's Northern borders, suggesting many that enter and proceed north are not accounted for in official statistics.

Reports by people-on-the-move about pushbacks from neighbouring Hungary and Romania continue to involve testimonies of physical or material violence. These range from beatings with sticks and kicking, to the destruction or theft of personal belongings. An article by

InfoMigrants echoed these accounts and suggested the route through Serbia to Romania has been particularly frequented in the last months.

This easterly strand of the Balkan Route has been characterised by the aggressive response of Romanian border officials. In September, the Collective Aid Subotica team conducted an assessment at the border and spoke to people subject to these attacks. One transit group of approximately 30 people from Syria reported Romanian border officials entered Serbian territory whilst they were sleeping in the forest and alerted Serbian border police who then proceeded to apprehend the group. Others shared experiences of theft by Romanian border authorities, including the confiscation of mobile phones, money and even food from the hands of small children.

BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN BOSANSKA OTOKA

The final week of August saw a disturbing development, further restricting freedom of movement for people-on-the-move within Bosnia-Herzegovina, and denounced by Amnesty International as "not only unlawful, but potentially reckless". Reminiscent of the "disembarkation point" at Velečevo, Ključ, around 600 people at the peak were forced to remain within a small stretch of no-man's land between the entity boundaries of the Federation and Republika Srpska. The location, near Bosans-

ka Otoka on the edge of the Una Sana Canton (USC), is essentially a cornfield, with no proper access to shelter, food, or water. People-on-the-move, including families with small children, were forced off from buses at roadblocks, as well as rounded up and transported from urban areas in USC by police, while vigilante groups were also reported to be active in intercepting buses.

BVMN partners observed as the Danish Refugee Council organised a distribution of dry food packs and provision of first aid treatment by medical staff. But every provision of humanitarian aid required approval by the police, leading to long delays and dire shortages. This bottleneck of people stuck at the entity boundary resulted from a decision by the Coordination Committee on Migration in USC on 19th August. This imposed severe restrictions as a stated reaction to protests and expressed discontent by local populations, which had already overspilled into targeted attacks on squats in the area of Vrnograč. The committee decision included a sweeping ban on: new arrivals into USC, transportation of people-on-the-move in public transport and taxis, private accommodation, public gatherings, and distribution of humanitarian aid and medical assistance (excepting emergencies) to those outside of camps.

During the second week of September, the practice of forced transfers and disembarkations had reduced, with smaller groups of around 10-30 single males stuck in the Bosanska Otoka area. Overall, USC's harsh policies and the forced relocations resulted in a significant decrease of people travelling to USC via Banja Luka (Republika Srpska). By mid-September the situation had scaled down, with very few people remaining at the site in Bosanska Otoka for more than a few hours. But as a reaction to the rapidly deteriorating conditions for transit groups in urban areas and near the reception centers in USC, huge makeshift shelter communities were set up in the forests close to the border with Croatia. The biggest settlement of this kind, with over 500 people living in poor conditions, appeared near Siljkovaca village, near Velika Kladusa.

SPECIAL FORCES CLEAR BIRA

After a meeting of a special migration task force in the Una-Sana Canton, with the participation of UNHCR and IOM, the local authorities took further repressive measures against the presence of people-on-the-move in the area, based on the conclusion of the Canton Assembly and the Municipalities of Bihac and Velika Kladusa.

On 29th September, the Canton's Ministry of Health and Social Policies of the Government ordered the temporary transfer of unaccompanied minors from the

camp Bira to the facility in Borici, a center for families and vulnerable adults. Alongside this transfer, the evacuation of the single male population living in Bira and the consequent closure of the camp was also decreed. This measure was not conveyed to residents of the centre by any organisation, and led to the completely unexpected arrival of approximately fifty Special Forces officers and USC police with the order to evacuate the containers where people were staying.

SCENES FROM THE
CLEARING OF BIRA
ON 29TH SEPTEMBER
(Source:AYS)

One hundred single men elected to leave immediately to cross the border into Croatia and were escorted away by police. The remaining people-on-the-move were transferred in five buses to the Lipa centre which was erected in spring around 25km south of Bihac. Due to overcrowding and mismanagement, about 250 people were left outside the gates of Lipa for several days in dramatic conditions, without any hygienic facilities and material support. The threat of a similar eviction for the residents of camp Miral in Velika Kladusa was not realised, despite being decreed within 72 hours of the cantonal task force meeting. The closure of the Bira led to a rise of people seeking shelter in the Bihac area. The surrounding squats and "jungle" encampments swelled as displaced groups attempted to escape the increasingly unfavourable weather conditions, and to avoid being transported by the Special Forces to Lipa. The police continue to raid abandoned buildings in order to deter this kind of settlement, even leading to an incident on 27th September where a man fell injured from the second floor of a building as he ran from attending officers. Violence on the streets has only compounded the risks people take in these abandoned buildings. Most recently, when apprehending people in the urban centre officers have taken to locking people in small vans without ventilation for several hours. Within this context and with the arrival of autumn, some people have decided to return to Sarajevo and even Serbia to spend the winter.

ITALY

DEPLOYMENT OF MILITARY TO THE BORDER

As reported in international and Italian media, 50 additional officers were added to protect the Italian-Slovenian border on 18th September. The securitisation measure was framed by the prefecture of Trieste as another step used "to combat illegal immigration". This new military contingent is part of operation "Safe Roads", a joint initiative with the Slovenian authorities that started in 2008 and whose tasks have been extended, in particular since the Covid-19 pandemic, with "men, means and materials for the army".

In September BVMN recorded the pushback of 66 people from Italy (see 9.1 & 9.2), a testament to the abovementioned resources. Additional media reports cite the ongoing exchange of migrants by Italian authorities with Slovenian counterparts. On 14th September, five people were accompanied by agents from the Udine Police Headquarters to the Gorizia Border Police "for the completion of the readmission and handover procedures to the Slovenian authorities". Four days later, another group of 70 people mainly from Afghanistan and Bangladesh were brought to a police station near the Slovenian border after being "tracked down" in Trieste. Volunteers supporting new arrivals in the city share that police are even pushing people back from the main train station, and that solidarity work is under constant pressure from authorities who patrol the main square.

The Italian Interior Ministry has tried to justify this drive for intensive "readmissions", invoking a 1996 agreement between Italy and Slovenia. Yet it's critics expose the fact that the bilateral agreement: "does not apply to asylum seekers and contradicts the Dublin regulation on asylum rights in Europe, which was precisely created to avoid border rebounds between one state and another".

In reality, this feigned adherence to law posited by the Italian state does not even match the way the procedures are carried out. People are often removed without being issued formal notice, or having this translated into a language they understand. Moreover without such documentation, recourse to appeal becomes virtually impossible, especially given that it triggers a "chain of transfer" all the way to Serbia or Bosnia-Herzegovina where applicants are hampered in their appeal. Referring to the insipid nature of these removals, Gianfranco Schiavone, president of the Italian Consortium of Solidarity, concludes: "it is a pushback said in a sweetened way".

GLOSSARY OF REPORTS, AUGUST 2020

BVMN recorded 40 pushback cases in September, impacting 1548 people from a wide demographic of countries including Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Morocco, Pakistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, Iraqi Kurdistan, Syria, DR Congo, Somalia, Eritrea, Lebanon, Egypt and Libya. The interviews account for a range of groups and individuals including men, women, families and unaccompanied minors.

The cases involved are outline below:

// 5 pushbacks to Serbia - one directly from Romania, one chain pushback from Slovenia, and three directly from Croatia
// 17 pushbacks to Bosnia-Herzegovina - one chain pushback from Austria, two chain pushbacks from Italy, four chain pushbacks from Slovenia, and ten directly from Croatia
// 16 pushbacks from Greece to Turkey
// 2 pushbacks to Greece from North Macedonia

LINK	INCIDENT	RECORDED		DEMOGRAPHIC
ROMANIA TO SERBIA				
1.1	15th September	16th September	12	Syria
SLOVENIA TO SERBIA				
2.1	23rd September	27th September	2	Afghanistan
CROATIA TO SERBIA				
3.1	1st September	3rd September	14	Afghanistan
3.2	10th September	16th September	2	Iran, Afghanistan
3.3	13th September	24th September	11	Iran
AUSTRIA TO BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA				
4.1	5th September	7th September	5	Syria, Morocco
SLOVENIA TO BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA				
5.1	1st August	14th September	40	Afghanistan, Pakistan
5.2	1st September	22nd September	8	Morocco
5.3	8th September	20st September	4	Morocco, Algeria
5.4	16th September	21st September	5	Afghanistan
CROATIA TO BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA				
6.1	23rd August	23rd September	33	Afghanistan, Pakistan
6.2	2nd September	2nd September	35	Bangladesh
6.3	3rd September	9th September	20	Afghanistan
6.4	4th September	17th September	10	Pakistan, Afghanistan, Morocco
6.5	7th September	9th September	21	Afghanistan
6.6	8th September	9th September	13	Palestine, Morocco, Tunisia
6.7	9th September	9th September	22	Afghanistan
6.8	9th September	12th September	14	Afghanistan
6.9	14th September	15th September	44	Afghanistan
6.10	14th September	16th September	80	Afghanistan
FIND ALL REPORTS ON THE DATABASE HERE.				

LINK	INCIDENT	RECORDED		DEMOGRAPHIC
	**NORTH MACEDONIA TO SERBIA**
7.1	4th September	7th September	1	Morocco
7.2	8th September	12th September	4	Algeria
	**GREECE TO TURKEY**
8.1	14th April	2nd September	76	Pakistan, Palestine, Syria, Morocco, Algeria
8.2	23rd April	15th September	16	Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia
8.3	27th April	18th September	11	Morocco, Iraqi Kurdistan
8.4	5th July	15th September	120	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Morocco, Algeria
8.5	14th August	21st August	50	Afghanistan, Palestine, Syria, Algeria
8.6	19th August	16th September	41	Palestine, Syria, DR Congo, Somalia, Eritrea, Lebanon
8.7	24th August	6th September	18	Palestine, Syria, DR Congo, Somalia
8.8	24th August	11th September	55	Pakistan, Algeria, Syria, Tunisia
8.9	27th August	13th September	80	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria
8.10	28th August	8th September	3	Egypt
8.11	29th August	17th September	102	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Algeria
8.12	4th September	16th September	110	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Syria, Morocco, Lebanon, Algeria, Libya
8.13	2nd September	12th September	120	Afghanistan, Palestine, Syria, Morocco
8.14	6th September	13th September	80	Pakistan, Algeria, Syria, Morocco, Egypt
8.15	9th September	10th September	120	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Palestine, Syria, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia
8.16	18th September	18th September	80	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Morocco, Algeria
	**ITALY TO BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA**
9.1	21st September	23rd September	24	Afghanistan
9.2	15th September	17th September	42	Afghanistan, Pakistan
	**FIND ALL REPORTS ON THE DATABASE HERE.**

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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
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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

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