**PIN – Psychosocial Innovation Network, Serbia**

**In Belgrade, 24th of February 2022.**

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**Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants**

**Human rights violations at international borders: trends, prevention and accountability**

**Trauma in transit**

Study from 2021 (Vukčević, Bobić & Živanović, 2021) indicated that out of the 20 listed, refugees experience an average of ten different stressful and traumatic events during transit. A very small percentage of participants (3.5%) did not face any traumatic experience during transit, while 96% of participants experienced at least one and 30% more than 13 such experiences. During transit, refugees most often are in conditions where they have no access to food and water (85%), or shelter (80%), situations in which their lives are in danger (76%), in which they have been separated from family or close friends (65%), or did not have access to relevant information (62%). Two-thirds of participants reported being a victim of psychological violence (60%), while a slightly lower percentage experienced illegal or violent confiscation of money or personal property (58%). Furthermore, more than half of the participants reported they experienced discrimination (54%), and severe physical injuries during transit (55%). Besides that, there was a substantial proportion of those experiencing torture (34%) and sexual violence (14%). Hence, the average number of experienced traumatic events is considered high. More importantly, comparison to the data from previous reports enables tracking changes in experiencing adverse events and shows that the percentage of those who experienced traumatic events mostly increased over time. For example – in comparison to 2014, results in 2021 show there 16% and 13% participants more reported lacking food or water and lacking shelter, respectively. Comparing current findings with the research from 2017 (Vukčević, et al., 2017) it can be noticed that one-third more of refugees experienced separation from family members and twice as many refugees experienced the death of a close person. Furthermore, sexual violence during transit and the percentage of those who have suffered serious bodily injuries has also increased (Vukčević et al., 2021). Furthermore, refugees often report overwhelming experiences of wasting time, a feeling of missing life opportunities while waiting, and a lack of educational opportunities (Vukčević, Momirović, Purić, 2016; Vukčević, Bobić & Bjekić, 2019). Finally, discrimination and segregation from the local population is often present (Bjekić et al., 2020).

These results indicate that inadequate and inhumane practices towards refugees continue to exist, and imply that no effective measures have been made to improve their living and transit conditions which should be guaranteed by international law. On the contrary, the high prevalence of traumatic experiences during transit suggests that violent and inhumane practices during transit are common.

**Pushback**

Study results from 2021 indicate that 65% of refugees experienced pushback in a neighboring country (Vukčević et al., 2021). Pushback is accompanied by immanent traumatic experiences in almost all refugees – 93% of refugees experienced at least one trauma while being pushed back. Refugees have experienced, on average, more than three traumatic experiences during pushback (of the six in the questionnaire), while only 7% of participants had none. The results show that 8 out of 10 participants experienced insults, humiliation, threats, and other forms of psychological violence, while slightly more than half of the participants experienced physical violence during pushback. Additionally, about three-quarters of participants were separated from family members or close friends during pushback, and slightly less than three-quarters experienced the confiscation of personal property or money, while about two-thirds found themselves in life-threatening situations. Somewhat less than a fifth of the sample suffered some form of sexual violence during the forced return. Compared to the data from our previous studies, the percentage of refugees experiencing pushback has increased dramatically. Namely, the percentage of those who experienced pushback in 2014 was 38% (Vukčević et al., 2014). In 2017 this number increased to 48% (Vukčević et al., 2017), to reach its peak of 65% in 2021 (Vukčević et al., 2021).

These findings highlight the urgent need to end the harmful border practices. It is worrying that these dangerous and dehumanizing practices not only continue to exist but even increase in prevalence. Finding that most refugees experience pushback raises the suspicion that pushback has become one of the common and normalized practices in times when a collective effort is made to combat it.

**The mental health of refugees and migrants and its relation to trauma in transit and pushback**

Research conducted in Serbia in the period from 2014 to 2020 indicates that more than 80% of refugees residing in Serbia can be considered psychologically vulnerable (Vukčević et al., 2014; Vukčević et al., 2016; Vukčević et al., 2017; Vukčević et al., 2018; Vukčević et al., 2019; Vukčević et al., 2020), and there is a high prevalence of those experiencing depression, anxiety, and PTSD related difficulties (Vukčević et al., 2020). Some of the most pronounced symptoms are excessive worry, repetitive thoughts of the most frightening events, a feeling of constant alertness, tension, and low interest in everyday activities (Vukčević et al., 2014). The latest results from the 2021 study showed that more than 8 out of 10 participants are vulnerable, while 6 out of 10 are in need of psychological support. Moreover, half of the participants (51%) reported experiencing pronounced symptoms of depression, while about a third of the participants have pronounced symptoms of anxiety (37.8%) and PTSD (32.3%). Furthermore, the results showed a low level of psychological well-being among participants (Vukčević et al., 2021).

Examining the trend in refugees’ mental health over the past five years (2017-2021), it is observed that the severity of symptomatology of depression, anxiety, and PTSD have been dropping slightly over the past 4 years, with the subsequent substantial increase in 2021. Precisely, with regards to depression, the percentage of refugees expressing depressive symptomatology was 48% in 2017, 42% in 2018, 36% in 2019, 35% in 2020, and 51% in 2021. In the case of anxiety symptoms, the percentage in 2017 was 37%, in the three following years (2018-2020) it was 29%, with the highest percentage in the last year – 38% of participants. The percentage of refugees expressing symptoms of PTSD was 28% in 2017, 25% in 2018, 19% in 2019, 20% in 2020, and 32% in 2021. Hence, in comparison to the 2020, there has been an increase of 16%, 9%, and 12% in incidences of depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms in 2021, respectively (Vukčević et al., 2017; Vukčević et al., 2018; Vukčević et al., 2019; Vukčević et al., 2020, Vukčević et al., 2021).

It is becoming increasingly clear that traumatic experiences during transit and pushback have an important influence on refugees’ mental health. Our previous studies focused on the transit context indicate that traumatic experiences during transit predict the symptoms of depression, anxiety and PTSD (Vukčević et al., 2021). Stressful experiences in transit such as torture, loss of a family member, overall exposure to a traumatic experience, poor living conditions, and discrimination represent risk factors for PTSD (Purić & Vukčević, 2019). Research has also shown that negative self-perception of functioning is associated with general stressors, while stressful events experienced in contact with the local population are associated with symptoms of depression (Purić & Vukčević, 2019). Additional risk factors for the mental health of refugees in transit include specific stressors related to transit countries, such as inadequate accommodation conditions and difficulties in accessing health and social care services (Vukčević, Živanović, & Bjekić, 2019; Purić & Vukčević, 2019), along with complicated and long procedures of determining a refugee status (Vukčević, Kovačević & Bjekić, 2021).

Multiple harmful effects of pushback on refugees’ mental health need to be highlighted. In addition to human rights violations, and accompanying traumatic experiences it usually includes, pushback represents a “step back” for refugees trying to reach destination countries and, therefore, it has a particularly harmful effect on refugees’ mental health and well-being. This is supported by our finding that the topic of pushback practices singled out during the interviews as an especially important and stressful one, and by the high prevalence of experienced trauma during pushback, as described above (Vukčević et al., 2021). Moreover, the results showed there is a significant relationship between a number of traumatic experiences during pushback and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Purić & Vukčević, 2019; Vukčević et al., 2021). Finally, participants who had experienced pushback showed significantly higher severity of depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms than participants who had not experienced pushback (Vukčević et al., 2021).

**Conclusion**

The information provided are an important indicator of the harmful border practices, and their impact on refugees’ mental health. A high percentage of refugees are experiencing pushback, an illegal and dehumanizing practices, and this percentage seems to only increase over time. Furthermore, pushback is accompanied by immanent traumatic experiences in almost all refugees that is, 93% of refugees experienced at least one trauma while being pushed back. The transit itself is also accompanied by traumatic events, given that refugees experience an average of ten different traumatic events during transit. The indicators of refugees’ mental health are worrying – half of the participants had pronounced symptoms of depression, a third of the participants had pronounced symptoms of anxiety and PTSD, and generally a low level of psychological well-being among participants is identified. There is evidence that a number of traumatic events experienced during pushback and transit influence the severity of depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptomatology, which has only increased in comparison with the data obtained last year. The data provided here calls for an urgent response to this humanitarian and human rights crisis.

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