



Border Violence Monitoring Network

ILLEGAL PUSH-BACKS AND BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS



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DECEMBER 2020

BALKAN REGION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During December 2020, the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) gathered 25 testimonies of pushbacks, impacting a total of 707 people-on-the-move. This rounds off a year of consistent and compelling evidence collected by BVMN, exposing the systematised use of pushbacks at the European Union external border. In this report, updates cover a variety of violations including pushback practices, internal violence and the crisis around winterised shelter.

The shocking events that continue to unfold in Lipa, in Bosnia–Herzegovina, are reviewed here. The planned closure of the camp, followed by a huge fire, has created mass homelessness, further harming a transit community already underserved by the EU-funded camp system. This report also looks at the practice of burning clothes carried out by the Croatian police, a tactic particularly brutal within the context of freezing winter temperatures. These winterised trends are also considered inline with recent criminal complaints launched by BVMN member Centre for Peace Studies, and insights from activists working with arrivals in Trieste, Italy.

At the Greek border with Turkey, testimonies gathered in December portray some of the starkest violations to date. Accounts describing the use of the tri-border area between Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey, offer an insight into the recent patterns in border geography, and the engagement of multiple border agencies in chain pushbacks to Turkey. In parallel, this publication provides a case study analysis of a pushback from Lesvos, looking at the way policing of the Aegean waters and islands continue to be governed by processes of incommunicado detention and violent removal.

On a legal level, the notable ruling provided by the European Court of Justice on Hungary's deviation from EU asylum law was issued in December. This result, which confirms years of evidence provided by BVMN and others, is seen in conjunction with a further increase in border securitisation on the southern border with Serbia. Transit and shelter throughout Serbia has also been increasingly shaped by violence and displacement, and this report looks at police repression against squated communities and criminalisation of assistance.

In addition to violence perpetrated by border enforcement and local police, BVMN also documented several instances of abuse from other state institutions and fascist groups during the month of December. In Greece, videos published by the Ministry of Asylum are analysed and evidence of right wing violence against a centre for minors adds to the weight of evidence portraying the repressive situation for transit communities across the country. This report also provides an update of the Covid-19 situation in camps on Samos, and the use of gateway pushbacks from North Macedonia to 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, Disinfaux Collective, Josoor, [re:]ports Sarajevo, InfoKolpa, Centre for Peace Studies, Mare Liberum, Collective Aid and Fresh Response.*

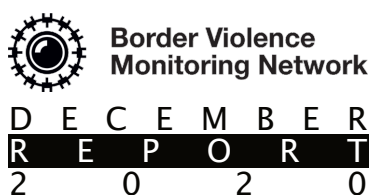


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REPORTING NETWORK

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 [database](#), used as a platform to collate testimonies of illegal pushbacks which are gathered through interviews.

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.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological process for these interviews leverages the close social contact that we have as independent volunteers with refugees and migrants to monitor push-backs 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.

ABBREVIATIONS

BiH	-	Bosnia and Herzegovina
HR	-	Croatia
SRB	-	Serbia
SLO	-	Slovenia
ROM	-	Romania
HUN	-	Hungary
ITA	-	Italy
BGR	-	Bulgaria
MNK	-	North Macedonia
GRK	-	Greece
TUR	-	Turkey
EU	-	European Union

TRENDS IN BORDER VIOLENCE

PUSHBACK FROM A CHURCH ON LESVOS



St. Barbara church in Pamfila, Lesvos (Source: [Google Maps](#))

It has become a standard practice in 2020 for people-on-the-move who arrive on Greek islands to be apprehended by the Hellenic Coast Guard (HCG) or Greek police and taken back out to sea where they are placed in life rafts and left adrift close to Turkish waters. For this reason, many arrivals to the Aegean islands try to hide upon their arrival, in fear of being pushed back.

One such incident, which exemplifies the systematic nature of such pushbacks from Greece, occurred in early December (see [11.5](#)). A group of 30 people from Somalia and DR Congo were only a few meters away from the shores of Lesvos when a HCG vessel approached their dinghy. Fearing a pushback, thirteen people jumped into the water and swam to shore. Once they made it onto land, they watched as the HCG officers took the rest of their group aboard their vessel, searched them and struck them violently with batons and hands.

The group who made it to land hid in a forest while sending messages to NGOs, alerting them of their arrival and asking for help. As they could not reach anyone, they entered the [church of St. Barbara](#), located in the middle of the village of Pamfila, and asked for shelter. A man working at the church assured the group they could stay until a priest arrived. However, two men in civilian clothes

arrived soon after. They talked to the church employee who then told the group to leave the church immediately. Outside, the men told the group to wait. A few minutes later, a female officer in Greek police uniform arrived, accompanied by five men wearing black clothes and balaclavas. They took the group's phones and drove them to a detention site where they were held for about two hours before being taken back to the coastline. Waiting at the shore were six men, dressed in HCG uniforms and balaclavas, with a RHIB (small vessel) which they boarded the group onto. The officers drove them out into the sea and transferred them onto a HCG panther class ship on which several other masked officers were waiting. This larger vessel drove for a further hour, before stopping and disembarking the group onto an orange life raft. The thirteen people were subsequently left adrift on the unsteerable life raft in the middle of the Aegean Sea.

At several points throughout their ordeal, the group had clearly expressed their intention to ask for asylum. Once back in Turkey, they learned that the other 17 members of their original group had been pushed back on life rafts before even setting foot on Lesvos. The entire case is an illustrative example of the way maritime border and island interiors are being used to stage incommunicado apprehensions and dangerous mass pushbacks.

USE OF TRI-BORDER AREA NEAR ORESTIADA

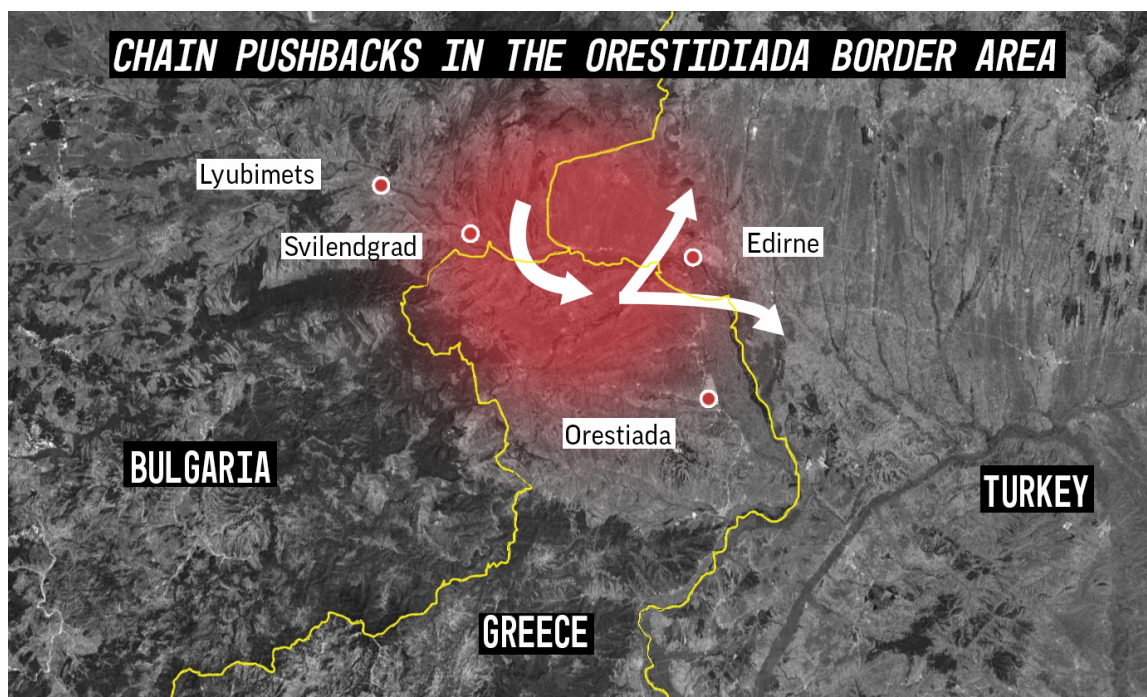
Chain pushbacks have become a routine fixture of the EU external border. This phenomena describes the process whereby people-on-the-move are pushed back through several countries in a row. This is a common trend in removals from Slovenia, via Croatia, to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia. These practices were even observed to have been initiated from Italy and Austria in 2020, and make up [15%](#) of the reports gathered on BVMN's database.

Typically, a chain pushback involves transit groups being transferred between each country's police forces in a highly coordinated process. This was seen in December with cases which detail the orchestrated use of official border crossings (such as between Italy and Slovenia, see [4.2](#)). Yet this is not necessarily a feature of all chain pushbacks. As 2020 concluded, BVMN began observing a trend in pushbacks via the Orestiada area of Northern Evros, an area used to perform indirect chain removals from Bulgaria to Turkey. Geographically positioned as a section of Greek territory sandwiched between the two countries, the composition of Orestiada enables Bulgarian authorities to push people-on-the-move back, in the knowledge that they will be easily intercepted by the Greek authorities and eventually returned to Turkey. For instance, in December, a 33-year-old Tunisian man was caught in Bulgaria, robbed of all his possessions and attacked by a police dog (see [10.1](#)).

“[He] continued walking on Greek territory for another two days but then he could not walk anymore due to exhaustion and his injuries and gave up. He decided to surrender himself to Greek police.”

Upon being captured by the Greek police, he was detained with a group of 50 others, and finally pushed back to Turkey. This process relies less on formal collaboration between national police forces, and more on the border geography and the vulnerability conferred onto groups when officers abandon them without clothes, phones, money, food and water in the tri-border area. This process can be likened to the informal chain pushback route operated from Serbia where people are stripped of their belongings and then pushed back to North Macedonia, only to be caught and then pushed back to Greece.

While there is a lack of direct interaction between the perpetrators in these cases, there is still a wide spectrum of actors involved to ensure their completion. Pushbacks carried out near the tri-border area of Orestiada in December involved both Bulgarian and Greek officials, but also allegedly Frontex personnel (see [11.9](#)) recognised by respondents through their distinctive “blue armband”. This level of domestic and trans-national border enforcement allows for the indirect pushback route to function through this intersection of EU member state boundaries.



GATEKEEPING IN IDOMENI

Border closures along the Balkan Route in 2015 put a squeeze on Greece. A bottleneck formed in Idomeni, as the small village became one of the main crossing points for transit communities traveling through North Macedonia on their journeys towards Central Europe. Late that year, however, the route was physically sealed off with over 200km of barbed wire fencing.

In recent years, police of the two countries have created and maintained a fenced corridor at the border, using gates to closely control the movement of persons through. Notably these gates are used exclusively for ejecting persons southwards to Greece, part of a systematised use of border infrastructure to control and omit transit groups. Since May 2020, BVMN has collected 14 reports which outline the use of a particular gate in the fence near Idomeni to carry out pushbacks. In the latest report (see [9.1](#)) from the 8th of December 2020, respondents described how three North Macedonian officers wearing military-style clothes and balaclavas opened a gate in the border fence and shouted at them to “go back” to Greece.

The primary gate used can be found west from the Evzoni Border Station, the main road crossing between North Macedonia and

Greece. The official border crossing in Evzoni is in the public eye, with multiple cars passing through every day. However, by contrast the gate near Idomeni used for pushbacks is in a more remote location by the railway line which links the two countries, a location where the police benefit from a level of privacy which they regularly use to carry out unchecked violence.

A [BVMN report](#) from September 2020, recounts how the officers opened the door of the vehicle that had brought them to the border, pepper sprayed the respondent in the face and pushed him back through the gate to Greece. Another [report](#) from August 2020, describes how officers struck the group-members several times with their batons, before using the same gated location to eject the group. Upon return to Greece some people remain in the border area, highlighted by a [InfoMigrants report](#) in July describing the revolving transit population around Idomeni. Many however make the journey south to Thessaloniki, following the railway line either on foot or by boarding trains. This cycle in transit and pushbacks has become a permanent fixture of the Greek-North Macedonian border, symbolised by the gate through which groups are forced from one territory to another.



Gate between N. Macedonia and Greece (Source:[Quartz](#))

FIRE PITS USED BY CROATIAN POLICE

Throughout the development of Croatian pushback practices, the natural contours of the green border have been weaponised against people-on-the-move. In particular this can be seen in the standardised way that Croatian police light fires at the border, burning the clothes and possessions of people before violently ejecting them into BiH, a practice that was [caught on camera back in 2019](#).

In December, BVMN received multiple testimonies of people who experienced this specific form of violence. The respondents shared how after being caught in the Croatian interior by officers, often dressed in black uniforms and masks, their clothes and rucksacks were thrown into fires at the border (see [6.1](#) & [6.2](#)). As people are disembarked from the vans used to return them to BiH, they are passed onto teams of officers who are stationed at the border. These officers often already have fires burning:

“When the group arrived, it was still dark, and a hole was prepared in the ground in which a big fire was burning”

The preparation of the fires alludes to the organised nature of the pushback process, and the division of roles between different groups of officers who carry out specialised tasks – including transportation, summary beatings, and the stripping and burning of

clothing. The holes in the ground also suggest that the specific locations are being used repeatedly, eroding the soil into scorched pits – an enduring mark of the border violence being carried out. The BVMN database supports this analysis, showing a high density of pushbacks at particular points along Croatia’s green border. But the practice is not isolated to just one EU member state, and [40% of cases recorded by BVMN](#) across the Balkan route involve the destruction of possessions, either via burning, or officers breaking items such as phones. For example, last month reports detailed the way Romanian police also carry out systematic torching of transit groups possessions, with respondents injuring themselves in trying to rescue their belongings from the flames (see [1.1](#)).

The burning of clothes and possessions is an extension of the inhumane and degrading treatment faced by people-on-the-move, and is intimately connected to the forced undressing of people during pushbacks. The fires ensure that people are left with nothing as they are forced back into Bosnia-Herzegovina and other transit countries along the route, meaning they face long foot journeys semi-naked, and subsequently face the struggle of recouping basic clothing. In this way, fires become an informal tool, accompanying the regular use of guns, batons and other weapons in the abuse of people-on-the-move.

UPDATE ON THE SITUATION

CROATIA

CRIMINAL COMPLAINT SUBMITTED ON RAPE CASE

The Centre for Peace Studies (CPS), a longstanding member of BVMN based in Zagreb, has filed a further [two criminal complaints](#) to the Croatian public prosecutor against unknown police perpetrators for their involvement in heinous pushback violations, including rape. The offending officers are reported to have detained transit groups, including children, and handed them over to masked officers dressed in black, matching the description of the “special unit” or “operational action ‘Corridor’” deployed in the border areas by the [Croatian Ministry of Interior](#) (MUP).



Karlovac County Court (Source: [sudovi.hr](#))

According to one of the groups subject to this abuse, they were beaten with batons by the officers, and then were forced to undress at the border near the Bosnian town of Velika Kladuša. Testimonies of the incident taken by Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and shared in a shocking [Guardian](#) article explained how:

“They took us out one by one and ordered us to take off our pants and lie down on the floor facing the ground” ... “One of [the officers] took a selfie with [them] without clothes.”

One of the people attacked during this incident also described having been raped by one of the officers “with a branch”. [Mustafa Hodzic](#), a doctor in Velika Kladuša who examined the victim, confirmed the wounds on the back and legs and the evidence of sexual abuse:

“I have never seen anything like it. Even if it isn’t the first time as a doctor [that] I have seen signs of sexual violence on migrants, which, according to the asylum seekers’ accounts, were perpetrated on Croatian territory by Croatian officials dressed in black uniforms.”

Alongside the medical proof, further evidence that the subjects of these criminal complaints were in fact in Croatia at the time of the incident came in the form of court files from Karlovac County Court. A revealing arti-

cle published in [Croatian news portal Jutarnji](#), described how some of the transit group stood before a judge after being detained for resisting arrest, providing hard evidence of their location prior to the violent pushback. But despite this raft of evidence, the MUP continues to deny these and other allegations which find their officers to be directly carrying out illegal cross-border pushbacks, torture and sexual violence.

Referring to this trend in ultra-violence, [DRC Secretary-General Charlotte Slente](#) described how in October 2020, “more than 75 persons in one week have all independently reported inhumane treatment, savage beatings, and even sexual abuse.” The frequency and ferocity of these violent pushbacks can only function through a systematised, and state sanctioned border regime. But despite the public knowledge of the violence occurring at the HR-BiH border, documented through an entire volume in the [Black Book of Pushbacks](#) published by BVMN in collaboration with GUE/NGL, there is still no substantive accountability in place on a national or EU level. CPS called for an [effective and independent investigation](#) in its statement, joining others such as MEP Clare Daly in demanding action to stop the unchecked rights violations being carried out by Croatia. In a statement for [The Guardian](#), Daly called out the complicity of Brussels in these abuses:

“The blood of these people, so horrifically mistreated on the Croatian border, is on the hands of the European commission.”

BOSNIA-HERZEGONIVA

FIRE IN CAMP LIPA

The situation for the transit community in Bosnia-Herzegovina's Una-Sana Canton (USC) deteriorated dramatically in December with thousands more people becoming homeless. The temporary site in [Lipa was struck by a huge fire](#), displacing the 1200 people who had been living there. The flames tore through the rubhall structures on the very day of the camps planned eviction, declared in a statement by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

In the build up to the fire, there had already been calls to resolve the existing lack of basic shelter and amenities, which the Lipa site had so far failed to provide. In a [letter](#) sent to the President of the Council of Ministers of BiH and the Minister of Security, Selmo Cikotic, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović expressed her concern that, a year after the closure of the Vucjak camp, another humanitarian crisis was underway in the USC.

Earlier in December, after pressure from the European Union, the Council of Ministers had unanimously decreed the transformation of the temporary Lipa site into an official camp, with the suggestion of provisional accommodation inside former camp Bira, in the city of Bihać. Yet this interim move to house the residents of Lipa, for four months while construction work took place, was mooted by the USC government and the mayor of Bihać.

On the afternoon of 22nd December, some citizens of Bihać gathered in front of Bira, and blocked several IOM vans carrying 46 people-on-the-move who were to be accommodated there. Shortly afterwards, a fire brigade vehicle also arrived in front of the former factory and was parked across one entrance in order to block further access. The following morning an extraordinary meeting was held in USC, with local authorities contesting the decision of the central government of Sarajevo ordering the relocation of people from Lipa to Bira. In reaction, IOM began withdrawing their



Fires rip through the structures in Lipa (Source:[InfoMigrants](#))

staff from Lipa that very day, and only hours later the huge fire broke out, causing thousands to flee to the neighboring fields.

In the aftermath, with few of the structures left standing, a large group of residents tried to head towards the city of Bihać in search of shelter. They were [blocked in the area of Ripac](#), near Lohovski Most, and prevented by Bosnian police and Special Forces from seeking refuge in the cantons capital. As a result, many people have been forced to remain in the remnants of the burnt out site in Lipa, facing freezing temperatures and no substantial support. The Red Cross has been providing one meal a day, meanwhile IOM has completely left the camp, which is currently under the management of the Service for Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Security.

A week after the fire, there was a further attempt by IOM to relocate the people on the move to Bradina, in the municipality of Konjic about 40km from Sarajevo, in a former armed forces barracks. With this announcement, the people in Lipa spent more than 24

hours in 20 buses waiting to be transferred. But after protestation from local authorities and the members of the public in Bradina, the transfer was stopped and the people were disembarked from the coaches again in Lipa. During this period the central government in Sarajevo sent the BiH army to control the area for several days and set up tents.

Since then, the situation in Lipa has remained dire, with multiple people commencing a hunger strike, denouncing the inhumane conditions in which they are forced to live. Via a decree brought in during the autumn of 2019, outreach work by solidarity groups and locals has been hampered in USC, meaning there are limited resources entering the site. Local police have also clamped down on access to Lipa and its surrounds, producing an increasingly hostile situation for the people inside. Throughout, the EU and its implementing partners have been conspicuous by their absence, and this stalemate is set to last the entire winter, with the only outcome being further harm to the transit community stuck there.

ITALY

LULL IN WINTER ARRIVALS

In the month of December volunteers supporting new arrivals in Trieste observed a drop in numbers compared to previous months. This trend conforms to the reduced accessibility of the route, which is made harsher over the mid winter months because of the snow and freezing temperatures.

Alongside this, heightened border controls brought in during 2020 on the Italian border and the increased Covid-19 related measures on urban areas and public transport may have contributed to the drop in presence of new arrivals. But perhaps more concerning is the climate of insecurity which has spread since May of last year. People arriving in Friuli Venezia Giulia (the Italian region bordering Slovenia) remain at a consistent risk of push-back if picked up within the first 10km of the border ([4.1](#) & [4.2](#)). This has a knock-on effect, reducing the number of people who feel safe within the city limits of Trieste.

For those who do avoid the ever present risk of being pushed back to Bosnia–Herzegovina or Serbia, the struggle persists with a massive deficit in winterised accommodation. As noted in the [November Report](#), there are still no operating dormitories in Trieste that can be contacted from the street. Instead, people regularly sleep rough, and report being



Signpost erected in Ferneti (Source: [ANSA](#))

turned away from hotels which were meant to provide emergency shelter. This has increased the feeling of mistrust and fear among the transit community, and is an indignity faced by people-on-the-move and the local homeless community alike.

The alienation of arrivals by the Italian authorities was epitomised by the stunt carried out at the Ferneti police station on the International Day of the Migrants. A [wooden signpost](#) was erected to mark the intersection of routes into Italy, and the departure points of people arriving to Trieste. The crude irony was not lost on spectators, who saw the signs directed to Bosnia and Serbia installed by a police force directly involved in chain push-backs to these countries.

HUNGARY

EUROPEAN COURT OF JUSTICE RULING

On 17th December 2020, the [European Court of Justice \(ECJ\)](#) found Hungary's asylum laws to be in violation of EU rules. In response to an infringement procedure, initiated by the Commission back in 2015, the Court found that it was "virtually impossible" to apply for asylum in Hungary. The ruling focused on the extremely limited access to Hungary's asylum system, primarily referring to the bottleneck caused by the transit zones (prison-like facilities which, until recently, were the only access point into the Hungarian asylum system).

The irony of the matter is that, following another ECJ ruling in May 2020, Hungary had already [shut down its transit zones](#). This is part of Hungary's strategy: Hungary willingly oversteps boundaries set by European and international law, knowing full-well that it will take years before it faces any consequences. In fact, a [very similar phenomenon](#) is currently playing out all over again: since the transit zones were closed down, new laws stipulate that the only legal way to apply for international protection in Hungary is through its embassies in Belgrade or Kiev. This system is in clear violation of international law: Erno Simon, spokesperson of UNHCR Hungary, argued it undermines "both the access to territory and the access to fair procedure - the two pillars of the post-World War II international legal system." Again, the European Union is pursuing an infringement procedure - but as the December ruling showed: once such a procedure is completed after several years, Hungary may have moved on.

Other parts of the recent ruling are more promising. The ruling slammed Hungary's pushback practices. Reaffirming the illegality of pushbacks (which have been de facto legalized in Hungary since 2016) is important -- especially, in light of this year's [European](#)



Pushbacks from Hungary (Source: [Hungarian Helsinki Committee](#))

[Court of Human Rights ruling](#), which de facto held that collective expulsions carried out by Spain had been legal, as well as trends to blur the line between pushbacks and readmissions (e.g. between [Italy and Slovenia](#)). In addition, the ruling made clear that crisis declarations, active in Hungary since the "Summer of Migration" in 2015, are insufficient to override EU rules. This is a rare but welcome signal from an EU institution, especially in light of the myriads of rights suspensions pursued throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

SECURITISATION OF THE BORDER

Since the migration route through Serbia and Hungary became one of the main crossing points into the EU in 2015, Hungary has continued to respond by militarising its Southern border to Serbia, seen most overtly when it became the first country in the region to erect a [4m high and 175km long border fence](#). Although a lot of people-on-the-move are now choosing different routes, for example through Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia to the West, or Romania to the East,

a substantial amount of people still frequent the Serbian-Hungarian border. This fact is not outwardly apparent in mainstream reports and media, but [statistics gathered by UNHCR](#) showed that at least 1567 pushbacks from Hungary into Serbia occurred in November alone.

Five years on from the fated "Summer of Migration", which marked the beginning of an intensive border securitisation drive by Hun-

gary, the authorities are still seeking to erect more physical barriers to block off access to the territory. After the [detection of several tunnels](#), Hungary has built a [10km long underground barrier](#) that was finalized in October of 2020. The Hungarian Ministry of Interior also announced that there is a possibility of [adding more underground barrier sections](#), depending on the situation. This physical measure is situated within a pattern of increasing border police deployment, with Hungary sending [double the number of border officials](#), as well as additional military boats on the River Tisa on its Southern border in the beginning of 2020.



Hungarian police on the Tisa River (Source:Infostart)

These processes of fortification of the border, force people-on-the-move to take more dangerous and clandestine routes with regular reports about people drowning in the River Tisa or severely injuring themselves when trying to cross the border fence. From the relatively small amount of people-on-

the-move that teams on the ground are reaching, numbers of these incidents are hard to estimate, and there is only partial data on these injuries, disappearances and deaths.



Hungarian border with Serbia (Source:InfoMigrants)

SERBIA

SITUATION IN ŠID

Transit communities in Šid, Serbia are facing increasing pressures from internal and external actors as well as from the winter weather. Though there is currently no snow in this part of Serbia, it is cold and rainy, making already difficult conditions miserable. Currently an estimated 100 people are living in squats in and around Šid.

In the past Šid has been popular in the winter months as a stopping point on the way to Croatia, as it does not pose the same geographically extreme conditions as other more

mountainous areas of the border, being relatively flat. However, transit via this border is no less dangerous, and there is regular violence used by the Croatian police during pushbacks. Alongside this, in December there was a violent incident between people involved in the local smuggling network and other people-on-the-move, leading to many of them being moved to camps, and thus having less access to the border.

Furthermore, so-called “taxi games” have become more difficult after a group of taxi

drivers were arrested near Šid, as reported by the Serbian news outlet [Telegraf](#). Fewer taxi drivers have since been available and willing to drive people-on-the-move, especially between Šid and nearby Batrovci on the border to Croatia. Transit communities also report an increase in police presence in the improvised squats and tent shelters where they live, conforming to a wider pattern of harassment and evictions across the country.

Things are also growing increasingly difficult for assistance workers, including BVMN partner No Name Kitchen. As reported by [Radio Slobodna Evropa](#), three volunteers were stopped in their van on 12th December. The volunteers immediately called a lawyer, an activist from the Serbian group Klikaktiv, however the police refused to communicate with the lawyer. Instead the officers verbally abused the volunteers, punching one of them, and arresting another who was from the local community.

On 28th December, a long-term NNK volunteer was deported from Serbia, in spite of Klikaktiv's best efforts. She reports that she went from distributing as usual to being left

alone at the border in Croatia in the dark. These incidents have been shocking to all of the volunteers and add to the overall worsening conditions in Šid. A [recent podcast](#) made by BVMN in collaboration with Klikaktiv has analysed this trend in criminalisation of solidarity.

On top of all of this, December was also the month in which one person from the transit community living near Šid lost his life. On 17th December, Mohammad Almehdi Karboj from Syria, who had been living in Principovac camp, left Šid to cross into Croatia by train. Later that day, his body was found near the local train station. Volunteers from No Name Kitchen got in contact with his friends and family. They never learned the circumstances of his unfortunate death, but the volunteers supported his friends to identify the body, organized a memorial and filmed his burial in Šid so his family could see the service. Mohammad is one of many people who lost their lives along the Balkan route in 2020, and a reminder of the human cost of hard borders.



Squat evictions have been on the rise in Serbia (Source: [Radio Slobodna Evropa](#))

During a press conference on 8th December, Greek Minister of Migration, Notis Mitarakis, showed several short video clips depicting asylum seekers speaking about how they were told to contact monitoring NGOs in order to receive help upon reaching Greece from Turkey. The videos were recorded on a mobile phone, and published without the faces and voices of the asylum seekers interviewed anonymised.

Minister Mitarakis did not provide any contextual information to how the interviews were conducted, nor did he give assurances that the standards for the protection of those interviewed had been met. Questions were subsequently raised as to how and why these videos were filmed, and how would the Ministry or the Lesvos Port Authority justify their publication of these materials, as it was a leak of official procedures.

BVMN partner Disinfo Collective led an [investigation](#) into the videos, identifying that the videos were likely recorded inside isoboxes used as offices by the port authority in Mytilini, Lesvos. Lawyers and legal practitioners with long-term experience on issues related to refugees and asylum have spoken out against the videos, expressing strong concern regarding the legality of such actions, and the state's failure to meet obligations to protect the confidentiality of asylum seeker's personal data during the asylum procedure. One [lawyer involved](#) stated:

"With regard to the receipt of audiovisual material, in accordance with the General Regulation on Personal Data Protection, the prior consent of the data subject is required, which con-

sists in the free, specific, explicit and fully aware indication of this agreement in favor of the processing of data concerning it."

Furthermore, video recording is not foreseen at any stage of the asylum procedure, nor of course at the stage of the pre-investigation procedure carried out by the police or the Coast Guard in the context of the investigation of the illegal entry into Greece.

The primary [responses of Minister Mitarakis](#) to such critiques was to reiterate the current government's xenophobic anti-refugee stance, proposing that "*The vast majority of migrants are economic migrants,*" and that "*it is obvious that these people are not in danger in Turkey and, therefore, they should be given asylum [in Turkey], if necessary*". These statements are not factual, given that Greek Ministry of Migration figures show that about half of those arriving are recognized as refugees, but also that Somalis in particular are recognized as refugees at a very high rate, exceeding 95% in Greece. Further, Turkey recognizes the protection of rights provided by the Geneva Convention only for Syrian citizens, temporarily and in the vast majority of cases on paper, not in practice. In other words, Somalis cannot enjoy the full rights granted to them by asylum in Turkey and are therefore at risk in that country. Mitarakis also tried to deflect blame by focusing on potential misconduct on the side of the Turkish Coast Guard and other Turkish authorities. Such forms of misconduct however do not justify the publication of such materials by Greek authorities, or provide a pass for further misconduct.



Breakdown of the video content
(Source: [Disinfo Collective](#))

CONDITIONS ON SAMOS

The [Vathy camp in Samos](#), initially built to accommodate 650 people, currently houses over 3,500 people – more than five times its capacity. At least 100 camp residents have already tested positive for Covid-19, emphasising the [statement released by MSF](#) that “people in quarantine have very limited access to basic services including sanitation, but also food” and suffer from a lack of “communicated medical response plan from the competent authorities”.

Since the beginning of the year, there have been at least seven fires in the Vathy camp: three separate fires in [April](#), two in [September](#), another fire on the 2nd of [November](#) which destroyed at least 150 people’s accommodation structures and a week later, a [second larger](#) fire burnt the RIC food-line, isolation boxes and 500–700 people’s shelters. [EuroMed Monitor](#) stated plainly that the occurrence of such fires in Greek camps is an “inevitable outcome of [the] appalling conditions” created by the ‘hotspot approach’ on the Aegean Islands.

On the 8th of November, a boat carrying 24 people seeking asylum, including two pregnant women, capsized near Samos. In the event, a [6-year-old child lost his life](#). The father of the young boy was arrested and [charged with endangering his son’s life](#), fac-

ing a 10-year prison sentence if found guilty. These charges are an attack on the right to seek asylum and raise serious concerns on whether [criminalisation of refugees](#) will be used in the future as a “strategy of deterrence” to inhibit others from seeking safety in Europe.

In November, a referral system for human rights violations was created which highlighted how police violence, possible exclusion from health services, unlawful imprisonment and bans to travel are being experienced by camp residents. The appalling conditions of Vathy camp violate international human rights law – in particular, [Article 25 of the UDHR](#) which affirms that: “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family...”.

Additionally to these dire conditions, a powerful earthquake reaching 7.0 on the Richter Scale hit Samos on the 30th of October. International Rescue Committee (IRC) published a report this month to decry the mental toll that the ‘hotspot approach’ has had on arrivals to Samos – demonstrating that the “dangerous, overcrowded and inhumane living conditions” of the Greek camps have resulted in “consistent accounts of severe mental health conditions”.



Burnt tents caused by a fire in November (Source:[InfoMigrants](#))

RACIST ATTACK ON MINORS SHELTER

On the 26th December, when many were still celebrating Christmas, the church-run [shelter for unaccompanied minors in Oreokastro](#), Thessaloniki, was subjected to a shocking racist attack. Despite the 9:00pm curfew currently in place in Greece, at 11:00pm twelve Greek men armed with knives and iron bars gathered outside the facility. Five of them broke into the premises and within seconds reached the courtyard. They chased and beat all those who did not manage to escape, repeatedly shouting “f*** Allah”, “we will slaughter you” and “go back to your country!”

Given that they were armed and that they had gathered illegally during a curfew, it is clear that this attack was premeditated. The event led to four minors between the age of 12 and 15 years old being physically injured. One of those injured had severe breathing problems due to impact injuries on his chest and was consequently [admitted to a hospital](#). According to a [police statement](#), only two of the attackers have been identified and arrested - a 38 year old and his 14 year old son. The son was released shortly after however, while the father is to be [brought before the public prosecutor](#).

In March this year, locals attacked a hotel meant to host refugees in [Vilia](#), and in the same month two people were [shot while outside of Moria camp](#). In May, a building in [Panagitsa](#) was set on fire, and now the latest incident in Thessaloniki is yet another reminder of the increase in far right attacks on transit communities. This is also not the first time the shelter in Oreokastro was subject to racially charged actions either. For instance, in 2016 and 2017 parents of a local public school [protested](#) the admission of minors living in the centre.

The government has failed to condemn such violence. Instead, a MP of the ruling New-Democracy Party, Konstantinos Bogdanos, only days later [tweeted the image of a house block](#), which will be used to shelter unaccompanied minors in Athens, describing it as a “threat to social cohesion and peace.” Amidst an increasingly xenophobic and hostile climate, political endorsements like this only exposes tenants to similar attacks.

GLOSSARY OF REPORTS, DECEMBER 2020

In November BVMN published 25 reports, impacting 707 people-on-the-move. The people in these cases included men, women, children with guardians and unaccompanied children. They also represent a wide demographic, including people from Iran, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, DR Congo, Ivory Coast and Somalia.

-5 pushbacks to Serbia (2 chain from Slovenia, 1 from Croatia, 2 from Romania)
 -6 pushbacks to Bosnia-Herzegovina (2 chain from Italy, 1 chain from Slovenia, 3 from Croatia)
 -3 pushbacks to Greece (1 from Italy, 1 from North Macedonia, 1 from Albania)
 -11 pushbacks to Turkey (1 chain from Bulgaria, 10 from Greece)

LINK	INCIDENT	RECORDED	GROUP	DEMOGRAPHIC
ROMANIA TO SERBIA				
1.1	16 th December	20 th December	20	Afghanistan
1.2	18 th December	29 th December	43	Afghanistan
SLOVENIA TO SERBIA				
2.1	3 rd December	17 th December	2	Afghanistan
2.2	6 th December	17 th December	3	Afghanistan
CROATIA TO SERBIA				
3.1	15 th December	17 th December	4	Afghanistan
ITALY TO BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA				
4.1	17 th September	1 st December	6	Pakistan
4.2	22 nd December	1 st January	10	Morocco, Iraq, Pakistan
SLOVENIA TO BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA				
5.1	25 th November	23 rd December	20	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Morocco, Algeria
CROATIA TO BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA				
6.1	21 st November	9 th December	12	Pakistan, Morocco
6.2	22 nd November	24 th November	20	Pakistan, India, Nepal
6.3	13 th December	29 th November	10	Iran and Iraq
ITALY TO GREECE				
7.1	20 th December	31 st December	2	Afghanistan
ALBANIA TO GREECE				
8.1	25 th November	1 st December	9	Iran, Syria, Morocco
NORTH MACEDONIA TO GREECE				
9.1	8 th December	10 th December	5	Morocco
BULGARIA TO TURKEY				
10.1	15 th December	16 th December	80	Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Tunisia, DR Congo
FIND ALL REPORTS ON THE DATABASE HERE .				

LINK	INCIDENT	RECORDED	GROUP	DEMOGRAPHIC
GREECE TO TURKEY				
11.1	23 rd April	10 th December	30	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Algeria
11.2	21 st May	21 st November	30	Pakistan, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya
11.3	28 th November	1 st December	80	Iraq, Iran
11.4	3 rd December	5 th December	40	Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan
11.5	3 rd December	7 th December	30	Somalia, DR Congo
11.6	4 th December	14 th December	25	Syria, Morocco, Algeria
11.7	11 th December	12 th December	100	Syria, Morocco, Afghanistan
11.8	13 th December	13 th December	1	Iraq
11.9	20 th December	22 nd December	70	Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Somalia, Cote d'Ivoire
11.10	21 st December	22 nd December	55	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Egypt, Algeria

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 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



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