



Border Violence
Monitoring Network



ILLEGAL
PUSH-BACKS AND
BORDER VIOLENCE
REPORTS



MINES  **STOP MI**

MARCH 2021 - BALKAN REGION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March, the Border Violence Monitoring Network* (BVMN) recorded 31 pushback cases, impacting 671 people-on-the-move in the Balkans. This report looks at the direct and indirect violence that people face at borders in the region and the way border enforcement has adapted to maximise the abuse of transit communities. In profile were those killed at borders and interiors last month – directly because of the lack of safe passage into the EU.

This report looks at the mine detonation that killed a group on foot in Croatia, and the multiple accidents and pushbacks on trucking routes across the EU external border. Understanding how people are forced into these precarious routes requires attention to the use of surveillance and violent pushbacks. Based on first hand accounts recorded in March, this report explores the use of fixed security installations on the Hungarian border fence, and the mobile surveillance via drones on the Croatian border.

Trends in apprehension and removal are also analysed, showing how pushback violence transcends direct physical violence, and shapes the experiences of children and young families. The report looks at the experience of these groups at the Croatian border, and also picks up on the legal challenge being brought by a minor against the Hellenic Coast Guard. Multiple testimonies from two pushbacks from Bulgaria were also documented: one chain pushback in which a transit group was pushed first into Greece, and later to Turkey, and one directly from Bulgaria to Turkey.

On a policy level, the latest law changes in Slovenia have expanded the powers that can be mobilised against transit communities entering the country. Within the context of narrowing arrivals to Italy, and a tightening of pushback practices via Croatia, this marks a worrying turn in the policing of the Western Balkan Route. Meanwhile in Hungary, the extension of this “crisis” model is further analysed in light of the latest European Court of Human Rights ruling and the shifting landscape of international organisations operating out of Budapest.

Over a year after the first lockdowns were implemented across Europe, the deteriorating Covid-19 situation in camps in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Aegean islands are a reminder of the differentiated experience of the pandemic. In March, conditions in various transit sites – from Athens to the Una Sana Canton – were punctuated with violent urban policing and harassment of squatted and homeless communities. In the month where BVMN published its 1000th testimony, it is sadly apparent that practices at the EU external border remain consistently aggressive to people-on-the-move, both in the systematic use of pushbacks and the violence felt within state borders.

**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, Disinfo Collective, Josoor, [re:]ports Sarajevo, InfoKolpa, Centre for Peace Studies, Mare Liberum, IPSIA, 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 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.

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

PUSHBACKS FROM CROATIA OF FAMILIES AND UNACCOMPANIED MINORS

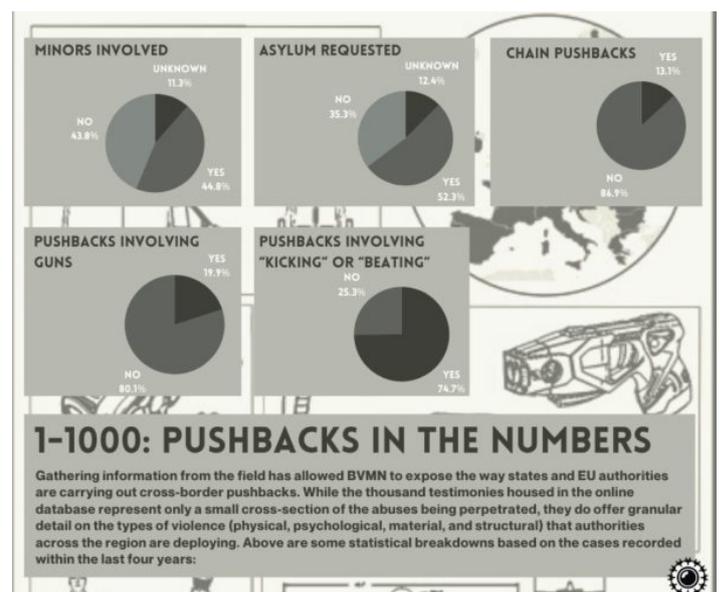
During the last months, BVMN member organisations operating at the external EU border in Bosnia–Herzegovina have witnessed an increased arrival of families and unaccompanied minors, mainly from Afghanistan. In most cases the families, often including very young children and babies, are arriving from camps in Greece, where delays in their asylum procedures or endless waiting for their family reunification claims has led them to continue their journeys straight to Western Europe. However, in the majority of cases these families and unaccompanied minors subsequently find themselves stranded in northwest Bosnia–Herzegovina.

With this demographic shift, there has also been an uptick in the pushback of groups including families or unaccompanied minors (see [6.1](#) & [6.2](#)), and [Danish Refugee Council](#) report that this trend has increased throughout Spring 2021. The experience of minors varies across cases. While very young children are rarely themselves the subjects of physical violence, they are often witness to very brutal and humiliating acts carried out against their parents/guardians. In one case from March 2021, a three- and ten-year-old watched as a Croatian police officer held a knife to their father's throat, threatening to kill him (see [6.12](#)). Reportedly, the officer also hit their father on his head two times with the knife's handle. When the children started shouting and crying they were told to "shut up" by one of the officers. In light of these incidents, parents often report how children have difficulty sleeping through the night, and as explored in BVMN's [November Report](#), the lasting impact of these traumatic events represents a slow violence that extends beyond the pushback itself.

Meanwhile unaccompanied minors, who often range from early to mid-teens, are often the subject of more direct violence. Under European law unaccompanied and separated children should not be refused entry into a country. Nevertheless, a case recorded in March described the way five unaccompanied minors were pushed back, even though the Croatian officers were aware of their age (see [6.3](#)). The pushback involved them being laid out prone on the floor and beaten with batons, before being forced into the Korana river. In such cases, minors are intentionally merged with adults in the transit group to

affect widespread violence, but the impact of these attacks for young people takes on additional dimensions, forming part of their juvenile experience.

BVMN member Center for Peace Studies published [a report](#) in 2020 examining how repeated exposure to traumatic pushback events during childhood can have adverse effects on the brain and nervous system. Moreover, the lack of safe spaces and constant movement exacerbates the trauma and hinders recovery, which has knock-on effects for individuals, social groups and families. The experiences of unaccompanied minors and young families are part of a wider spectrum of trauma impacting people at the Croatian border. While nobody should be subject to these abuses, the treatment of these demographics can be particularly damaging.



Infographic on violations within pushbacks (Source: [BVMN](#))

THE WAITING GAME

Many people-on-the-move try to bypass Croatia during their transit, because of the limited asylum access and risk of police violence. But there has been a recent rise in pushbacks from the immediate border area where families crossing from Bosnia–Herzegovina present directly to the Croatian police in order to request asylum.

This trend in transit and pushbacks has been driven by multiple reasons. Firstly the length of journeys to Slovenia or Italy are a huge barrier to movement for groups with young children. Meanwhile, for others, separation from family during previous pushbacks has led them to multiple attempts to re enter Croatia and be reunited with relatives in the asylum centres. But while Croatian police are mandated to receive requests for international protection, years of evidence collected by BVMN has shown illegal pushbacks to be the default approach taken by law enforcement.

One testimony recorded the experience of a group of families that walked overnight (around 10 kilometres) into the Croatian interior before contacting the authorities to request asylum (see 6.2). On this occasion, they called the police using a phone. When the police came, the request for asylum was ignored. The officers took and examined the phone that had been used to contact them, before pushing them back at a location that

was some 25 or more kilometres from where they had started. The family in this case state that they have tried to make multiple asylum requests this way, either by calling the police or contacting bodies such as International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Reportedly in these cases, the family were asked for their location, and when police arrived they were pushed back to Bosnia–Herzegovina.

In another incident, a group entered Croatia and waited on a main road near Maljevac until they were found by police (see 6.12). The respondent showed the officers copies of the documents held by his wife and child who were already hosted in the asylum centre in Zagreb. However, the Croatian police ignored his request and violently pushed the group back to Bosnia–Herzegovina close to Miral camp.

While to some extent the physical ordeal of walking hundreds of kilometres is mitigated by these shorter attempts, people still come up against the violent gatekeeping of asylum. Whether approaching or avoiding Croatian police, the likelihood of expulsion is arguably the same. These “shallow” pushbacks are just one of a range of removal strategies that flaunt international law alongside deep interior removals and surveillance of transport routes, they represent the increasing impermeability of the EU external border.

FATAL RISKS PRESENTED BY TRUCK GAMES

While the majority of pushbacks reported by BVMN describe the removal of people who cross borders on foot, there are many other means of crossing the EU borders utilized by the transit community. These means reflect the increasing levels of surveillance and police violence that people need to avoid, and the huge distances people need to travel undetected (made worse in recent years because of the extension of chain pushbacks).

Haulage or trucking routes are often used to navigate borders, and bypass countries where asylum access is limited. However last month, cases from Slovenia, Croatia and Greece all highlighted the physical risks of embarking, stowing away and being caught on trucks in order to cross borders.

In one case recorded in March, a group that had boarded a large truck in Serbia managed to reach an industrial area near Zagreb,

Croatia. But when the group exited the cargo area of the truck, they were attacked by some factory workers who also called the police. When the officers arrived, they participated in the beating (see 4.1). The group were then expelled to Serbia, in a cruel cross-border pushback near Batrovci in which the groups’ sleeping bags, coats, shoelaces and medicine were taken.

A further case where law enforcement were alerted by haulage staff was recorded in March from Slovenia (see 3.1). The group were removed from a truck near Kozina, received Islamophobic from haulage staff and were then subject to a violent chain pushback to Serbia. A similar chain pushback was also affected from the Obrežje border crossing, where a group were subject to a police beating after being detected by a truck scanner (see 5.2). This kind of violence is not isolated to land trucking routes, and in March BVMN

also shared a report of a person being attacked after disembarking a truck on the Superfast ferry line between Greece and Italy. The spread of cases shows that across different EU member states, intensive controls of transport routes are feeding directly into violent pushbacks.

Alongside assaults and illegal forced removals, the nature of stowing away in trucks also poses huge risks in terms of suffocation and road traffic accidents. Multiple cases from across Europe have shown the deadly way these trucking routes claim lives, with the death of seven people in a [container bound from Serbia to Paraguay](#) being just one of the latest examples. Last month in Croatia a further [four people were killed](#) when a truck crashed on the highway and the cargo crushed them. The remainder of the transit group also received severe injuries while being thrown from the wreckage. These

avoidable deaths and injuries serve as a grim reminder of the fatal border regime that the EU is supporting.

The proliferation of these [preventable] tragedies across multiple borders shows the lack of safe and legal means of entry for transit communities. The lack of response to these deaths also points to the complicity of the authorities maintaining hardline migration regimes. In a recent article [Harshi Walia](#) referred to the death of people in transit as “border killings”, a term that aptly signals the presence of a perpetrator. The fact that people continue to die or be violently pushed back is not a byproduct, but an intention of the EU’s border regime. What’s more, the way pushbacks have spread from the immediate border areas into interiors and commercial settings (such as haulage routes) shows the way violence against people-on-the-move has bled from the state into public spheres.



Truck that overturned in Croatia, killing four people (Source: [Ivica Galovic/PIXSELL/Picture-alliance](#))

FEATURES OF THE HUNGARIAN BORDER FENCE

BVMN testimonies within the last two months have given further insights into the way the Hungarian border fence functions as a tool of violence, surveillance and deterrence. [First built in 2015](#), and stretching the entire 175 kilometre border between Hungary and Serbia, the barrier forms both a physical and symbolic piece of architecture within EU border securitisation. Attention to the various functions of this fixed border installation illustrate that it is far from “just a fence”, but embodies the encroachment of technological surveillance into processes of border violence.

The barrier itself is made up of two fences, stands four metres high, and includes rolls of concertina razor wire. The specification is designed to inhibit transit, and for those who must risk crossing it, the threat of serious injury is ever present. In an incident in early March (see [1.1](#)), one respondent describes falling from the first fence and breaking his leg upon landing. Such injuries, coupled with the cuts from razor wire, are common experiences for those who have no legal options of entry into Hungary from Serbia. As described in the [February report](#), hospitalisation from these injuries is neither a reprieve from pushbacks, and the respondent was described being removed to Serbia despite needing further treatment.

Alongside this violent deterrence, the fence is also designed to make illegal removals more efficient. Pushbacks from Hungary are intensive processes that are carried out by a variety of police divisions and military personnel who operate in the border area, alongside private security and vigilante groups. One of the functions of the barrier is

to connect up mobile units from these authorities, who are dispersed along its length in patrol vehicles, watch towers and border stations. This is achieved with a [service road](#) which runs between the two fences. The road acts as a thoroughfare for the fast arrival of apprehending officers (see) and the transportation of captured transit groups for pushback. The Hungarian authorities are alerted to crossings by a web of [cameras and thermal sensors](#), and recent testimonies suggest that respondents have heard [alarms](#) being set off when in proximity to the fence.

After apprehension, a network of small gates feed off the security road, allowing Hungarian officers to carry out collective expulsions into rural Serbian farmland on the other side of the border. At these gates, officers often use handheld cameras to record the pushbacks of transit groups, but a recent testimony also referred to [fixed speaker systems](#) which play automated messages in multiple languages (such as Arabic, Pashto and Urdu).

“When we came closer to the speakers, they [the speakers] said “don’t come, go back!”

A [Reuters report](#) from 2017 confirms the fact that speaker systems were indeed installed along the border fence in order to broadcast automated messages which directed asylum seekers towards the transit zones. Yet with these [transit zones](#) closed since May 2020, and access to asylum [all but shut off within Hungary](#), these PA transmissions only help to reaffirm the dissonance between high tech automated border regimes and freedom of movement.

CHARTING CROATIAN DRONE USAGE

Since the closure of the humanitarian corridor Croatia has invested extensively in surveillance equipment to monitor crossings from Bosnia–Herzegovina and Serbia. Unlike the Hungarian model, which relies more heavily on technologies centred around the physical border barrier, Croatia has focused on more mobile detection equipment. These assets, like helicopters and portable thermal imaging sensors, can be deployed across borders and interiors to find transit groups and direct police forces to their location. One of the centrepieces to this arsenal has been an ever expanding fleet of unmanned drones.

A testimony shared by BVMN in March confirms recent drone usage in border operations (see [6.7](#)), with the respondent stating that they had heard the device flying overhead prior to capture near the E71 highway in Croatia. This connects with multiple other witness accounts that cite drones during apprehension, many of which were compiled in a [recent BVMN submission](#) to the UN’s thematic report on Race, Borders and Digital Technology. Open source researcher [Jack Sapoch](#) has tracked extensively the development of drones and their role in detecting transit groups in Croatia. One of the latest procurements by the Croatian Ministry of Interior (MUP) is the 4x eRIS III long-range drone, built by King ICT/Planet IX and Erickson Nikola Tesla. As [Sapoch states](#):

“the 4x eRIS III can spot people at 10 km in daytime and 3 km at night with a max flight speed of 130 km/hr. Moreover, it is designed to send direct video link to the National Coordination Center in Zagreb”

The coordination of these detection capacities with traditional police methods has had a stark impact on the speed and frequency with which Croatian authorities can intercept transit groups. As with a high proportion of reports recorded by BVMN from Croatia, drone sightings are regularly followed by extreme levels of abuse from the arriving officers. Examples of this interchange between surveillance and applied violence can be seen in incidents where detainees were [choked by the neck](#) or targetted with [CS spray](#) by Croatian police.

A recent Guardian article by [Andrei Popoviciu](#) also provided a critique of technology as an enhancement to border violence. Looking at the “battery” of drones and other surveillance equipment used in Croatia, Hungary and Serbia, Popoviciu found that detection devices were being weaponised by EU member states against people-on-the-move. According to a January [statement by the EU Commission](#), in the last 5 years Croatia alone has received 109.23 million euros from the Internal Security Fund to “to better protect and manage the EU’s external borders”. With such vast amounts of money being funneled into high tech security, and the continuation of heinous rights abuses, these assets can be seen as direct companion pieces to the violence of police on the ground.



4x eRIS III model (Source:[Davor Pongračić / CROPIX](#))

PUSHBACKS FROM BULGARIA TO TURKEY

This month, BVMN took five testimonies of pushbacks from Bulgaria: two from a chain pushback on the 10th March from Bulgaria to Greece (see [10.2](#)), and then Greece to Turkey, and three from a pushback that occurred on 15th March from Bulgaria directly to Turkey (see [11.2](#)). In both incidents, the respondents describe experiencing violence and abuse from the authorities while detained, as well as during the pushback itself.

On 10th March, 55 people were apprehended in Bulgaria near [Valche pole](#), by six Bulgarian police officers wearing blue uniforms with “police” written on their shoulders and back. The police took all of the belongings from everyone in the group and put them in the back of the cars, kicking and hitting them along the way. The group was driven less than 30 minutes, first on a paved road and then on an unpaved road, with fast driving. The group asked for asylum, however, the respondent said the officers:

“didn’t let us talk too much, but we did talk about getting us to the camp, but they didn’t accept and they just took us to the border and took everything from us. Then they started screaming after they took everything from us and kept saying ‘go go go.’”

In Greece, the transit group then walked for three days until they arrived in [Mikro Dereio](#), where they were apprehended at night by three officers. The transit group was then taken to a detention site in the middle of a small village, where over 100 people were already detained. The following day, the people were taken roughly 60 at a time in a large military truck to a wooded area along the Evros/Meriç river, where they were met by ten officers armed with guns wearing green camouflage military uniforms with Greek flags on them.

The officers repeatedly hit the people in the group with batons, kicked them, and punched them in the face. One Syrian man “couldn’t breathe because the officer hit him straight to the chest.”

They also took the rest of the group’s belongings, “*even the shoes*”. Around 18 people at a time were loaded onto a green, military-style boat that was about 2 by 4 meters and powered by a motor.

On the 15th of March, a transit group of 16 people were separated into two groups and pushed back at slightly different spots at the same time. 16 people (all Syrian) were walking in Bulgaria when they were apprehended at about 11am. They had walked for about 30km through Bulgaria from crossing the river at the border before they were caught. The respondents describe being attacked by police dogs at the moment of apprehension, which is consistent with other testimonies from [previous pushbacks from Bulgaria](#).

Everyone from the transit group was then subject to a body search and had their belongings confiscated. They were forced into what is described as Jeeps with a box in the back, eight people at a time. They drove for about an hour in total until they arrived at the border. The driving was reckless and everyone in the box kept colliding with each other. When they arrived at the border, there were 4–5 more officers there, wearing the same uniforms as the previous officers. At the border, the transit group was hit with branches, kicked, and punched by the officers. The group were reduced to just their trousers and were bare feet. The place where they were pushed back through the fence was described as not an ‘official’ door, but rather a hole in the fence. In this way the transit group was made to crawl back into Turkey.



Pushbacks in the tri-border area between Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey (Source: [BVMN](#))

UPDATE ON THE SITUATION

GREECE

MINOR LAUNCHES LEGAL CHALLENGE OVER PUSHBACK

[Human Rights Watch](#) recognises that Greek officials have resorted to using unprecedented levels of border violence against people-on-the-move arriving into Greek territories. Pushbacks from the Aegean Islands back to Turkey have become increasingly frequent, and alarmingly violent.

Last month, Global Legal Action Network (GLAN) lodged a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) on behalf of an unaccompanied minor who, between 8th and 9th September 2020, was taken from inside the Vathy RIC and ["subject to a life threatening pushback to Turkey, along with another minor"](#).

"...The Coast Guard officers drove the ship into the middle of the Aegean sea, forced the two teenagers into an inflatable, motorless raft and left them to drift. The children paddled with their hands until they were rescued by the Turkish Coast Guard." ([GLAN 2021](#))

The case that stimulated the filing of an application to ECtHR involved a [collective expulsion](#) of 16 Afghan asylum-seekers to Turkey by the Hellenic Greek Coast Guard on 8th September 2020, whilst the children in the aforementioned case, aged 15 and 16, successfully arrived at Vathy RIC in Samos. The

morning after arriving at the RIC, the two children presented themselves to the authorities in order to register as asylum-seekers. Not only were the pair denied the fundamental human right to ask for asylum, as protected in international and EU law (Art. 18 of the EU Charter with due respect to 1951 Geneva Convention and Art. 78 of the TFEU), both were apprehended and abducted from Vathy camp by Greek officers under the pretence that they were being taken to quarantine. Instead, they were placed in an inflatable raft and left adrift in the Aegean Sea.

"The officers escorted them to the port where they were forced aboard a Hellenic Coast Guard vessel, handcuffed, and had their phones and money confiscated...." Once rescued, ***"they were detained in Turkey for about 9 days, before being released, destitute and without support."*** ([GLAN 2021](#))

Abandoning children in the sea on rafts amounts to torture – violating Art. 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Art. 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The complaint to ECtHR pertains to yet another challenge against Greece's systematic practice of illegal pushbacks and collective expulsions in the Aegean Sea.

POLICE BRUTALITY, MOVEMENT OF THE PLATIAS

The month of March marked a crucial turning point on issues of police brutality in Greece. Over the last year, the current New Democracy administration has used the pandemic and lockdown as an excuse to significantly expand the power of the police, while violence and abuses of these new powers have largely gone unchecked. [Human rights groups and opposition parties](#) have accused the government of cracking down on protests under the pretext of fighting the virus. As of the beginning of March, Greek Ombudsman Andreas Potakis said [reports about police violence](#) have risen by 75 percent during the past year. Much of this [violence has targeted](#)

[migrants](#), asylum seekers, people-of-color, while in wealthy urban neighborhoods police are rarely seen.

This changed slightly on 9th March, when a [video](#) went viral of police harassing and beating a family in the middle-class Athenian suburb of New Smyrni. In the video, a man is seen being beaten to the ground by several officers while shouting "it hurts". This event [lead to weeks](#) of protests against police brutality, many of which were violently suppressed by police. Several protestors were imprisoned, with reports of at least one person being [tortured while in detention](#). "Police

violence and impunity have a long record in Greece and in no case can they be considered ‘isolated incidents,’” said Gabriel Sakellaridis, Amnesty International’s executive director in Greece. “Especially in the last year and a half, it is pretty evident that there is a hike in these incidents.” ([Politico](#))

While the problematics of the situation are clear—that it took an instance of police brutality in a white, middle-class suburb to draw attention to spark public outrage at a form of state violence that has plagued minority communities for at least the last year—it has opened up important discussions and has already lead to some changes. Connections have been built between migrant, anarchist,

feminist, and other struggles, recognizing the interconnectedness of their struggles against an increasingly authoritarian state. When french anarchist Errol was incarcerated without due process again after an antiracist demonstration in late March, calls for solidarity focused on broader issues of police brutality, illegal incarceration and deportation of those considered “undesirable” in some way by the state. Neighborhood demonstrations throughout the city every weekend in March brought together local struggles against racism and xenophobia, police brutality, the lockdown, and mass incarceration – showing the connected fight against the border and internal state violence.

CROATIA

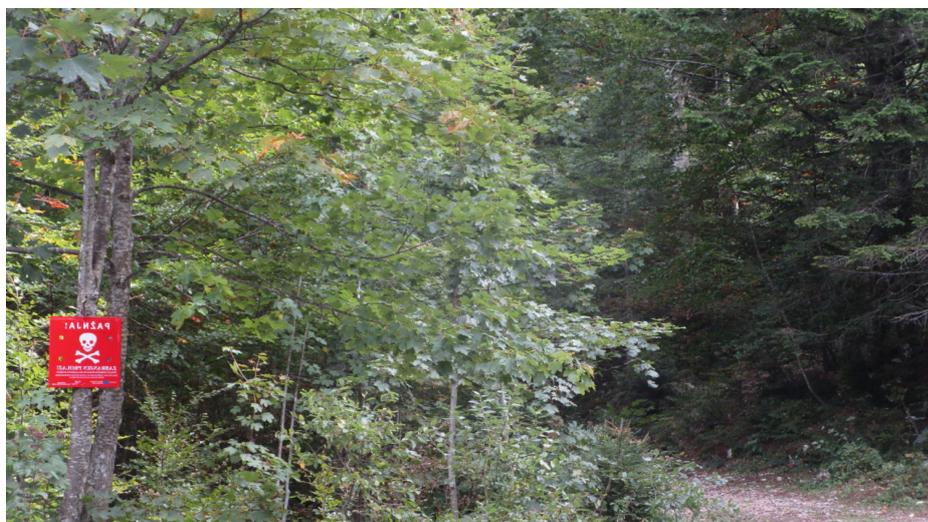
MINE DETONATION CAUSES FATALITY AND INJURIES

26 years after the end of the Yugoslav war, still many anti-personnel landmines are spread across countries such as Croatia. These remnants of war represent a permanent danger, especially for the people-on-the-move. Denied safe and legal ways to enter the EU, people are forced to take risky routes in the woods and avoid official roads, despite the presence of unexploded ordinances that lie underfoot in the more remote countryside and mountain areas.

On 4th March, a transit group stepped on an undiscovered landmine during their journey from Bosnia-Herzegovina to Croatia. The number of people injured is still unclear but Marko Bičanić, the [mayor of Saborsko](#) (HR), confirmed that one person died, and network member [Are You Serious reported](#) four were injured, two of whom were admitted to the hospital in Ogulin (HR). An [article in Nezavisne](#) cites Davor Vukelja, the hospital’s director as saying that the two people treated in Ogulin were from Pakistan – the origin of the other members of the transit group remains unknown. According to [Infomigrants](#), “[p]olice reportedly arrived at the scene soon after the blast and picked up another 10 migrants who had left the scene of the accident after an hours-long search on Friday.”

"I feel sorry for these people, I hope that the migrant problems will be solved soon, because, no matter how much they complain that it is not easy for us with migrants, it is much harder for them," [said Marko Bičanić](#).

The rhetoric of the mayor of Saborsko is not shared by the national authorities, and the priority of the Croatian government and the EU is not the safety of the people-on-the-move. Rather, the focus remains on securitising the border, flouting international protection laws in favor of pushbacks and border control methods that use violence and torture. This mine explosion sits within a list of other fatalities – such as drownings and traffic accidents – which represents border violence at its fullest.



Minefield on the BiH-HR border (Source:[BVMN](#))

SLOVENIA

ASYLUM DENTED BY NEW “CRISIS” LAWS

In March 2021 the Slovenian parliament approved amendments of the [International Protection Act](#) and the [Foreigners Act](#), bringing further deterioration of migrants’ and refugees’ rights in Slovenia.

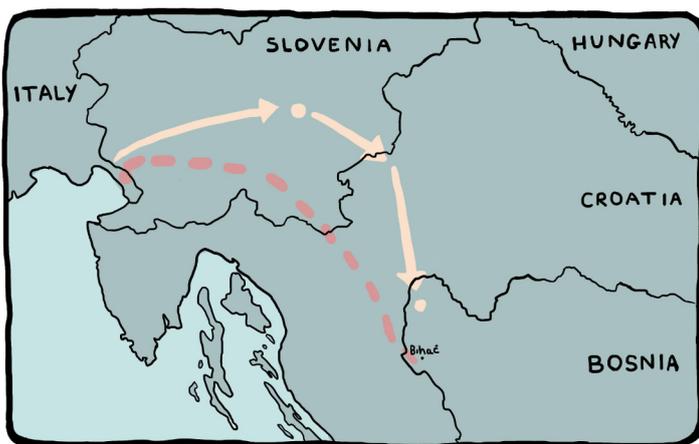
The Slovenian government has once again introduced amendments of the Foreigners Act which could effectively suspend the right to claim asylum in Slovenia. The [suspension of right to asylum](#) in the articles 10a and 10b of the Foreigners Act was already introduced in 2017, but was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court. This time the government introduces a new dubious legal term named “complex migration crisis” in the infamous articles 10.a and 10.b of the Foreigners Act. With these amendments in place the Ministry of Interior is in charge of monitoring the migration situation in Slovenia and able to suggest to the government to put forward the vote on declaration of the “complex migration crisis” in Slovenia. There are no clear conditions or indications stated in the Act that would define when such a crisis would occur. The stated conditions are vague and describe a general state of crisis, such as that “effective functioning of the legal and welfare state is endangered”, that “ensuring public order and peace is endangered”, that “effective functioning of the economy is being threatened”.

The recognition of “complex migration crisis” is the sole responsibility of the Ministry of Interior and can be approved by a vote of absolute

majority in the parliament. If this is to happen, Slovenia would effectively close its borders to those seeking international protection. The police will be granted the authority to simply transport a person who has crossed the border irregularly to the border and refer him/her/them to the country from where he/she/they has entered Slovenia without any procedure and procedural guarantees. If a person states the intention to seek asylum, the police can reject his/her claim as unjustified and refer him/her/them to the country from where he/she has entered Slovenia. Nominally, this can be done if there are no recognized systemic deficiencies of the asylum system in the said country and the person will not face danger of torture or ill-treatment upon return.

The problem is that currently, in defiance of numerous reports, testimonies, civil investigations and even court judgements, the brutal violence conducted by the Croatian police against people on the move is not recognized in Slovenia as torture or ill-treatment, and in fact since 2018 more than 25.000 readmissions to Croatia have been successfully executed. Slovenia has been recognized as a country with systemic deficiencies in its asylum system twice by the Italian courts in [Genoa](#) and [Rome](#). Furthermore, violation of right of access to asylum, prohibition of collective expulsions and prohibition of torture was recognized by the [Slovenian Administrative Court](#) in December 2020, where the final decision is now pending at the Supreme Court.

Numerous [testimonies](#) and [investigations](#) also show the Slovenian police systematically deny the right to seek asylum by ignoring asylum requests and using readmission procedures in chain pushbacks to Croatia. The recent amendment of the Foreigners Act is therefore the newest try at a legal maneuver with the aim to legitimize human rights violations that have been going on in practice without sanction for many years. So far no steps have been taken to challenge the amendments at the Constitutional Court, although the amendment is in direct contradiction to the Ombudsman’s opinion and the Constitutional Court’s decision.



Chain pushbacks in which Slovenia participate
(Source: [Brush&Bow](#))

BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS IN CAMPS

The dramatic increase in Covid-19 cases in Bosnia-Herzegovina over the past month has drastically affected the transit community in the Una Sana Canton (USC), particularly with the disproportionate restrictions imposed on their movement. On 5th March, the first [cases of Covid-19 were recorded](#) at TRC Borici, which houses families and unaccompanied minors. Infections were found both among the beneficiaries and the NGO employees working inside, and the camp was subsequently put in lockdown. At the end of March, TRC Sedra (another family camp in USC) was also put in lockdown after the discovery of 11 positive cases among the beneficiaries. An entry and exit ban was imposed on all residents as a result.

At the Lipa camp remains unclear how many positive cases exist, though the camp was put in lockdown for several days and the authorities said there were at least 120 infections recorded. During this short lockdown, about 150 people were placed inside the restaurant area, which became a temporary quarantine tent (though it was not prepared in any way for this purpose).

Confirmed cases of Covid-19 were also reported in TRC Blažuj and Ušivak, in the vicinity of Sarajevo. However, the most dramatic situation was reported at TRC Miral, in Velika Kladusa, where PCR tests were carried out on all the beneficiaries of the camp (about 700) and 137 tested positive.

The escalation in the number of positive cases within the transit community has not only led to the total closure of the camps, violating the freedom of movement of people in transit and preventing the registration of new arrivals within the camps, but has also led to a series of measures taken deliberately to reduce, if not eliminate, the presence of people in transit in the city centre.

In early March, members of the Operational Group for the Coordination of Activities and Supervision of the Situation of Migrants and Refugees in Una Sana Canton confirmed the [renewed movement](#) of the transit community into the area. It is claimed that some 2,000 people-on-the-move are in USC outside the reception system and forced to live on the

streets and in abandoned buildings. The cantonal government stated that in the first two weeks of March alone, almost 1,000 new arrivals were recorded in the Canton, most of them coming from the TRCs Blažuj and Ušivak, or pushed back from Croatia.

In the same meeting of the Task Force for Migration Management, the need to urgently open new camps in other parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina was underlined due to the rise in arrivals, especially with the arrival of good weather. This statement was also echoed by the Minister of Internal Affairs of USC, Nermin Kljajić, who has called for the evacuation of all squats and the transfer of the transit community outside the Canton.

The restrictive measures taken against the transit community, defined as a "serious epidemiological problem of safety and health and a risk for the local population", have led to increased control by the police authorities in the streets and abandoned buildings. This has spread not only fear for the transit communities targeted by these exclusionary policies, but also brought in an increase in episodes of criminalisation of solidarity towards volunteers and activists supporting these groups.



Illustration of camp Lipa (Source: [Brush&Bow](#))

URBAN POLICING IN BIHAĆ

As people-on-the-move continue to come to Bihać from Serbia and southern parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina, in particular Sarajevo, and as the weather improves, there have been changes in urban policing. While there have been slightly fewer evictions from large informal settlements (“squats”) in the city, those living outside the central area report that police officers often block them from entering Bihać. If transit groups do attempt to enter, they risk being forcibly taken by police to Lipa camp, some 25 kilometers south of the city.

One young man recently reported having had to walk back from Lipa camp on three separate occasions in the past month. These removals limit access to essential services, including the ability to purchase food, retrieve water and maintain contact with family (with obstacles to access data and charging).

In rare cases there have been reports of violent removals to camp Lipa. In particular, people living outside of a camp in Bihać report being violently removed by the police

several times. One person described a removal coordinated by the Service for Foreign Affairs (SFA). Two officers dressed in grey uniforms, accompanied by another in blue, attended the place where he was sleeping and physically assaulted him, as well as using verbal abuse. During the raid, several other squatted houses were cleared, and in total five minors were sent to a family camp, while three young adults were taken to Lipa camp.

People-on-the-move also report stricter curfew enforcement than the general population. Individuals have been stopped and told to go back to their accommodation as early as 8pm (curfew is 9pm). This, too, limits access to services including support from solidarity organisations. Recently police have also been more frequently removing people-on-the-move from public areas like the city center and public parks (though this was already an existent practice). The use of Covid-19 measures combine with regular eviction tactics to create an increasingly hostile situation for transit communities around Bihać.

CONDITIONS AND INTERNAL VIOLENCE IN BOSANSKA BOJNA

In the area of Bojna around 200–300 people-on-the-move continue to live close to the Bosnian-Croatian border. Most of them are families with small children, as documented in a recent [Guardian article](#). With such proximity to the border, more frequent crossings are possible. Though this often means insufficient infrastructure for both daily needs and recovering from violent pushbacks, as profiled in BVMN’s [November Report](#).

Getting food and hygiene products takes hours of walking, while access to money transfers and hospitals are even further away. This distance means that squat residents often depend on support from outside. Yet, for several weeks humanitarian aid and medical support, even from larger bodies like the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has been prohibited by police. The access roads to the border squats are blocked by the police, and only locals can enter. Solidarity groups continue to try to support people with essential items, but getting food, clothes, hygiene products and phones for the transit community in Bojna has become extremely hard.

Meanwhile just across the border, transit groups continue to face regular violence and

theft at the hands of the Croatian police forces. Groups are regularly forced to strip naked, and have their phones and power-banks removed. These devices are the most important tools for reaching the EU, and are systematically destroyed. The Croatian police also steal money, and take away belongings such as sleeping bags, coats and shoes. In tandem with physical violence, this drain on the resources of families in the Bojna area is also a cyclical form of violence engineered to slow down future border crossings.

Coupled with this recurrent violence, Bosanska Bojna has also been host to recent episodes of intimidation and violence from a group of locals. On 30th March, two journalists were interviewing a group of families who live in a ruined house 100 meters from the border, but were attacked by angry residents, who insulted them and threatened to damage their car. The journalists shared that the two men were extremely aggressive and questioned their right to film in the location.

The same scenario played out again at another abandoned house, with the local person becoming aggressive and demanding that the families inside leave. Some of the families in the area shared that this aggres-

sion was a frequent occurrence, and that villagers called on a particular man from the neighbourhood to intimidate squat residents, sometimes with a firearm. In this incident from late March, the person was seen to be

hounding people out of the squats, acts which the local police observed but did not prevent. Several locals were later taken to Velika Kladuša police station and held there for questioning, but were soon released.



Bosanska Bojna on the BiH–HR border (Source: [Alessio Mamo/Guardian](#))

HUNGARY

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND THE HUNGARIAN ASYLUM SYSTEM

On 2nd March, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) [delivered its verdict](#) in the case of an Afghan–Iranian family who had been detained at the Hungarian “transit zone” Röszke. The family, who was represented by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, was detained for the entire duration of their asylum procedure, at times lacked access to food, and was not provided with a translator.

The ECtHR ruled that the family was unlawfully detained, joining the legal consensus on the issue. This ruling is significant in that it reaches a different conclusion compared to the [ECtHR’s controversial Grand Chamber ruling](#) from November 2019, where the Court had found that the detention in transit zones

did not constitute unlawful deprivation of liberty. However, this reversal comes almost a year after Hungary has closed down the transit zones due to a ECJ ruling discussed in earlier [reports](#).

A different set of international organizations has also made headlines in Hungary during the past month. [UNHCR condemned](#) the continuation of the legal system underpinning Hungary’s pushbacks. In particular, Hungary has once more extended the ‘crisis situation due to mass immigration’ despite decreasing numbers of arrivals to the EU. Under this crisis-state, pushbacks are domestically legalised even though the [ECJ has made clear](#) that they violate international law. In stark

contrast to this condemnation, UNHCR is expanding its footprint in Hungary. During a [ribbon cutting ceremony](#) to inaugurate new UNHCR and UN Office of Counter Terrorism offices, Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó made racist claims linking migration and terrorism. In this context, Lorenzo Pasquali, head of UNHCR Hungary, thanked the Hungarian government for its continued support.

Both of these examples showcase the ambivalent role played by international organizations in the repression and securitisation of the EU's border. On the one hand strategic litigation and official statements can put pressure governments to better their way. On the other hand, international organisations are ultimately dependent on national governments and can become repressive actors in their own right by providing legal and narrative support for externalisation and securitisation policies.

ITALY

COVID-19 AND NEW ARRIVALS

During the month of March transit groups slowly started again to arrive in Trieste, Italy after months of reduced arrivals. Most times people were arriving in Piazza Libertà (where Linea d'Ombra and Strada Si.Cura are operating daily) in small groups of 3 to 5 individuals. By the end of the month, roughly 100 people had passed through the square seeking support. A certain increase was registered also in the Covid-19 quarantine facilities.

Even though Trieste and the surrounding region is considered as a red zone for Covid-19 in Italy (alongside most of the country), people seem to be able to cross and continue their journey. This differs to the situation that played out in 2020 when the red zone meant the cessation of transportation and a ban on leaving the city.

The Hotel Alabarda, a Caritas-led centre providing winterised accommodation, seems to be currently out of operation. Alongside this there is a broader lack of information or pro-

vision for people who reach Trieste, further impacting the street homelessness issue. At least in terms of illegal removals there has been a slight reprieve. There has been no more reports of pushbacks from Trieste in the past weeks. The recent decision of the Court of Rome may be an influencing factor, pressuring Italian authorities to suspend the activity for now.

During the month of March the investigation into Gian Andrea Franchi (vice-president of Linea d'Ombra) continued. He was given back his personal belongings by the police and with a crowdfunding it was possible to raise donations for legal expenses. However, the month ended with an unacceptable and disturbing situation: a swastika was engraved on the lift door of the floor where Linea d'Ombra is based (which is also Gian Andrea Franchi and Lorena Fornasir's house). In all likelihood it is intimidation by the far-right groups of Trieste towards those supporting people-on-the-move.



Overlooking the city of Trieste (Source: [Brush&Bow](#))

GLOSSARY OF REPORTS, MARCH 2021

BVMN recorded 31 pushback cases in March, impacting 677 people-on-the-move. Those affected by these incidents included men, women, children with guardians and unaccompanied children. They also represent a wide demographic, including people from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Palestine Iraq, Syria, Iran, Kuwait, Kurdistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh & Afghanistan.

-4 pushbacks to Serbia (1 chain from Slovenia, 1 from Croatia, 1 from Hungary, and 1 from Romania)
 -15 pushbacks to Bosnia-Herzegovina (3 chains from Slovenia, and 12 from Croatia)
 -4 pushbacks to Greece (1 from Italy, 2 from Albania, and 1 from North Macedonia)
 -8 pushbacks to Turkey (2 chain from Bulgaria, 2 direct from Bulgaria, 4 from Greece)

LINK	INCIDENT	RECORDED	GROUP	DEMOGRAPHIC
HUNGARY TO SERBIA				
1.1	2 nd March	15 th March	1	Afghanistan
ROMANIA TO SERBIA				
2.1	4 th March	12 th March	30	Afghanistan
SLOVENIA TO SERBIA				
3.1	14 th March	20 th March	4	Afghanistan, Pakistan
CROATIA TO SERBIA				
4.1	11 th March	16 th March	3	Pakistan
SLOVENIA TO BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA				
5.1	2 nd March	4 th March	4	Afghanistan
5.2	5 th March	8 th March	3	Pakistan
5.3	8 th March	14 th March	3	Algeria, Morocco
CROATIA TO BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA				
6.1	24 th February	18 th March	5	Afghanistan
6.2	26 th February	18 th March	12	Afghanistan, Iran
6.3	5 th March	15 th March	5	Afghanistan
6.4	5 th March	15 th March	1	Afghanistan
6.5	6 th March	11 th March	35	Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan
6.6	7 th March	10 th March	2	Algeria
6.7	9 th March	15 th March	30	Afghanistan
6.8	8 th March	2 nd April	4	Afghanistan, Syria, Kuwait
6.9	18 th March	31 st March	5	Kurdistan
6.10	28 th March	30 th March	100	Afghanistan
6.11	29 th March	30 th March	17	Afghanistan
6.12	31 st March	1 st April	3	Afghanistan
ITALY TO GREECE				
7.1	30 th March	1 st April	1	Afghanistan

LINK	INCIDENT	RECORDED	GROUP	DEMOGRAPHIC
ALBANIA TO GREECE				
8.1	5 th February	12 th March	60	Morocco, Algeria, Egypt
8.2	5 th February	15 th March	50	Morocco, Algeria
NORTH MACEDONIA TO GREECE				
9.1	10 th February	16 th February	12	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh
BULGARIA TO TURKEY (VIA GREECE)				
10.1	1 st March	2 nd March	60	Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Morocco, Egypt
10.2	10 th March	11 th March	55	Syria, Morocco, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria
BULGARIA TO TURKEY (DIRECT)				
11.1	24 th March	25 th March	1	Morocco
11.2	15 th March	16 th March	8	Syria
GREECE TO TURKEY				
12.1	3 rd March	3 rd March	50	Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Morocco, Tunisia
12.2	4 th March	5 th March	1	Tunisia
12.3	6 th March	7 th March	36	Morocco, Tunisia, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan
12.4	6 th March	7 th March	70	Syria, Morocco, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, Tunisia, Libya, Lebanon, Egypt
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 based on the horizontal participation of member organisations in the field of documentation, advocacy, media and litigation. The Network receives funds through charitable grants and donations from supporters. The funds primarily cover transport subsidies for volunteers in the field and staff costs.

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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Monitoring Network**