



**Border Violence  
Monitoring Network**

# SPECIAL REPORT: COVID-19 AND BORDER VIOLENCE ALONG THE BALKAN ROUTE



**APRIL 2020  
BALKAN REGION**

# IN THIS REPORT

The intersection of health restrictions and border violence shows a tightening set of measures for people-on-the-move in the Western Balkans and Greece. Since the onset of COVID-19 lockdowns and states of emergency, inequality has been sharpened for transit communities, further limiting access to asylum, health-care, adequate accommodation, and safety from brutal collective expulsions. Developments covered in this report include:

- The deployment of military forces at borders and camps was a core feature of the securitised response to COVID-19. This is explored through the proposals made by the Slovenian government to increase the army's remit in the border area and the garrisoning of camps with armed soldiers in Serbia.
- The development of pushback practice in countries such as Croatia has shown a disturbing, with cross-border removals persisting and adapting to the lockdown. This was seen most keenly by the paint tagging of transit groups and the hidden spread of COVID-19 within offending police forces in Topusko which has put people-on-the-move at direct risk of infection.
- Collective expulsions from camps have rapidly become a new concern for people in centres in Greece and Serbia. The lockdown measures were used on multiple occasions as an excuse to perform large scale pushbacks from inner city camps and centres hosting asylum seekers. This expansion of pushbacks into institutional spaces is an extremely worrying development, showing the impunity of authorities who have mobilised states of emergency to engage in unlawful removals.
- Inadequate accommodation facilities are an ongoing concern for transit groups denied the basic means to exercise relevant health protocols. Across the Balkan Route and Greece, the sealing of centres marked disproportionate deprivations of liberty and wilful neglect of hygienic standards by

# INTRODUCTION

The spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) during the spring of 2020 has presented a major concern for people across the world. The rate of fatalities and pressure on hospitals has strained communities and public institutions, engaging a crisis response. However, the emergence of this highly infectious disease has had an even more pronounced impact on vulnerable communities, especially in the securitised response it has induced. This imbalance reflects existing patterns of state-based violence applied specifically to migrants, refugees and transient communities. This report looks in depth at the convergence of public health policy and securitisation of the border regime in the Western Balkans and Greece to explore how rights suspensions affecting people-on-the-move have been shaped by the pandemic.

The Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN)<sup>\*</sup> have been recording and advocating against illegal pushbacks on the Balkan Route since 2017. With a [database of over 700 reports](#), BVMN have shown these acts are a shared policy of EU countries and other states within the region. Since the “lockdown” measures came into force during mid-March, BVMN have continued to monitor and receive reports of violent collective expulsions, confirming that illegal removal practices have not stopped, in spite of the formal closure of borders. The scope of this report challenges the understanding of public health measures as simply directed towards the curbing of viral transmission, but expands on their intersection with methods of border externalisation and the targeted narrowing of fundamental rights for people at national and EU borders.

With site specific analysis of pushback regimes in Western Balkans and Greece, the report looks at how cross-border removals have persisted, adapted and been augmented by institutional responses to the pandemic. COVID-19 measures such as lockdowns, isolation, physical distancing, and personal protective equipment highlight the contrasting experiences of the people-on-the-move with that of the general public. Alongside this disjuncture, the way capture, detention, transportation and ejection has adapted to the context of the pandemic also shows the forging of new powers for actors managing border and asylum regimes. In many cases, the core act of collective expulsion has persisted across the wider region as a tool of externalisation. Yet the COVID-19 period has also seen the staging of new practices such as paint tagging in Croatia, or pushbacks from inner city camps such as in Greece and Serbia.

Considering the unfolding situation across multiple borders, the report exposes the move by authorities to apply exceptional practices to people-on-the-move. Within existing health restrictions, the proposed militarisation of the Slovenian border, garrisoning of camps in Serbia and movement restrictions in Bosnia-Herzegovina have all eroded fundamental rights along the Route. These securitised responses to COVID-19 bodes ill for the future, as reactive policy soon establishes itself as an enduring mechanism of control. In the aftermath of COVID-19, whether and how such unlawful treatment will be lifted is an open ended question: “[the emergency never ends, but merely becomes a natural context of everyday life](#)”.

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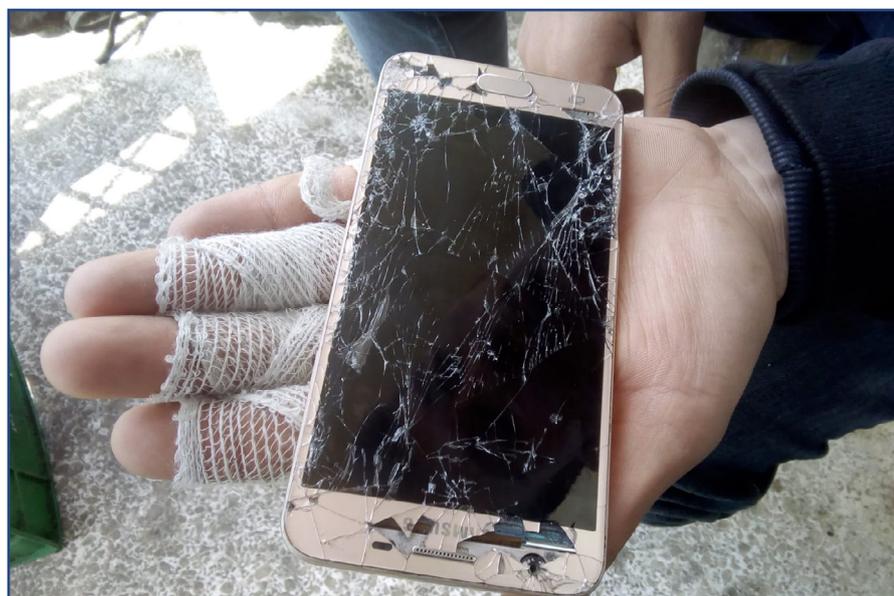
\* BVMN is a network of watchdog organisations active in Greece and the Western Balkans including No Name Kitchen, Rigardu, Are You Syrious, Mobile Info Team, Wave Thessaloniki, Infokolpa, Escuela con Alma, Centre for Peace Studies, Mare Liberum, InfoPark, Collective Aid and Fresh Response. This report is a joint-effort initiated by these partners.

## METHODOLOGY

BVMN is an alliance of grassroots organisations and NGOs working with the common goal of documenting, exposing and advocating for the cessation of illegal pushbacks and border violence practices. BVMN uses a shared database to publish first hand testimonies of pushbacks which are taken via interview. Volunteers working along the Balkan Route and Greece apply a common interview framework and methodology, recording hard data (geo-locations and times), as well as narrative stories of individuals or small groups affected by pushbacks.

Within the context of COVID-19 measures, face-to-face contact and fieldwork has been interrupted, therefore meaning only a partial dataset has been gathered on

existent violations carried out during the lockdown period. In response, BVMN have been using alternate mediums to record and track pushbacks, such as interviews via video call, contact with affected groups via social media and gathering of shorthand testimonies. In order to gain up to date information from the field, this report also pools insights from partner organisations working on various borders in the Balkans and Greece, bringing together their insights on legal support, integration work, documentation and advocacy. Through these contributions, and the framing of specific case studies, the report examines policy developments, major news stories and events relating to pushbacks and transit conditions.



PHONE BROKEN BY LOCAL  
AUTHORITIES IN PATRAS, GREECE  
(SOURCE: NO NAME KITCHEN)W

## DEFINITIONS

Pushbacks are the informal expulsion (without due process) of individuals or groups to another country. This lies in contrast to the term “deportation”, which is conducted in a legal framework, and “readmission” which is a formal procedure rooted in bilateral and multilateral agreements between states. In the past five years, pushbacks have become an important, if unofficial, part of the migration regime of EU countries and elsewhere.

People-on-the-move A broad demographic encompassing both refugees, migrants and other transient communities who navigate borders and transit routes.

## ABBREVIATIONS

BiH - Bosnia and Herzegovina  
HR - Croatia  
SRB - Serbia  
SLO - Slovenia  
EU - European Union

HUN - Hungary  
MNK - North Macedonia  
GRC - Greece  
TUR - Turkey

# RIGHTS SUSPENSIONS

Changes caused by COVID-19 have manifested themselves in different ways for people-on-the-move. Many developments have occurred at a policy level, through state and EU decision making, meanwhile others have been observed in the informal application of push-backs and the dire transit conditions these bodies sponsor. Securitisation forms the backdrop to these institutional and informal changes, set by the wider understandings of the pandemic and its transmission as an invasion. This narrative opens up state recourse to physical force, and was furthered by the [World Health Organisation](#) who placed COVID-19 on a par with terrorism. The subsequent merger of institutional mandates saw bodies, such as the Ministry of Interior in Croatia, blending responsibilities towards crime, migration and the pandemic in a concerning fashion. Within this state of emergency, governments have even enlisted the military to manage health measures. While personal autonomy and movement is necessarily ceded to prevent viral transmission, the application

of securitised policy has disproportionately targeted transit populations along the Balkan Route.

## THE APPLICATION OF SECURITISED POLICY HAS DISPROPORTIONATELY TARGETED TRANSIT POPULATIONS ALONG THE BALKAN ROUTE.

It is useful to understand this targeting under several core rights suspensions which relate to transit, borders and international protection. Right suspensions are examined here as breaches of domestic and international laws preserving the rights of refugees and other transient communities. Alongside this legal reading, rights suspensions are also modes of repression which operate within a web of other inhibiting practices such as the fining of homeless people, dispersal of squat communities, poor living conditions in camps and other developments which are outlined in this report.

## ASYLUM ACCESS

The landscape of asylum access has changed drastically since intensive restrictions came into force during March. BVMN has already reported on asylum as an [eroded set of rights](#), but due process for international protection claims has been further challenged in recent months during the health emergency. Firstly, persistent pushbacks from borders continue to deny people access to claim international protection, with states performing collective expulsion without con-

sidering applicants' individual cases. Second, government decisions to pause or close asylum offices with no effective alternative or remedy have placed transit groups and applicants in an effective limbo, and at risk of pushback. Accordingly, the development of COVID-19 measures have allowed countries such as Greece, Croatia and Hungary to further restrict internationally mandated access to protection.

## FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

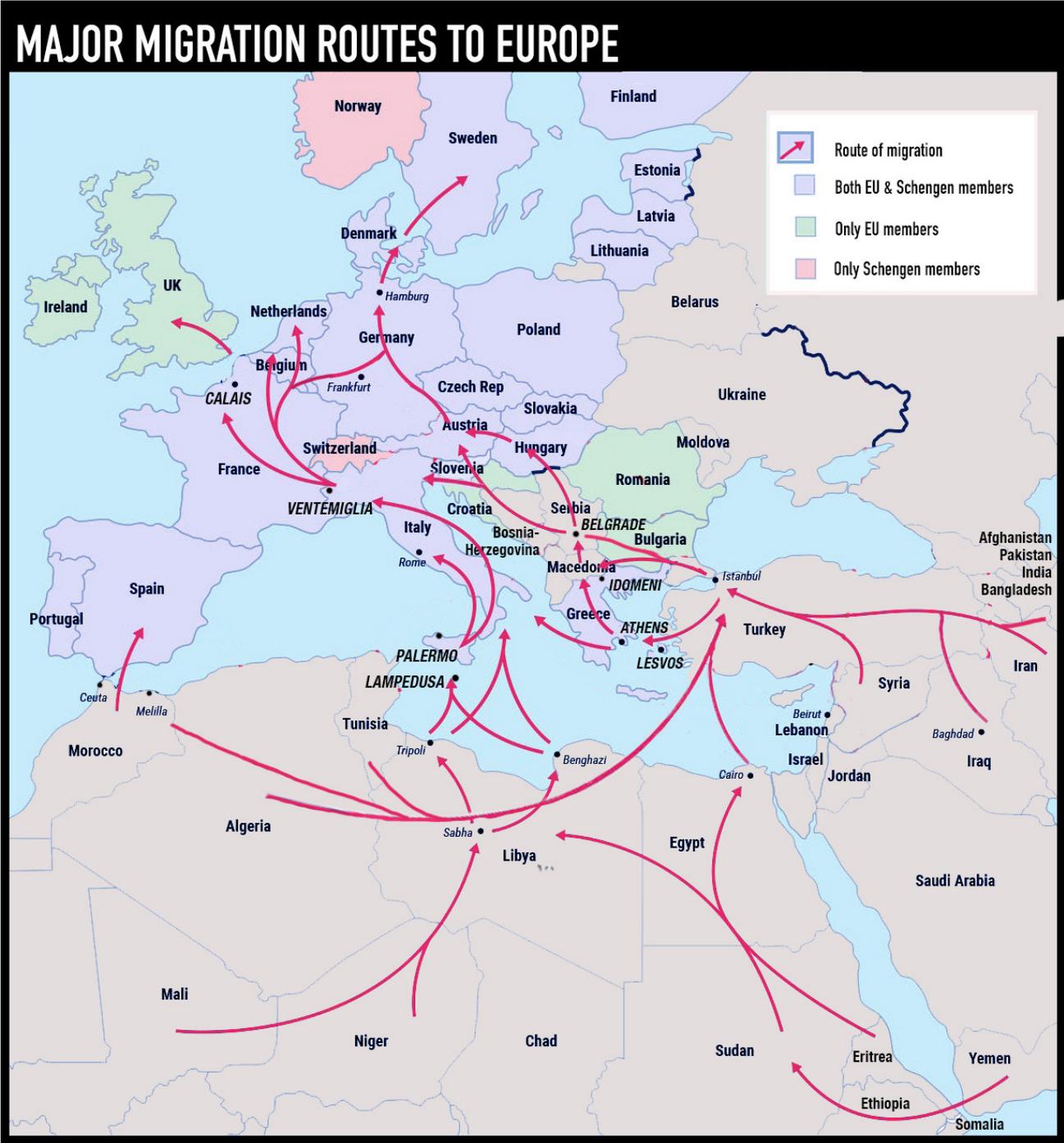
The control of movement, both internally and at borders, has been furthered under the guise of COVID-19 restrictions. Under the Geneva Convention, an individual cannot be punished for crossing into another territory when attempting to seek asylum, yet measures during March and April continued to breach this, marking people-on-the-move as public health

risks. Parallel deprivations of liberty have occurred in camps throughout the Balkan Route where transit populations have been issued further restrictions on their movement, beyond the scope of those faced by the general public. For example, throughout the restrictions, the penalisation of homeless transit groups in search of basic necessities by imposing fines has

# SAFETY AND HEALTHCARE

Within the context of the viral pandemic, the physical rights of people-on-the-move have been suspended in both settlement and transit. Protections against inhumane accommodation and detention have been cast aside with the mass confinement of tens of thousands of people in the Western Balkans and Greece. This report considers in particular the use of military, police and private personnel to trap people in overcrowded camps under full lockdowns or curfews. In these

centres the lack of access to health care, relevant isolation, basic amenities, and recourse to leave these site have violated multiple laws and raised questions about the racial discrimination underpinning the application of COVID-19 measures against people-on-the-move. During pushbacks, the lack of effective health screening, alongside the summary use of mass detention and group transport is deeply concerning.



SOURCE: NO NAME KITCHEN

# EU AND SCHENGEN MEASURES

In the midst of the escalating COVID-19 outbreak, the EU launched the [Joint Action Plan for Human Rights](#). However, the intention of this communication and the reality on the ground has borne acute differences. Most notably, violations of fundamental rights continue by EU Member States and third countries who have various EU agreements on migration, asylum and border security, alongside funded camp systems. Rather than assisting vulnerable transit communities in this precarious period, policy and guidance has allowed reborderisation across a majority of member states to erode further the right to asylum, due procedure and humane treatment.

On 16th March 2020, the Commission had already issued recommendations and implemented measures concerning the [reintroduction of internal borders](#), the closure of external borders, as well as Community management of public health. This ostensibly aimed at halting all non-essential travel to the EU as a bid to limit viral transmission. Though this was framed as exempting “person[s] in need of international protection or for other humanitarian reasons respecting the principle of non-refoulement”, the continuation of pushbacks at the EU’s external border has shown little respect for such safeguards.

[COVID-19 Guidelines](#) from the Commission also invited further breaches by allowing border officials to

“refuse entry to non-resident third country nationals where they present relevant symptoms or have been particularly exposed to risk of infection”. Invoking this state of emergency legitimised tougher border controls during the March period, especially against people exiting transit states with confirmed cases. Framing crossings as a “threat to public health”, the Commission failed its own guidance to act “non-discriminatory” by indirectly implicating transit communities as carriers of the disease.

Similar guidelines were issued on [asylum, return procedures and resettlement](#), but again fell shy of wider demands from initiatives such as the [Leave No-one Behind](#) campaign calling for the evacuation of people stuck in overcrowded camps in Greece. Dunja Mijatović, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, also raised [concerns](#) over the growing risks for people being detained or at risk of removal. She urged states to “review the situation of rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants in immigration detention, and to release them to the maximum extent possible”. While some divergent examples exist, such as the granting of [temporary citizenship status](#) for asylum seekers in Portugal, a more integrative approach to handling the crisis. Elsewhere in the EU such as in Croatia, and across the Greek-Balkan Routes, action was leant towards the surging up of borders rather than protecting those stuck at them.



INSIDE THE NEWLY OPENED, EU-FUNDED LIPA CAMP IN BOSNOA-HERZEGOVINA  
(SOURCE: [TRANSBALKANSKA SOLIDARNOST](#))

# SLOVENIA

## GOVERNMENT CHANGE

March brought a double change in Slovenia. Besides general pandemic restrictions, a new far right government took power. The change of government was accompanied with [sweeping personnel changes](#) in key functions. The new government formed under the leadership of Janez Janša whose party SDS (Slovene Democratic Party) is closely aligned with the Fidesz government of Hungary. In addition to political ties, Hungary is also subsidizing a consortium of conservative media outlets that are dedicated to far right propaganda and under direct control by the SDS party. Aleš Hojs, the new Minister of Interior, used to be the director of NOVA24, a media organisation that specializes in fear mongering, conspiracy theories of a "Soros & NGO backed invasion of Europe", and general demonization and criminalization of people-on-the-move, activists and organizations that work in the field.

While still under Hojs' control, NOVA24 fabricated and heavily publicised a fake story that the first COVID-19 patient in Italy was a Pakistani person who came via the Balkan Route. This plays into the narrative of pushbacks as a health measure against COVID-19, falsely justifying the practice of removing groups to Croatia (who in turn eject people to Bosnia-Herzegovina). Additionally, the government is using spending cuts to defund organisations working in the field of international protection such as NGO's that are providing legal help in asylum camps. There has also been an announcement to substantially reduce funding for the projects involved with integration of refugees and asylum seekers.

**PUSHBACK: SLOVENIA – CROATIA**  
**DATE: 19TH APRIL 2020**

**THREE PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM IN SLOVENIA WERE CAUGHT IN THE KOPER AREA BY POLICE, WHERE ONE INJURED GROUP MEMBER HAD HIS FINGER AMPUTATED. DESPITE CLAIMS FOR INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION, THE GROUP WERE PUSHED BACK TO BIH, WHERE THE VICTIM NURSES A LASTING INJURY.**

[READ THE INFOKOLPA POST]



## ADMINISTRATIVE OVERVIEW

March and April saw a decrease in the number of irregular border crossings compared to both the first two months of this year and the same period in 2019. The number of people detained at police stations due to irregular border crossings in March and the first half of April in 2019 was down by 40% and 75% respectively. The trend of deportations to Croatia, however, remains consistently high. Of the 1835 people detained between January and March of this year 1246 were readmitted to Croatian police. This clearly shows that, in early 2020 during the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent restrictions, Slovenia has continued the systematic denial of asylum rights and used the readmission agreement with Croatia to deport large numbers of people across the border, as observed [previously](#). According to this bilateral readmission agreement, a person can be returned to Croatian police from Slovenia if there is proof that they illegally crossed the border in the last 48 hours. Despite the COVID-19

pandemic Slovenia continues to readmit people to Croatia with full knowledge of the high risk of [torture and further illegal pushback](#) to Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this sense, the limits on authorities carrying out faulty readmissions seem distinctly light when compared to the wider health restrictions that the general public cannot circumvent.

At the same time the Ministry of Interior Affairs has suspended asylum procedures until the first of July. Ministry officials are not accepting any new asylum requests, nor do they conduct interviews with asylum seekers or make decisions in individual asylum cases. The number of people in asylum camps is in the meantime high. Because of measures against COVID-19, movement in camps has been restricted and asylum seekers can only exit one by one, presenting a further check on the independence of many left in a precarious situation during the asylum office closures.

## THE CASE OF M. FROM MOROCCO

The case of M. from Morocco is an example of the Slovenian police attempting to exploit COVID-19 restrictions to further infringe on the rights of asylum seekers. On Saturday 2nd April 2020, after two denied asylum requests, police came to the Asylum Camp Ljubljana-Vič to take M. to the border and deport him to Croatia. InfoKolpa, who are handling the case, report officials failed to deport M. but on the way back to the camp, one of the police officers pulled him out of the car and started beating him. As the camp officials refused to report the incident, there was a quiet protest of 20 asylum seekers the same night. Police Station Cerknica filed an order for M.'s detention on the grounds that he "entered the country illegally two times", and therefore constituted a "flight risk". Police carried out the order four days later. This action sets a new precedent - a retroactive criminalisation of bor-

der crossing - which has previously been filed within 48hrs of the first police contact.

In the detention centre, M. started a hunger strike. With the help of a lawyer he filed a complaint to an administrative court which decided that the detention was indeed illegal and ordered that the Police Station Cerknica reconsider the detention. The police responded by filing a second detention order. The order was amended to include that M. would pose a threat to public security during the pandemic on the assumption that he would violate the decree on the restriction of movement. Currently M. is at high risk of deportation to Croatia or Morocco, especially since the court recently rejected his appeal. His case symbolises the mobilisation of COVID-19 measures to demonise people-in-transit.

## ARTICLE 37A TO DEPLOY THE MILITARY

Despite a decrease in irregular border crossings during March the new Slovenian government announced the activation of "Article 37a" of the Defence Act. The act was intended to grant the military police authority to process civilians at the border. The army has been present at the border ever since 2015 so this prioritisation of the article at the height of the pandemic was met with wide public concern, especially as the new government made sweeping personnel changes in police, military and parts of the judiciary. The article

did not receive the required two thirds majority in the Committee of Foreign Relations, due to a wide public outcry, including a [letter](#) written by organisations in Slovenia and signed by BVMN to the EU Commission. Military deployment is already a feature of the Balkan Route, starting at the Evros border in Greece. Moves in Slovenia to increase powers during COVID-19 were also matched with army installments around camps in Serbia, elevating the role of defence forces as a primary agent in health management.

# CROATIA

## **PUSHBACK: CROATIA TO BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA DATE: 6TH APRIL 2020**

**"WE NEED HELP OUR FRIEND IS HURT" ...  
"WE GAVE OURSELVES TO CROATIAN POLICE"**

**16 AFGHANI PEOPLE PUSHED BACK CLOSE TO BASARA  
(HR). THE GROUP SOUGHT MEDICAL HELP FOR THEIR  
FRIEND WHO HAD COLLAPSED, BUT WERE PUSHED BACK  
DIRECTLY TO BOSNIA WITH THE USE OF BATONS AND A FIRE  
TO BURN SOME OF THEIR CLOTHES**

[\[READ REPORT\]](#)



## **PUSHBACKS CONTINUE FAR FROM SIGHT OF MONITORS**

The COVID-19 emergency is influencing daily routines, making public and private life radically different from before. Unfortunately some things, such as Croatia's pushback regime, stay the same. The only difference is that these violent collective expulsions operate in increased silence, especially with global attention preoccupied with the pandemic and human rights observers unable to monitor in the field due to health restrictions.

**THESE VIOLENT COLLECTIVE  
EXPULSIONS OPERATE IN INCREASED  
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RIGHTS OBSERVERS UNABLE TO  
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HEALTH RESTRICTIONS.**

Pushbacks and violence at borders have persisted, as seen in the case study above where a group including a severely injured person and a minor were ejected into BiH. Croatian officers burnt their clothes and used batons to beat them, as in hundreds of cases documented before by BVMN. These acts persisted in March during the height of restrictions, and a case from the nearby Poljana area, documented via [Facebook video](#), showing an injured man being carried away from the border with Croatian policemen in the background controlling the area.

A relatively new development in pushback practices is the tagging of groups with orange spray paint. [No Name Kitchen's](#) ongoing monitoring base in Velika Kladusa picked up on two cases reported in the first week of May where transit groups returned with spray paint markings administered to their clothes and exposed

## A RELATIVELY NEW DEVELOPMENT IN PUSHBACK PRACTICES IS THE TAGGING OF GROUPS WITH ORANGE SPRAY PAINT

Chain pushbacks from from Slovenia via Croatia have also continued. A family, that had [risked death](#), hiding under a clay deposit on a freight train, were transferred from Dobova (SLO) to Harmica (HR) by police forces at the beginning of March. Along with other families, they detained in cramped conditions by authorities in Croatia before being pushed-back to Serbia, a far cry from the mandated physical distancing required:

“we couldn’t breathe because of the large amount of people who were there and we were all lying on the floor”

Hearing reports of increased brutality during push-backs is worrying due to the increased autonomy that state authorities have taken for themselves during these course of the pandemic. Push-backs are illegal and the spread of COVID-19 is not an excuse to confront vulnerable people with even more violence.



ORANGE SPRAY PAINT MARKINGS ON TRANSIT GROUPS PUSHED BACK FROM HR TO BIH (SOURCE: [NNK](#))



## HEALTH RISK POSED BY BORDER GUARDS

Across Croatia's border with Serbia and Bosnia, reports of violent and indiscriminate expulsions continue to surface during the COVID-19 outbreak, showing no concern for people's health or fundamental rights. This neglect was also highlighted in severe allegations of whistleblowers from the border police who approached reporters of the Croatian-based NGO [Are You Syrious \(AYS\)](#) - a key member of BVMN. The incidents concerned relate to the COVID-19 case among a division of police being housed in a hotel facility in Topusko and tasked with apprehending irregular migrants.

"They went to work with migrants. They were in the hotel for 10 days, using the restaurant and other facilities together. One had a diagnosed case of COVID-19 and his closest contacts were put in self-isolation, but not the others. There are up to 200 officers in that hotel. The others continued operating [with migrants]

and were later returned to their designated police stations. Officers are afraid to speak up because they are afraid of losing their jobs", a whistleblower described.

Following the similar information from a concerned health worker, and learning about the corroborating information gathered by a credible Croatian journalist, AYS approached the Croatian Ombudswoman with a request for investigation.

It is already common knowledge that to staff Croatia's illegal pushback apparatus, hotels in the border area (such as the [Lika-Sinj County](#)) are being provided as improvised barracks for hundreds of officers drafted from across the country. The new allegations about a similar site in Topusko, represent gross misconduct, putting the transit population in BiH's Una Sana Canton at huge risk of contracting COVID-19.



TOPUSKO (HR) MARKED BY RED SQUARE, OTHER POINTS MARK PUSHBACK LOCATIONS (SOURCE: BVMN)



## ASYLUM, DETENTION AND PRECARIOUS STATUS

The first restrictive measures in Croatia related to COVID-19 were activated in early February 2020, such as two-meters physical distancing, and basic disinfection rules. Reception centres for asylum seekers, located in Zagreb and Kutina, temporarily restricted access to the facilities, increased floor markings and hygienic supplies, and put residents under medical supervision. Only the Red Cross and Medicin du Monde are able to continue work inside and inform people about the current situation with the pandemic. Meanwhile all other activities have been suspended or moved online. Centre for Peace Studies and Are You Syrious continue to work remotely alongside other organisations who support children with their homework via whatsapp; give free legal aid through phone calls and emails; and supply psychosocial support.

One pertinent case from the asylum centre in Zagreb saw a Syrian refugee returned by Dublin regulation to Croatia from Austria, and then isolated as potentially infectious with COVID-19. Consequently he was put in quarantine in the detention centre in Ježevo. According to the reporting organizations to the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), it was because there were no adequate self-isolation measures and he lacked self-discipline in regards to self-isolation. His case was followed by two xenophobic media articles, and raises concerns about the use of detention as a default response to infection within the refugee community. While [Health Minister Vili Beroš](#) confirmed that the hospital treatment for all coronavirus patients in Croatia will be free of charge, other developments have exposed a continued two-tiered system in regards to refugees and transit groups during COVID-19. One telling example

is the fixed perimeter fence set up in Zagreb outside the Porin asylum centre in March. As reported by the [Welcome! Initiative](#), the fence was a preplanned construction (for the cost of [HRK 693,000](#)). Yet considering the psychological panic and myriad of information spreading on COVID-19, this fence and it's timing has created even more confusion, division and intolerance. On the [komunal.org](#) web site, residents of Porin among others [posted](#) a letter stating: "the health threat has set a state of emergency, which is an ideal opportunity to distract from the repressive and restrictive policies being implemented in the background".

The Ministry of Interior announced a [decision](#) to suspend measures against foreigners on short-term stays as per the Foreigners Act. However, the status remains unclear for the most vulnerable groups caught up in the current situation - people whose claims for international protection have been denied and who have been ordered to leave Croatia, people who have resided in Croatia based on work quotas or residence and work permits and have found themselves now in an irregular status and out of work. These people do not have the opportunity to leave Croatia, but they also do not have a guaranteed roof over their heads, health care or secured existence. Further uncertainty is faced by people whose claim for international protection has been rejected. On the one side they have received an order to leave the country, and on the other they are stuck in Croatia without a place where to stay for the duration of the pandemic. These and many other critical situations have been raised with the Ministry of Interior, which is yet to show itself as a responsible body.

# BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA



POLICE REMOVING PEOPLE SLEEPING IN A FOOTBALL STADIUM IN BIHAC (SOURCE: [USKINFO.BA](https://www.uskinfo.ba)).

## RESTRICTIONS ON MOVEMENT AND LIPA

On 16th March 2020, “a complete restriction on the movement of migrants outside the temporary centres” was ordered by the Crisis Staff of the Una Sana Canton’s (USK) [Health, Labour and Social Policy Ministry](https://www.uskinfo.ba). By the end of April, 1,531 cases of COVID-19, and 60 deaths had been confirmed in BiH. However, according to International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and Danish Refugee Council (DRC) workers interviewed by BVMN there were no confirmed cases in reception facilities for asylum seekers and people-on-the-move. However, 45 people exhibiting symptoms, and 24 exhibiting COVID-19 “like” symptoms (in Bira and Lipa), were isolated. More than 700 people in total were put in preventative isolation for monitoring, including 500 people newly registered or pushed back.

COVID-19 has resulted in further rights restrictions, specifically for people-on-the-move stuck in BiH, as alluded to in this [Biltern article](https://www.biltern.com):

“[M]ore than 5,000 people were detained in existing temporary refugee reception centers. They include about 500 unaccompanied minors and several hundred children with families. Persons in

need of special care, patients, victims of torture, members of the LGBTQ population, persons with mental disorders, victims of domestic violence have also been locked down into “EU-funded” camps.”

The cantonal Ministries of Interior ensure that these containment measures are respected, with police officers stationed in front of each centre. The state of emergency gives these officers “the right to physically force persons trying to leave the centers to return”, increasing the level of coercive treatment which was already emerging in the policing of the USK.

In early April parallel measures were [announced](https://www.uskinfo.ba) by the [Sarajevo](https://www.uskinfo.ba) police, regarding the removal of people from the streets. Meanwhile in USK, the first few hundred people living in squats and other improvised accommodation were transported to the newly constructed [Lipa camp](https://www.uskinfo.ba).<sup>\*</sup> Arrivals to be isolated for 14 days as a preventive measure. Squat evictions and removal from public places are not a new pattern in USK, but according to the [mayor of Bihac](https://www.uskinfo.ba), Suhret Fazlic, “moving these people to the new centre will allow their health and safety to be better monitored”. However,

\* Lipa is a newly constructed site 25km south of Bihac (USK) consisting of rub-hall structures and opened with EU funding via the implementation of IOM on 21st April 2020.

ANGER OF LACK OF FOOD IN MIRAL BE-  
COMES APPARENT IN MID-APRIL AFTER A  
VIDEO SURFACES OF A CAMP SECURITY  
GUARD DUMPING A CAMP RESIDENT'S  
FLOUR INTO A NEARBY STREAM. OVER 60  
RESIDENTS WRITE A LETTER DEMANDING  
MORE FOOD



FIGHT BREAKS OUT IN THE MINORS  
WING OF BIHAC RTC IN LATE APRIL



LIPA CAMP IS OPENED WITH  
FUNDING FROM THE EU ON  
APRIL 21ST



FATHER OF FOUR LIVING IN  
USIVAK CAMP WITH HIS  
FAMILY DIED IN APRIL,  
ALLEGEDLY FROM INJURIES  
SUSTAINED FROM A CAMP  
SECURITY GUARD



THOUSANDS OF INDIVIDUALS  
LIVING OUTSIDE OF THE CAMP  
SYSTEM IN TUZLA AND SARAJEVO  
MOVED TO BLAZUJ MARCH

LARGE SCALE RIOT TAKE PLACE  
IN THE CAMP IN MID-APRIL

**CAMPS IN BIH:**

**POPULATION:**

1 - UŠIVAK RTC	811
2 - BLAŽUJ RTC	811
3 - BIRA RTC	1783
4 - BORICI RTC	292
5 - HOTEL SEDRA RTC	~500
6 - MIRAL RTC	819
7 - LIPA RTC	400
8 - SALAKOVAC RTC	94
9 - DELIJAŠ AC	15

RTC = RECEPTION/TRANSIT CENTER  
AC = ASYLUM CENTER

\*BETWEEN MID-MARCH AND CONTINUING ON INTO MAY, THOU-  
SANDS OF PEOPLE-ON-THE-MOVE WERE MOVED FROM INFORMAL  
LIVING ARRANGEMENTS IN TUZLA, SARAJEVO, AND BIHAC AND  
PLACED INTO BLAZUJ AND LIPA CAMP RESPECTIVELY. THIS  
RESULTED IN A DECREASE IN THE AMOUNT OF PEOPLE LIVING  
IN INFORMAL ARRANGEMENTS THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. IT  
IS DIFFICULT TO SAY CURRENTLY WHAT THE EXACT NUMBERS  
OF PEOPLE LIVING IN INFORMAL ARRANGMENTS IN THE COUN-  
TRY CURRENTLY, ALTHOUGH THE NUMBER BEFORE THE PANDEM-  
IC WAS ESTIMATED IN FEBRUARY TO BE AROUND 2600 PER-  
SONS

\*\*POPULATION DATA FROM UNHCR (FEBRUARY, 2020)

BVMN received reports of less accommodating transfers, as alleged by one Afghani man still stuck inside the Lipa camp:

“At first two police officers took us in small van then started beating us by stick, then they pulled over and again beat us but this time they use mask on their faces and took us to bigger van with army forces. At the end the van took us near Lipa”

It seems as though the cited objective is not consistent with the measures taken, exposing people to further harm and violence rather than safeguarding their health. The lack of oversight in the isolation zones in Lipa, due to insufficient staff, also prevents proper monitoring of the people in those areas, according to staff working for DRC. Furthermore, the difficulty to follow-up on those referred to preventive or symptomatic isolation is also a consequence of constant mass transfers of people from disparate locations into one camp, illustrating how supposedly preventative measures actually increase the risk of transmission. The camps are now “housing nearly 20 percent more migrants and refugees than prior to the coronavirus outbreak” according to [InfoMigrants](#). Inside the already overcrowded camps, the [sanitary conditions](#) require further investment: “According to volunteers who receive requests for help every day, the centers lack food and hygiene products,” as well as “access to running water”. If improvements have been made in terms of water and sanitation facilities in Lipa, IOM having increased the number of showers available, there is still a need to improve the hot water supply and to ensure

a regular distribution of hygiene kits, as well as clean clothes. As many people were transferred from abandoned buildings and other outdoor places, where they had no access to those items, this is an urgent need highlighted by international NGOs working there. In this period, most local and international NGOs are forbidden to enter the camps. Forced isolation and inactivity deprive many of the camps’ residents of information and support. Médecins du Monde’s Minds on the Move Integral Support Center continues to provide virtual access via Facebook and telephone lines in Arabic, Farsi and Urdu. At a time where many services are provided remotely, there is a great need to improve the internet connection in the camp facilities, such as Sedra, where access remains lacking or insufficient.

For people living outside the camps, the situation induced by COVID-19 has put even more at stake because of existing barriers to the BiH health care system - as exemplified in a recent [pushback case](#) where no ambulances were available to aid an injured group in USK’s Trzac area. The pushback of groups within this context mark a further troubling dimension for transit and settlement for which Croatia and Slovenia are keenly responsible. People returned under these violent and informal means face precarious accommodation conditions, evidenced by the state of Lipa, but also [chain removals from Slovenia](#) on 25th March 2020 where transit groups had to climb into Miral camp because of overcapacity. Unchecked pushbacks provide the backdrop to the current strife in BiH, where the condition of people-on-the-move has been further worsened during the COVID-19 outbreak.

## TENSIONS AND SECURITISATION IN CAMPS

This deteriorating situation in camps inevitably exacerbates tensions, a natural reaction to confinement, isolation and a lack of communication. Accordingly, the restriction of movement has induced more fractious relations in what are now immensely overcrowded accommodation sites. In [Blazuj camp](#), a massive fight broke out involving around 400 people on 13th April 2020, several ended up injured, requiring medical assistance. Smaller altercations also broke out in March in the minors section in Bira, showing the living conditions foisted upon thousands of people-on-the-move in BiH as entirely unsustainable.

With the beginning of Ramadan fasting, people wait several hours to receive dinner, their first meal of the day, a strain that has been one of the key elements that triggered conflict in Bira. According to the Italian

NGO [IPSIA](#), other frustrations include the inability of people “to buy the food they like or recharge phone credits or buy cigarettes”. Children (the select number of minors who do receive education) also have trouble adapting from already limited schooling provision to [online platforms](#) which are barely accessible due to the aforementioned problems with internet connectivity. Meanwhile all groups in the camps are affected by the lack of access to the outdoors, causing profound mental and physical strain.

Within this ongoing confinement, fighting culminated in the death of one man residing in Ušivak camp in Sarajevo, raising key concerns about the use of private security to maintain these effective prisons. What Peter Van der Auweraert, regional head of IOM, [cited](#) as “a fight between two national groups”, was challenged

by [reports](#) by the deceased's family who state he was attacked by a security guard. This is not the first allegation to be aired about the private security companies contracted in IOM camps.\* While the news focuses on the death tolls related to COVID-19, little thought has been given to the potentially fatal conditions people in camps face in respect of armed personnel with batons and tasers. Analysis about the rise in [domestic violence](#) during COVID-19 has an intuitive link to this threat of assault behind closed doors, and is now a

daily reality for camp residents across BiH.

While the EU Commission [announced](#) an additional 4.5 million in humanitarian aid to deal with the COVID-19 outbreak, it would appear that it is too little too late for the thousands stranded in BiH. Whatsmore, questions about the responsibility of implementing partners who would be recipients of such funds must be raised in light of the poor conditions and violent behavior of private security in IOM run facilities.



SOURCE: NO NAME KITCHEN

\* On 21st April 2020, a [video](#) surfaced on social media of a Miral camp security guard throwing food, which camp residents had received privately from a local person, into a stream nearby the camp.

# SERBIA



TWO AUTHORITIES CARRYING OUT PAT DOWN SEARCHES OF THE CAMP RESIDENTS IN TUTIN, SERBIA. (SOURCE: BVMN)

**PUSHBACK: SERBIA – GREECE**  
**DATE: 3RD APRIL 2020**

**“THEY SAY ‘GO GO’ WITH THEIR GUNS”**

**A GROUP OF 16 PEOPLE WERE PICKED UP FROM TUTIN CAMP BY POLICE AND TOLD THEY WOULD BE TRANSFERRED TO A NEW CAMP FOR THE REASONS OF VIRUS PREVENTION. NINE HOURS LATER THEY WERE COLLECTIVELY EXPELLED OVER THE BORDER CLOSE TO LOJANE (MNK).**

[\[READ REPORT\]](#)

## CONTINUED PUSBACKS

The inflow of pushbacks to Serbia and the continued risks posed by precarious transit routes out of the country have persisted throughout the pandemic. At the border with Croatia, pushbacks were reported in the [Tovarnik/Sid area](#), meanwhile at the eastern border with Romania the [drowning of a transit group](#) attempting to cross the Danube river is an apt reminder of the fatal risks faced by people-on-the-move.

As well as incoming expulsions, push-backs from Serbia to North Macedonia have also continued. It is especially worrying that this behavior is carried out during a [state of emergency](#) declared by the Serbian state. One exemplary [case](#) published by BVMN in April captures how the pretext of health measures are used as a means to carry out violent repressions. Respondents shared how only weeks earlier they had been in the centre in Tutin (SRB) with valid camp cards. On 3rd April 2020, masked officers came and ordered a mass transfer, informing the group they were being taken to Preševo as a health precaution. They were driven to the Preševo area, but instead of the camp, the group were taken to the green border with North Macedonia and pushed back at gunpoint - “we find ourselves in the border”.

During the drive the group of 16, including a minor, share how the officers crammed them in a van for

nine hours without break, defying physical distancing protocols. Alongside the health implications, it is also notable that people who are accommodated in Tutin camp are being pushed back since it is one of the five centers for accommodation for asylum seekers in Serbia. The nature of pushbacks, which traditionally target informal squat communities and people in transit, have found an increasing foothold within institutional spaces, illustrating the expanding state of exception faced by people in Serbia who are increasingly at risk of violent collective expulsion.

In this most recent case, the group was later apprehended by North Macedonian authorities and subsequently pushed back to Greece, which further mirrors past accounts observed along the route. Some of the people who ended up in Greece and N. Macedonia had never been in the territory before since they had arrived in Serbia via Turkey and Bulgaria. Lawyers from [Klik.Activ](#) note that the use of exceptional circumstances to “justify” push-backs is a trend similar to the behavior of the Serbian state during the ostensible closure of the Route. They argue that the application of push backs as a mechanism to ease capacity in large centres overlaps with the current trend pertaining to COVID-19.

## VIOLENCE AND SECURITISATION IN CAMPS



ESCORT OF SERBIAN AUTHORITIES IN RIOT GEAR IN KRNJACA CAMP (SOURCE: [APC](#)).

Since Serbian President Vucic issued a state of emergency in Serbia on 15th March 2020, refugees and migrants have not been [allowed out](#) of the transit and asylum centers unless it is to seek medical care, or with special permission. The ban applies for those entering camps as well, so the majority of staff from human rights organizations and NGOs cannot enter the facilities either. In the event that [a certain person succeeds in leaving the camp without a permit](#), there is the risk of misdemeanour or criminal liability. Sweeps for refugees and migrants living in [squats and informal accommodations](#) reportedly intensified after this declaration, with apprehended individuals then being brought to different camps around the country. The declaration of a state of emergency also led to heightened military presence in camps around the country.

**WITHIN SERBIA THE RESTRICTION OF MOVEMENT IN TRANSIT AND ASYLUM CENTERS HAS RESULTED IN A DETERIORATING SITUATION MARKED BY THE ISOLATION OF TRANSIT COMMUNITIES, INCREASED SECURITISATION BY THE STATE, AND AN UPTICK OF VIOLENT INCIDENTS WITHIN THESE NOW CLOSED CAMPS.**

In response to the crisis imposed by COVID-19, the Serbian government has also temporarily established or re-opened three camps since March - Morović, Subotica and Miratovac respectively. These camps were quickly filled with new arrivals and people the Serbian

government transferred from other camps to manage overflow and contain “troublemakers”.

Similar to the trend which can be observed in Bosnia, within Serbia the restriction of movement in transit and asylum centers has resulted in a deteriorating situation marked by the isolation of transit communities, increased securitisation by the state, and an uptick of violent incidents within these now closed camps. On 10th April 2020, Special Forces were deployed to [Krnjača camp](#) outside of Belgrade and reportedly moved several buses of people to the newly opened Morović camp in the west of the country.

Video footage from inside [Krnjača](#) showing the injured in these attacks is a key reminder of the additional powers being exercised by authorities during the lockdown measures. Elsewhere, military personnel fired warning shots during periods of unrest in [Obrenovac](#) and [Adasevci](#) camps in April. Further unrest brought about by frustrations over containment and lack of services was reported in [Preševo](#) and Principovac. The garrisoning of accommodation sites, and use of violence by police - who removed people to undisclosed locations - represents the Serbian government’s weaponized approach to the health crisis. As Serbia works to relax the [health controls](#) brought in during March, question marks remain about the enduring nature of this spate of extreme violence, even after the state of emergency ended on the 6th May 2020.

ALL 100 RESIDENTS OF SUBOTICA RTC MOVED TO OTHER CAMPS IN SERBIA ON MARCH 21ST

ON APRIL 20TH, AROUND 50 CAMP RESIDENTS IN ADASEVCI RTC TRIED TO LEAVE THE CAMP, FOR THIS REASON ONE OF THE SOLDIERS SHOT IN THE AIR.



FIGHTS OVER CONDITIONS IN KRNJACA RTC RESULT IN SPECIAL POLICE FORCES BEING DEPLOYED ON APRIL 10TH, USE OF FORCE REPORTED.



CAMP OVERFLOW AND "TROUBLEMAKERS" FROM CAMPS AROUND SERBIAN ARE MOVED TO MOROVIC RTC IN APRIL

ON APRIL 5TH A LARGE BRAWL TOOK PLACE APPARENTLY BETWEEN CAMP RESIDENTS RESULTING IN 14 HOSPITALIZATIONS

SEVERAL GROUPS REPORT BEING TAKEN FROM TUTIN RTC AND PUSHED BACK TO NORTH MACEDONIA WITHOUT EXPLANATION

MIRATOVAC RTC TEMPORARILY RE-OPENED ON APRIL 6TH

A LARGE FIGHT BREAKS OUT ON APRIL 6TH IN PRESEVO RTC

**CAMPS IN SERBIA:**

- 1 - SOMBOR RTC
- 2 - KIKINA RTC
- 3 - PRINCIPOVAC RTC
- 4 - SID RTC
- 5 - ADESEVCI RTC
- 6 - KRNJAC AC
- 7 - OBRENOVAC RTC
- 8 - BANJA KOVILJAČA AC
- 9 - BOGOVAĐA AC
- 10 - SJENICA AC
- 11 - TUTIN AC
- 12 - DIVILJANA RTC

- 13 - PIROT RTC
- 14 - DIMITROVGRAD RTC
- 15 - VRANJE RTC
- 16 - BOSILEGRAD RTC
- 17 - BUJANOVAC RTC
- 18 - PRESEVO RTC

**TEMPORARILY OPENED/CLOSED:**

- 19 - MIRATOVAC RTC
- 20 - MOROVIC RTC
- 21 - SUBOTICA RTC

RTC = RECEPTION/TRANSIT CENTER  
AC = ASYLUM CENTER

\*IN MID-MARCH, FOLLOWING SERBIA'S DECLARATION OF A STATE OF EMERGENCY, STATE AUTHORITIES AROUND THE COUNTRY GATHERED OVER 2,000 PEOPLE-ON-THE-MOVE FROM PUBLIC SPACES AND TRANSPORTED THEM TO THE NEAREST GOVERNMENTAL CENTER. THIS RESULTED A SHARP SPIKE IN TOTAL CAMP NUMBERS AND A SHARP DECREASE IN THE AMOUNT OF PEOPLE LIVING IN INFORMAL ARRANGEMENTS THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY

\*\*POPULATION DATA FROM UNHCR (MARCH, 20202)

# GREECE

## PUSHBACKS FROM THESSALONIKI

The scope of existing pushback practices in Greece is already well developed, including the militarization of the Evros land border and the use of the Hellenic Coast Guard in the Aegean Sea. However, since COVID-19 restrictions began in mid-March, Greek authorities have embarked on further and expansive collective expulsions from sites deep into the mainland, going far beyond the common border security practices which target people in transit (foot and vehicle journeys across the border).

BVMN recently published [several cases](#) evidencing the removal and collective expulsion of residents in Diavata refugee camp close to Thessaloniki. These communities, camping in an overspill section because of the lack of space in the site, describe how Greek officers removed them with the promise of issuing documents to temporarily regularise their stay. Instead, multiple accounts cite the use of detention, violence such as baton attacks, and removal across the Evros river by the Greek military to Turkey.

In a [video](#) from Diavata first published by Are You Syrious, police are shown removing people in a white van from the camp. According to BVMN reports, at least 194 people have been transported by bus from the camp in Diavata and the Drama Paranesti Pre-removal Centre since late March. Speaking with affected persons, who are now in Istanbul and Erdine (TUR), reporters found that many had temporary documents. While often these were expired, they should have been renewed by the police since asylum seekers have no access to apply for asylum due to the [extended closure](#) of the Greek Asylum Service in light of COVID-19 restrictions.

Pushbacks themselves are inherently illegal for their summary application, use of violence and lack of legal frame regarding readmissions.<sup>\*</sup> However, the removal of people with temporary documents permitting their stay in Greece and the refusal of the police to renew their documents once expired when asylum applications cannot be submitted, adds another layer of

\* Readmissions under the EU-Turkey Statement have been suspended since the end of February 2020.

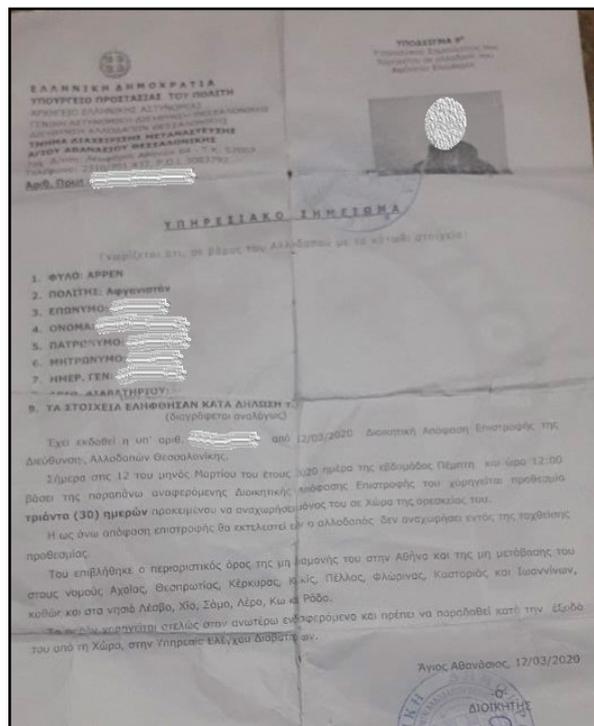


### **PUSHBACK: GREECE – TURKEY DATE: 16TH APRIL 2020**

**A YOUNG AFGHAN MAN WHO, AMONG 50 OTHER PEOPLE REMOVED FROM DIAVATA CAMP NEAR THESSALONIKI, WAS TAKEN TO THE BORDER AREA, DETAINED BY GREEK MILITARY PERSONNEL AND BEATEN WITH BATONS. AFTER THE ATTACK, THEY WERE LOADED INTO RUBBER BOATS AND TAKEN ACROSS THE RIVER TO TURKEY.**

[\[READ REPORT\]](#)

unlawful practice. This furthers the critique levelled at the Greek state for using COVID-19 measures as an opportunity to extend existing patterns of repression seen in early March. Expanding pushback targets to inner-city communities has targeted many new arrivals who reached cities like Thessaloniki when asylum access had formally been suspended by the Greek government. The pushback of these groups draws a worrying link between the assault on fundamental rights that began during the standoff close to Erdine (TUR) and the advancement of crossborder pushbacks during pandemic.



TOP - VALID TEMPORARY DOCUMENT HELD BY ONE OF THE PEOPLE PUSHED BACK. (SOURCE: [BVMN](#))



LEFT - INJURY TO HIS WRISTS SUSTAINED IN A BATON ATTACK BY GREEK AUTHORITIES (SOURCE: [BVMN](#))

## FINES IMPOSED ON HOMELESS TRANSIT GROUPS

A range of COVID-19 related measures have been imposed on the refugee and transit populations in Greece. Those in camps on mainland Greece and accommodated in the urban areas had to follow the same measures as the local population: controlled movement for specific reasons (i.e. grocery shopping, doctor's visits, physical exercise), justified through a [written form](#) or a [text message](#).

Homeless transit groups in the urban area of Thessaloniki or camping outside [Diavata camp](#) found themselves in the impossible situation of having to fulfill their needs while risking being fined. Numerous homeless persons were fined [150 euros](#) or more, some multiple times, due to the absence of the proper form or text message. Among them, homeless persons whose form or message did not include a fixed address, despite their explanations to the police officers

that they were homeless, were fined.

**NUMEROUS HOMELESS PERSONS WERE FINED 150 EUROS OR MORE, SOME MULTIPLE TIMES, DUE TO THE ABSENCE OF THE PROPER FORM OR TEXT MESSAGE.**

Neither the government nor the local municipalities have taken action about the fines imposed on homeless persons throughout Greece, nor in the Thessaloniki area. While the payment of fines cannot be enforced on persons without a tax number, which constitutes the majority of affected groups, once they will have submitted an asylum application and be in the possession of valid identification, they would have the right to be assigned a tax number and be latterly subject to the fine.

## DETENTION DURING PANDEMIC

A number of prominent human rights watchdogs and actors in the field have called on EU member states to review their policies on [immigration detention](#) in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. However in Greece the trend appears to be moving in the opposite direction. [BVMN's February Report](#) included a briefing on the increases in mass arrests, regardless of the subjects stage in the asylum process, especially targeting inner-city homeless populations. This practice has become unchecked during the period of national lockdown and, with it, increased repression of transit groups.

Over the past few months there have been updates from inside Paranesti Pre-removal Detention Centre in Drama, and Amygdaleza Detention Centre in Athens which document worsening conditions for inmates. Respondents from inside both facilities describe a lack of basic amenities such as running water, showers, or soap. Cramped and overcrowded conditions, with up to 13 inmates housed in one caravan with one, usually non-functioning, toilet. Requests for better services are met with violence at the hands of officers and riot police. On top of this, there have been complaints that no special precautions for COVID-19 are being taken, residents inside shared with BVMN reporters that sick in-

dividuals are not isolated, and are dismissed as having 'the flu'. These images are in line with the repression of conditions being widely reported on from the islands: the [overcrowded](#) conditions of Moria, one tap between 1,300 residents, severely limited healthcare and food provisions. A [hunger strike](#) by detainees in Paranesti in response to this lack of basic provision was met with the brutal intervention of Greek riot police, aptly symbolising the institutional response to material need in the refugee and transit community.

It is clear that, unlike Portugal's response to treat all undocumented migrants as regular citizens for this period, the Greek approach represents an intensification of well established patterns of repression and violence across its sea and land regions. There have even been reports that large groups are being taken from pre-removal detention centres, [specifically Paranesti](#), and pushed back across the Turkish border collectively. Rather than action taken in spite of public health risks, the combined repression of conditions and links to pushbacks show an intentional trajectory during COVID-19, where the Greek state has capitalised on the wider restrictions to act with further impunity in the detention system.

## THE AEGEAN ISLANDS

During March and April, COVID-19 measures had an observable impact on the Hotspots of the Aegean Islands and the exercise of pushbacks at sea. [Mare Liberum](#), a monitoring vessel in the area of Lesbos, shared how the Moria camp, as with multiple other camps on the islands, is overcrowded. The hygienic conditions are stated to be awful, and the COVID-19 prevention measures insufficient to prevent transmission. The evacuation of a small minority has been carried out too slowly, and the majority of residents and new arrivals are left exposed by the Greek government's neglect, especially since external assistance from NGOs and activists has been restricted.

No civil monitoring ships are permitted in the Aegean Sea during current restrictions. Under this forced suspension, the official whitewashing of arrivals statistics has raised concerns of disappearances and pushbacks. Greek officials recorded no landings in the period from mid-April to the first week of May – a historic, but questionable feat, that hasn't occurred since 2015

according to Mare Liberum. Despite this obfuscation, footage of two boats with passengers was filmed arriving at Samos, yet the people later [disappeared](#) after landing, raising questions about their possible detention and illegal pushbacks to Turkey.

Other missing persons were alleged to have suffered illegal pushbacks at the hands of the [Hellenic Coast Guard](#) on 30th April 2020. At least ten people arrived on Chios and were then removed to an undisclosed location. Later, a similar number of persons were rescued by the [Turkish Coast Guard](#) of a small rocky outcrop in the sea. These developments fit a consistent pattern within the COVID-19 period which link to the pushbacks and disappearances of people from Diavata and Paranesti on the mainland. The intensification of undocumented removals was accelerated by the standoff with Turkey during March, but since then, the Greek authorities have used the lockdown measures to shield from the public view further pushbacks.

## FRONTEX

The role of FRONTEX during the COVID-19 pandemic is a telling example of how expansive powers have been granted to securitisation bodies working in external border areas. The European Border and Coastguard Agency were already at a heightened deployment, bringing in an additional 100 border guards to Greece's Evros region at the start of March in response to the movement of [thousands of people to the TUR-GRK border](#). In April, deep into the general lockdown measures, the Agency [committed](#) to prolonging its deployments in Greece, as supported by the majority of sending states who now have 624 officers installed.

The sending of additional personnel in March was organised through a [Rapid Border Intervention \(RABIT\)](#), the quick response mechanism of FRONTEX. It was praised by Executive Director Fabrice Leggeri as a key example of how member states could mobilise officers, a reflexive power he asserted was strengthened by the formation of the coming standing core of 10,000 officers. Though the RABIT deployment was set to expire on 3rd April 2020, during the COVID-19 era, this temporary measure has been entrenched, marking a worryingly smooth transition between emergency action, and sustained policy. FRONTEX recently released its [risk analysis for 2020](#), positioning its more intensive work within the viral outbreak. This expanding remit comes in spite of multiple reports by both [BVMN](#) and organisations such as [Amnesty International](#) indicating that during March grievous human rights violations

reached a peak within FRONTEX's operational areas at the Greek land and maritime border. It was during this time the RABIT deployment stationed 100 extra border guards in Evros and supported initiatives in the Aegean Sea.

Possible involvement of FRONTEX officials was alerted to BVMN in April as reporters spoke with a person who was [pushed back from Greece to Turkey](#). He described being subject to seven pushbacks across this border in recent months. Notably he also referred to seeing "Italian and German police" during one of the pushbacks. This is notable as FRONTEX officers wear the uniform of their national sending state while deployed.

At a time when the Agency has been implicated in rights suspensions related to the Evros border, the permanence of its presence in Greece provides a disturbing account of EU action during the pandemic. In FRONTEX's [statement](#), the assistance to Greece was described as support "despite the difficulties caused by the outbreak of COVID-19". However, in line with the ongoing militarisation and rights breaches being observed along the Balkan Route, the continued deployment might be better understood as intimately related to the pandemic. Within the call by the EU and international institutions for tighter borders, the permanent installation of bodies like FRONTEX have been achieved through the conduit of COVID-19.



GERMAN AND DANISH OFFICERS ARRIVE IN APRIL TO GREECE (SOURCE: [FRONTEX](#))

# NORTH MACEDONIA



**PUSHBACK : N. MACEDONIA – GREECE**

**DATE : 22ND APRIL 2020**

**“THEY WANT TO KILL US. THEY WANT TO KILL US”**

**THE RESPONDENT HAD TO BE TREATED IN GREECE FOR A FRACTURE TO HIS ARM AFTER A SEVERE BEATING BY MNK POLICE. MASKED OFFICERS HIT THEM WITH BATONS AND FORCED BACK ACROSS THE BORDER.**

[\[READ REPORT\]](#)

On 17th March 2020, N. Macedonia announced the [closure](#) of all its border crossing points in response to the outbreak of COVID-19. Two days later, President Stevo Pendarovski called a [state of emergency](#), provisionally for 30 days, which was later extended for an additional month. These measures include strict hours of [curfew](#) and the compulsory use of face masks in public places where a safe distance of two meters cannot be adhered to. These regulations are particularly difficult for transit groups to abide by as access to face masks may be limited and obeying curfew is near impossible without a fixed abode.

**DESPITE THE BORDER CLOSURES, BVMN ALONE HAS RECORDED FOUR CASES OF PUSH-BACKS FROM N. MACEDONIA TO GREECE DURING APRIL**

Despite the border closures, BVMN alone has re-

corded four cases of push-backs from N. Macedonia to Greece during April, of which some belonged to a larger chain of push-backs from Serbia. Prime Minister Oliver Spasovski has emphasised the continuation of N. Macedonia's '[zero tolerance](#)' approach towards migrants crossing the borders, whilst working in collaboration with countries across the region during this period, stating that:

“Regardless of the corona crisis, we are closely monitoring the situation, but mainly there is no difference in our attitude”.

This attitude is arguably reflected in the ongoing treatment of transit groups by the officers working in the border regions of N. Macedonia. In two cases from this month, the officers were typically violent, resulting in one respondent being unable to walk without crutches (see report from [11th April 2020](#)), and another, with a fractured arm (see report from [22nd April 2020](#)). In the latter incident, the respondent felt so threatened by the officers that he asserted: “They want to kill us.

# HUNGARY

On 3rd March 2020, as the pandemic began to hit Europe but before a single case was reported in Hungary itself, the Hungarian government [decided to close](#) the “transit camps” in Röszke and Tompa for any new arrivals.<sup>\*</sup> These transit camps are the only entry point into the Hungarian asylum system for people on the move. The closure of the camps fell into the context of a broader narrative by the Hungarian government that the COVID-19 was brought to the country by foreigners. In an obvious case of race-baiting, Laós Kosa, chairman of the Parliamentary Defense Committee, [claimed](#) that transit populations were coming from “unsafe sanitary conditions”, thus connecting the health crisis to the Hungarian government’s ongoing anti-refugee rhetoric. Claiming that Iranian students were responsible for the country’s first outbreak, the Orbán government even [moved to deport](#) the group despite their legal residence status. Since March, no more refugees have been admitted to the transit camps, de facto shutting down the Hungarian asylum system following the trend across the Balkan route and in clear violation of EU law.

In contrast to other countries, whose tightened measures against transit populations have gone largely unchecked amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, Hungary has recently received significant criticism for its treatment of asylum applicants from the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU).

For background, even prior to the transit camps’ closure, the de facto chance of receiving international protection in Hungary was extremely slim because access to the camps was severely limited (last year, [fewer than 500](#) people managed to file for asylum in Hungary) and because almost all cases were deemed automatically inadmissible. Asylum applications’ inadmissibility was based on an [amendment](#) to Hungary’s Asylum Act introduced in 2018, which states that claims are inadmissible if an applicant arrives from a “safe transit country”. While this caveat appears to be similar to the EU’s concept of “safe third country”, the crucial difference is that Hungary maintains a case’s inadmissibility even if the transit country refuses to readmit the applicant. Under EU law, a country must consider the case’s merits if a safe third country refuses readmission. Almost all asylum applicants to Hungary arrive from Serbia, which is deemed a “safe

transit country” by Hungary and which has [refused readmission](#) for the past several years (this excludes pushbacks which are continuously carried out and have been extensively documented by [BVMN](#)). Due to the incongruence between Hungarian and EU law, there is an [ongoing infringement procedure](#) against Hungary but on March 19th, 2020 the [CJEU](#) ruled on a case declaring the Hungarian amendment in breach of EU law. This ruling will be an important precedent in a number of ongoing cases.

In a second, still ongoing case, the CJEU Advocate General [wrote in an opinion](#) that the conditions in the Röszke transit camp constitute unlawful detention. The Advocate General based his reasoning on the physically enforced isolation even between sectors of the camp (through barbed wires and fences), the need for authorization prior to contacting a lawyer, and the absence of a practical way to leave the camps. While it is theoretically allowed to leave the camps towards Serbia, Serbia does not allow for the re-entry of asylum applicants and those who leave lose their status as asylum applicants in the Hungarian asylum system. Importantly, the Advocate General argues that the CJEU should go beyond the [ruling](#) made by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which had previously determined that the Hungarian camps do not constitute a deprivation of the right to liberty and security. This is a hopeful sign, especially in the context of the ECHR’s recent decisions to the detriment of people-on-the-move as documented in BVMN’s [February Report](#). Finally, it is important to note that the classification of Röszke as unlawful detention is not yet a legally binding decision but judges at the CJEU are likely to follow the opinion of the Advocate General.

Hungary has, for years, engaged in systematic efforts to illegally limit the rights of people-on-the-move and saw an opening in the COVID-19 crisis to choke off its asylum system altogether. Adding to the worry, the Hungarian government has been empowered to [rule by decree](#) indefinitely. The CJEU’s rulings will thus challenge a Hungarian government no longer bound by any semblance of checks and balances. Whether or not the CJEU will be able to overturn Hungary’s inhumane asylum laws will be an important test of the EU’s judicial power and have deep effects on the lives of the people-on-the-move, imprisoned at Röszke.

\* Push-backs from Hungary, however, have continued during this period. The UNHCR [reports](#) at least 50 push-backs from Hungary to Serbia in the months of April.

# CONCLUSIONS

This special report on the intersection of COVID-19 and border regimes has uncovered common features in terms of exceptional violations, the mobilisation of security forces at borders and camps, and the repression of daily living conditions for people-on-the-move. Migration management within pandemic restrictions has had a dual impact. Firstly, comparing the experience of the general public with that of people-on-the-move has revealed the disproportionate effect of COVID-19 restrictions, especially pertaining to liberty, physical security and basic needs such as accommodation and healthcare. Observing relevant measures - such as social distancing protocols and hygienic standards - remains a challenge for those facing precarious border crossings, barriers to asylum access and a distinct lack of stable accommodation. People-on-the-move have suffered squat dispersals, sealed camps, additional checks on their movement, along with the continued risk of collective expulsion.

Secondly, the application of COVID-19 measures have also served as justification for the staging of further rights suspensions, showing how governments are capitalising on states of emergency in order to carry out more expansive rights violations against refugee and transient communities. This was seen most keenly with the incursion of police and military personnel into camps and detention spaces. In many cases, this

resulted in the removal and pushback of large groups, even those who held camp cards or temporary documents, such as in Serbia and Greece. Alongside this, new practices at the border - such as paint tagging by Croatian officials - also shows how the health response is being reinterpreted in a perverse fashion by those tasked with upholding law.

**RATHER THAN ENSURING PROTECTIONS AT A TIME OF DIRE NEED, THESE SYSTEMS HAVE BECOME MORE RESTRICTIVE, USING THE EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES OF COVID-19 TO FURTHER ERODE ACCESS AND DUE PROCEDURE.**

These disproportionate effects and the extension of rights suspensions are hallmarks of an opportunistic pushback and asylum regime. Rather than ensuring protections at a time of dire need, these systems have become more restrictive, using the exceptional circumstances of COVID-19 to further erode access and due procedure. Concerns are raised by BVMN about the reflexivity of such a border system, and how rights and fair treatment can be restored to people-on-the-move during and after the pandemic.

## STRUCTURE AND CONTACT

BVMN finances its monitoring work through charitable grants and foundations, and is not in receipt of funds from any political organisation. The expenditures cover transport subsidies for volunteers in the field and four paid positions. To find out more, check out our [website](#),

or 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](mailto:mail@borderviolence.eu). For press and media requests please contact: [press@borderviolence.eu](mailto:press@borderviolence.eu)