

INTERNAL VIOLENCE REPORT



BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Since May 2020 Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) started to collect testimonies of people-on-the-move (POM) who were victims of internal violence perpetrated by national police officers within states along the Balkan Route.

In this report - which is the third in this internal violence reporting project undertaken by the BVMN - we look at Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), mainly in the area of the Una Sana Canton in the north-western part of the country in the territory of the Una river valley.

The report was the result of interviews carried out by field reporters from BVMN's partner organisation No Name Kitchen and long-term monitoring through qualitative and quantitative observations of the situation on the ground by other members of BVMN.

The report provides a general overview of the Bosnian framework of the Balkan route, highlighting how political and administrative decisions influenced the routes and the management of the migration situation and how informal camps and temporary reception centres, managed by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and funded by the European Union, developed only in the territory of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. With a brief mention of the funding by the EU and European governments to Bosnia from 2018 to date, the report also examines the support by the EU and IOM to state authorities and police officers for border control.

It will then examine what is the situation inside the camps, and mainly in the new Lipa camp rebuilt after the fire that destroyed the previous structure in December 2020 leaving more than a thousand people stranded in high mountains with sub-zero temperatures and blocked by Special Forces if they tried to head towards the city of Bihać.

Violence and aggression perpetrated by the police against people-on-the-move will be discussed. The types of physical violence, including on unaccompanied minors, racist and xenophobic hatred and violence but also psychological and indirect violence against POMs and their immediate needs: evictions, forced transportation to camps, destruction of shelters, theft and destruction of property.

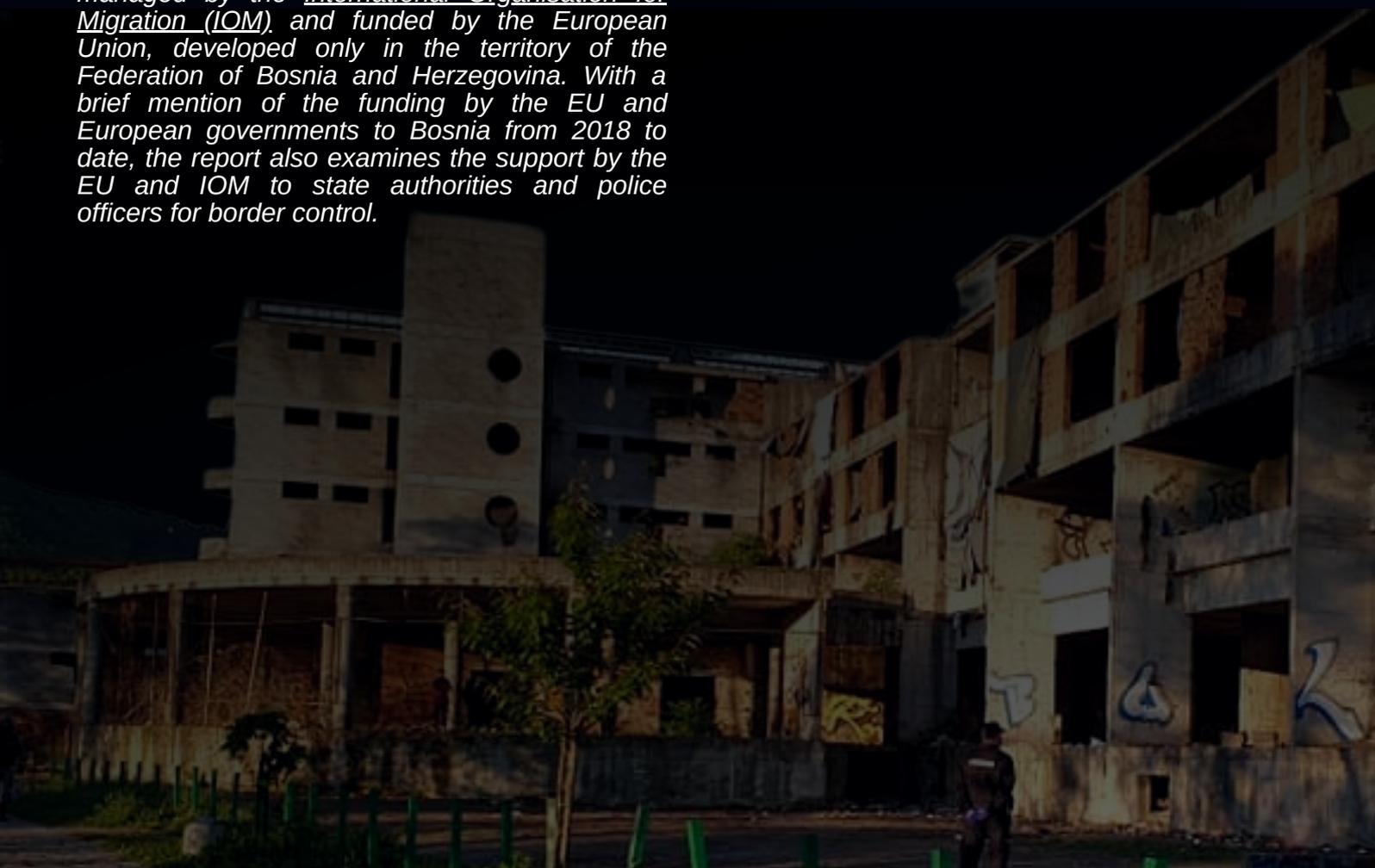


TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 The Political Context and Camp Management
- 3 Violence During a Peaceful Protest for Freedom of Movement
- 4 Eviction and forced transportation - Dom Penzionera and Krajna Metal
- 5 EU funding to support Bosnian police in border control
- 6 Violence, harassment and force transportation within the Una Sana Canton - Velika Kladuša and Bihać
- 8 Testimony
- 9 Network Structure and Contact

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT AND THE CAMP MANAGEMENT

The state structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina, outlined by the Dayton Agreement of 1995, and the political and administrative decisions taken by the different entities and the pressure of the European institutions have influenced the Balkan Route of people on the move and the opening of transit reception centers.

One of the obligations of Bosnia and Herzegovina within the framework of the European Union is to be partially integrated into the migration control regime, demonstrating that it is capable of managing migration and asylum processes on its slow path towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration. In the summer of 2016, the Ministry of Security of BiH presents in Sarajevo the "Strategy in the area of migration and asylum and the Action Plan for 2016-2020", a strategic document that defines the migration and asylum policy and what are the highest international and European standards.

In the spring of 2018, due to increased violence and pushbacks by Hungarian and Croatian police towards Serbia, people on the move diverted from Serbia to Montenegro or Bosnia, finding a country completely unprepared to deal with the migration crisis that was happening. With the arrival of the first people on the move in Bosnia, and on the basis of a decision taken by the European Union, the European Parliament directed all its donations for migration management in Bosnia to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) making it the responsible organization on the ground, mainly due to the lack of coordination by the different state institutions which led to the separation of Una Sana Canton - in the north-western part of the country and the main area of concentration of the transit community due to its extreme proximity to the Croatian border - from the rest of the country. This decision to entrust the coordination of migration management to IOM and UNHCR is due to the fact that in October 2018 there were general elections in Bosnia and no political force at that time wanted to take sides for or against the presence of people on the move in order not to lose votes and not to generate conflicts in the local community. With the formation of the Government in the autumn of 2018, the management of the migration crisis returned to the hands of the Ministry of Security together with the Service for Foreigners' Affairs (SFA), who focused mainly on the issue of border protection and registration of people on the move in the country.

With the closure of the elections and the formation of the new government, decisions regarding the management of the migration crisis were taken. In October of that year, a directive was ratified by the Ministry of Security prohibiting the entry and movement of new people on the move to the Una-Sana Canton. This decision triggered the inspection, in Ključ and Bosanska Otoka, by the cantonal police of buses and trains arriving from Republika Srpska and, without any legal basis, people on the move were made to leave buses and trains without the possibility of moving forward and seeing their freedom of movement totally violated. In the same year, a number of Facebook groups began to form, advocating violence against people on the move, and they began to spread false information identifying PoM as carriers of diseases, thieves and murderers. Two of these groups are Doček Migranata (in Bosnian, welcome Migrants), the logo recalls the Bosnian flag but depicts a hand holding a stick and STOP invaziji migranata!! Udruženje građana Bihaća.

In 2018, the various Temporary Reception Centres (TRCs) under the control of the Ministry of Security together with the SFA but managed by IOM and funded by the European Union developed. The TRCs are still exclusively present in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the Canton of Una Sana and in Sarajevo, as Miroslav Dodik - president of Republika Srpska - had declared that this geographical entity would not lend itself to any form of accommodation within its territory.

Since the beginning of 2018, the European Union has provided a total of 101,85 million euros to Bosnia and Herzegovina and through implementing partners, to which must be added funding from European governments such as Austria and Germany as in the reconstruction of the new Lipa camp. Funding that leads to the construction of overcrowded, degrading and dilapidated camps that restrict the freedom of movement of the transit community and violate the human and fundamental rights of individuals.



The last year has seen the closure of two main camps in Una Sana Canton, TRC Bira and TRC Sedra, with the aim of local institutions and international organizations present in the area to focus the presence of the transit community in the new Temporary Reception Centre (TRC) Lipa, which was officially opened on 19th November this year in an inaugural ceremony and was attended by prominent political leaders. These figures included the Director of the Service for Foreigners' Affairs, the Prime Minister of the Una Sana Canton, the Minister of Security of BiH, the Mayor of Bihać, the EU High Representative in BiH, and the IOM Chief of Mission in BiH. Within the week before the camp's opening, the 30 emergency tents, where the Lipa residents were previously located, were dismantled and all the single men were moved into new containers.

he camp itself is organized in containers with 6 beds each. New people arriving to the camp are registered and sent to the quarantine area for 7 days. Additionally, there are designated areas both for unaccompanied minors and families who arrived at the beginning of December.

Although the new facilities are notably warmer, with heating and hot water in the restrooms, and generally improved hygienic conditions, the larger threat lies in increased controls and restrictions. For example, the 10 PM curfew and the highly fenced-off area of the new facilities enhance the remoteness of the camp from the local town of Bihać, further perpetuating the freedom of movement for people on the move. Lipa residents also report uneasiness and preoccupation with the detention-like setting of the new TRC, as well as with anticipated evictions of informal camps in the Una Sana Canton.



Protest for the freedom of movement organised by POMs (source: No Name Kitchen)

VIOLENCE DURING A PEACEFUL PROTEST FOR FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

Last September, a group of around 150 people on the move living in Velika Kladuša, mostly consisting of families from Afghanistan, gathered in a protest for freedom of movement and for a life with dignity.

They left the open-air squat in Kladuša where they used to live and were followed by two police cars. As they came closer to the border with Croatia, a white border police van blocked the road. The border police force present consisted of 4 Bosnian border police officers and 2 police dogs. One of the officers told the respondent, a 16-year-old woman from Afghanistan, that they could travel to the border in smaller groups, but not as a larger group of protesters.

Due to the rising number of police officers, the protesting group turned around and attempted to move down another road towards the border. However, their efforts were once again blocked by approximately 6 police cars. A policeman started pushing a man with his baby in his arms 2-3 times. The man eventually fell to the ground, nearly falling into a river. The respondent remembers that throughout this conflict, many people told the police in English that it was a non-violent protest.

"This is a peaceful protest, we will not do anything and don't have any problem with you. We just want to go there [to the border]."

However the officers did not permit the protestors to pass, threatening the transit group

"Go back in the city if you want to demonstrate. [...] If you don't stop, we will bring you to Sarajevo".

One policeman pushed the respondent, repeating to her that she should return and asked who was the leader of the protest but, as also the respondent states, that was a peaceful protest, there was no leader leading it.

The respondent recalls that this appeared to further agitate the officer. In the meantime, police officers continued to assault the protestors with hands and police batons, including pregnant women and children. As a result, the protesting group decided to follow the police orders and turn around. With the belief that they could continue their protest in the city center, they attempted to walk on a road returning to the center. However, they were eventually stopped again by the police and told to end their protest.

The protest, therefore, returned to Kladuša, where the respondent describes several police cars patrolling around the open-air squat throughout the evening. Policemen continue to threaten people from the protest and warned that if they protested again, the police would evict their living space and place everyone into camps.

"We wanted to stay at the border until they make a decision for us. Because we are really tired of being here. And the weather is getting cold, so people don't know what to do. From every side, we are just pushed back."



Protest for the freedom of movement organised by POMs (source: No Name Kitchen)

EVICTED AND FORCED TRANSPORTATION - DOM PENZIONERA AND KRAJNA METAL

On the 18th of May 2021 a police operation conducted the eviction of the abandoned former nursing home in the Bihac city centre known as "Dom Penzionera". The abandoned building was used by around 250 People-on-the-move (POM) and was evicted by Special Force Police at around 6 in the morning.

As the eviction began, four Special Force Officers armed with machine guns were positioned at the entrance to each floor. Regular Police Officers in civilian clothing were also involved. The Officers approached the still-sleeping POM, forcing the POM to quickly awaken and providing barely enough time to grab their belongings. Most individuals left with only their phones and power banks. When they reached the front of the building, buses were already waiting to transport the POM to Lipa Camp.

The evicted POM were registered by camp authorities and on arrival at the camp, they were given breakfast. However, the camp was facing limited capacity and resources, resulting in poor hygienic conditions. Upon realizing these poor conditions, around 180 people left the camp through a hole in a back fence and returned to Bihac that day.

Directly after the POM had left "Dom Pensionera", the cleaning company JKB "Komrad" began cleaning up the property. They threw all the belongings of the POM out of the windows, including food, pots and pans, blankets, sleeping bags, and mattresses. An excavator then pushed the belongings into huge rubbish containers.

When the POM returned to town, most of them neither had food nor a sleeping place for the night. As a result, all of the individuals that were evicted and brought to the camp that day ended up on the street of Bihac.



Police officers during the eviction of Dom Penzionera (Source: Grad Bihać / Facebook)



Police officers and SFA during the eviction in Krajna Metal in Bihać
(Source: Grad Bihać / Facebook)

The other main abandoned building used as a place of shelter in Bihać, Krajna Metal, was also evicted on the 13th of July, 2021. Previously an old factory, the building sheltered approximately 253 people and was evicted by the SFA in cooperation with IOM and the Bosnian Authorities and forcibly transported to the Lipa camp. Like the “Dom Penzionera” eviction, the removals took place early in the morning and accounts of police violence were reported. The move fits into an ongoing pattern of evictions and dispersals to Lipa which impacts people across urban and rural squats in the Bihać area, and across wider Una- Sana Canton (USC).

EU FUNDING TO SUPPORT BOSNIAN POLICE IN BORDER CONTROL

On July 30th, 2021, the EU donated 63 vehicles and other specialized equipment to BiH Border Police and the State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA), as part of its wider project “EU Support to Migration and Border Management in Bosnia and Herzegovina”. This project started in 2007 and has involved packages worth over 126 million € since. This more recent donation was processed in partnership with IOM, through an Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) -a tool created by the EU in 2007 to fund reforms on prospective members.

The keys to the vehicles were publicly handed over by the EU Ambassador to the country, Johann Sattler, in an event attended by IOM representatives, together with the Bosnian authorities. More specifically, the donation consisted of 35 vans and 12 SUVs for the Border Police and 16 off-road vehicles for SIPA, which also received protective clothing. This is to be coupled with some unspecified additional equipment with which the EU aims at “significantly strengthen police officers’ work and enable them to act faster and be more mobile in the field”.



Vans donated by the EU to the Bosnian authorities
(Source: IOM / Facebook)

On 9th December it was announced that the European Union had made a further donation of vehicles and equipment to the Border Police of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Ministry of the Interior of the Western Herzegovina Canton. This time the value is over 430,000 euros and includes: 5 specialised vehicle trailers for transport with mobile homes for multi-day stays of guide dogs, 70 binoculars, 25 thermal cameras, 30 portable night vision devices, an SUV vehicle and a shallow draft service vessel. plus a van and a thermal imaging camera worth about 47,000 euro to the Ministry of Interior of Western Herzegovina.

BVMN field reporters have collected testimonies that point at the involvement of both bodies in systematic violence against people-on-the-move throughout the past months and years, both internally and at the borders of the country.

Without the existence of a comprehensive and independent oversight mechanism, these donations further prioritize the criminalization over the assistance to people-on-the-move, and are likely to further enable human rights abuses by police officers.



*Bosnian police officer with a guard dog
(Source: IOM / Facebook)*

VIOLENCE, HARASSMENT AND FORCE TRANSPORTATION WITHIN THE UNA SANA CANTON - VELIKA KLADUŠA AND BIHAĆ

'Helicopter place' is the biggest open-air squat in Velika Kladuša (BiH), inhabited by 50-250 people on the move. People have been repeatedly exposed to evictions by Bosnian police in collaboration with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). On the 3rd of September, the 29th of October, and the 24th of November, Helicopter place was evicted and the remaining tents destroyed. These procedures follow an ongoing pattern:

The day(s) before evictions take place, members of IOM and Bosnian police units are seen inspecting the respective squat, counting people in order to arrange the deportation to IOM-run camps. In the early morning hours the Bosnian Special Forces Police, wearing gray camouflage uniforms, arrives with the assistance of local police at the squat, forcing everybody to immediately pack one's belongings and get to the buses of IOM, waiting outside. Families and single men are getting split to different buses and brought to respective camps. For families it's either the Borici camp in Bihac or Ušivak camp in Sarajevo, whereas single men are deported to the TRC Miral in Velika Kladuša or TRC Lipa - 25km outside of Bihać. Until their arrival at the camps, people are not receiving information about the destination they are brought to.

Subsequently the remaining living structures such as tents, make-shift shelters and personal belongings that people-on-the-move couldn't carry with them to the bus, get destroyed by excavators, piled up and burned.

The purpose of these evictions and deportations is to gain control over people on the move within formalized camps of IOM, financed largely by the EU, and to make these people invisible from the public sphere in Una-Sana Canton. This deprives illegalized people on the move not only of already limited decisions on how and where to live and find shelter, but also the possibility to stay closer to the border to try another attempt to reach the EU. These people know already about the disastrous living conditions inside the many camps and therefore chose to live not inside of them, but rather in self-determined ways.

In recent months, the transit community has been subject to numerous evictions - mainly among large squats located in abandoned factories and tent camps in so-called jungles - and deportations to formal camps by the Bosnian police. On 15th October, BVMN's partner organisation No Name Kitchen (NNK), collected testimonies of internal violence in a squat 4km away from the city centre of Bihac concerning Bosnian police officers setting fire to the building where some people on the move had found shelter.

Many things were burnt in the fire, such as sleeping bags, tents and other belongings. This modus operandi implies that the police did not give people enough time to move and take out their belongings before setting the fire. Two weeks later, at the beginning of November, the police set fire to other tents in the south-eastern industrial zone of Bihać, where some people had decided to live because it was close to a large supermarket and not too far from the city. Also, in mid-November, a small jungle near the Una river, not far from the city centre, was burnt down. In the fire, three tents were destroyed, and five people were forced to leave their place with nowhere else to go.

In addition, there are numerous systematic controls in the jungles and around the city of Bihać where the Bosnian police often monitor the situation and count the number of people on the move living outside the camp system.

BVMN identified that such patterns of violence had become a systematic practice with the opening of the new camp in Lipa and the eviction of the main places where people on the move were living.

In fact, using the same methods of violence, on 17th November the police authorities of Una Sana Canton evicted the old abandoned factory called Kombiteks where some 15 single men had been living for a few months. One of the transit community present in the building said that five policemen - three of them wearing blue uniforms - arrived in the building at 8:30 am. The respondent, who was hiding on the first floor of the building when the officers arrived, stated that when the policemen went upstairs, they told him that it was illegal and that he should return to his country, threatening to talk to his embassy and have him deported from Bosnia. After that, they hit him with their batons ten times on his left arm and back, causing numerous bruises. Then they took him outside with the other people in the building. The police set fire to all their belongings in the building and ordered them to go to Lipa camp on their own. They allowed them to take one bag per person and then burnt everything else, leaving them with no place to sleep, no food, no clothes and destroying all their belongings. The respondent states that the police raided the Kombiteks numerous times, especially during the night.

On the morning of the 3rd December, five police officers entered a squat outside the TRC Borici. The six people - including two unaccompanied minors - that live there were still sleeping. There were five policemen, but just one of them was wearing a dark blue uniform, while the others were in civilian clothes. To wake them up, they started kicking them and their tents to get them out of bed, shouting to stand up. The police claimed to be searching for a person on the move that committed a crime in Bosnia, but they did not know anything about it. In the rush of collecting information about this person, that the police claimed he was a minor, first they took a video of all the people inside the room, they forced the respondent, one of the unaccompanied minors present, to put his arms behind his back, and threatened another member of the group to send him back to Pakistan if he did not give them the information they needed, while he continued saying that he did not know anything about it.

Then, all the group was physically pushed outside the house and five of them were taken to a police department nearby with police cars, while one of the minors was brought to another police station. While three members of the group were taken directly to Lipa camp, the respondent was questioned in the police station about the person they were looking for where he was beaten by police officers who punched him twice on the shoulder and threatened him that he would go to prison if he did not disclose the information they needed.

After that, they took his mobile phone and searched it, looking at all his private conversations, and they forced him to send a vocal message to the person they were searching for, asking him where he was. Not satisfied, they took the respondent out of the facilities and walked him around the cities in places where they thought it was likely to find that person. Not being able to find it, in the end, they ended up putting the respondent and the other person that was waiting with him in a car, and bringing them to Lipa camp, without any choice. Needless to say, all the group left Lipa five minutes after their arrival, after repeatedly stating that they did not want to go there. Eventually, they had to walk five hours in the snow to come back to their house.

They don't come to evict us but enter the building to steal our mobile phones and money while we are sleeping.



Bulldozer removing the remains of the burn tents after the Helicopter's eviction (Source: anonymous)



PoM in front of the rest of the Helicopter's squat getting burn (Source: anonymous)

TESTIMONY:

On 3rd December 75 people from Pakistan and Afghanistan were caught in an abandoned house near Bugar, north of Bihać, closed to the Croatian border. There were four policemen - wearing blue uniform with the Bosnian flag logo. One of the policemen pulled out his gun, then asked the people if they had any phones and told them to give him 100 euro each, admitting later that he was actually joking.

He then interrogated the people asking if there were any Afghans between them; he took 10 people of Afghan origin and forced one member of the group to undress and take off his underwear to be checked in front of everyone. An Afghan boy, one of the interviewees, stood up and complained about the behavior of the policeman, telling him that it was not right to ask people to undress in front of others. The policeman stopped. After that, the police ordered the people to leave the house and start walking. The respondent claims that there was a police car in front and one behind, and in between the people in transit were forced to walk on the street in the rain. They walked for 2/3 hours and on the way 20 people tried to escape; 10 were caught by the police who made all the people stop. The 10 people were forced to sit down and then they were beaten. One of the respondent was punched in the face, and the policeman who hit him was wearing a ring. He was also slapped 10 times on the ear. Almost the same happened to the other 9 people.



NETWORK STRUCTURE AND CONTACT

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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



**Border Violence
Monitoring Network**