Border Violence Monitoring Network

ILLEGAL PUSH-BACKS AND BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS

BALKAN REGION
JUNE 2020

Mrežnica
The Border Violence Monitoring Network* (BVMN) published 20 cases of illegal pushbacks during June, documenting the experience of 351 people whose rights were violated at the European Union’s external border. Volunteers in the field recorded a variety of cruel and abusive acts by officers, representing at least ten different national authorities. This report summarises the data and narrative testimony shared by people-on-the-move, highlighting the depth of violence being carried out in the service of hard borders.

Special focus is given to the Croatian context where a sequence of brutal knife attacks have furthered calls by multiple international watchdogs challenging the use of systematic torture by the Croatian police. First hand material is shared here on these cruel assaults, presented alongside fresh evidence of a huge EU-led coverup regarding pushbacks. In June, Croatia’s failing to implement an independent border monitoring mechanism - for which they had been funded - was uncovered alongside correspondence from Brussels officials engaged in hiding this fact. While people continue to drown in Croatian rivers, and are stripped and beaten at the border, the prevailing evidence points towards a gross misuse of EU funds in the implementation of this violence.

Further analysis covers the way an “informal readmissions” agreement is being abused by Italy to pushback groups to Slovenia, where they are then chain refouled into Bosnia-Herzegovina or Serbia. Alongside updates from the Western Balkans, attention is also given to the growing level of pushback violence at the Serbia eastern border where families are regularly being beaten by Romanian police. Meanwhile, at the south of the transit route in Greece, a unique attack by police on a humanitarian distribution site is considered through the lens of recent legislation on NGOs working in the territory. The continued accounts of mass apprehensions across mainland Greece matches with ongoing evidence being gathered at the Evros land border of violent pushbacks.

New in this report, BVMN also investigates several cases of pushbacks across the Aegean sea where the Greek authorities used tow-boats and knives to push dinghies into Turkish waters or sink them. Further analysis is also given to the use of weapons and specialised vehicles by Frontex in their Albania mission. Legal developments in both Hungary and Serbia are also noted, showing how processes of alignment and deviation from EU law are impacting asylum seekers rights. Five years on from the “summer of migration”, physical and system based violence at borders remains incredibly high in the Balkan Region and Greece.

*BVMN is a network of watchdog organisations active in Greece and the Western Balkans including No Name Kitchen, Rigardu, Are You Syrious, Mobile Info Team, Josoor, [re:]ports Sarajevo, InfoKolpa, Escuela con Alma, Centre for Peace Studies, Mare Liberum, Collective Aid and Fresh Response.
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REPORTING NETWORK

BVMN is a collaborative project between multiple grassroots organisations and NGOs working along the Western Balkan Route and Greece, documenting violations at borders directed towards people-on-the-move. The members have a common website database, used as a platform to collate testimonies of illegal pushbacks which are gathered through interviews.

ABBREVIATIONS

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

GENERAL

TERMINOLOGY

The term pushback is a key component of the situation that unfolded along the EU borders (Hungary and Croatia) with Serbia in 2016, after the closure of the Balkan route. Push-back describes the informal expulsion (without due process) of an individual or group to another country. This lies in contrast to the term “deportation”, which is conducted in a legal framework. Push-backs have become an important, if unofficial, part of the migration regime of EU countries and elsewhere.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological process for these interviews leverages the close social contact that we have as independent volunteers with refugees and migrants to monitor pushbacks at multiple borders. When individuals return with significant injuries or stories of abuse, one of our violence reporting volunteers will sit down with them to collect their testimony. Although the testimony collection itself is typically with a group no larger than five persons, the pushback groups which they represent can be as large as 50 persons. We have a standardised framework for our interview structure which blends the collection of hard data (dates, geo-locations, officer descriptions, photos of injuries/medical reports, etc.) with open narratives of the abuse.

ABBREVIATIONS
Manual weapons like knives play a key role in the net of illegal activity at Croatian borders targeting people-on-the-move. These tools of intimidation and pain physically mediate structures of ultra-violence, masculinity, racism and state/EU hierarchies which permeate modern pushback practices. In June BVMN reported two separate incidents where respondents suffered knife attacks, wounding, torturing and scarring their bodies. Commonly the Croatian police use batons, sticks, fists and open palms to strike transit groups as they eject people across the green border. However recently reporters heard from 29 people who shared the same experience of being threatened or cut by masked officers brandishing blades. In one case from 27th May (see 4.5), a group of 15 Pakistani men were caught in the Croatian village of Blata and detained by an old train station. They were then attacked by officers in black uniforms and masks, and the respondent was brutally slashed with a knife as five officers pinned him to the ground. Only a day earlier, a group apprehended in the nearby village of Licka Jesenica (see 4.2) was also assaulted with a knife as they were loaded into a vehicle pending their pushback. The report explains how they were “made to lie face down on the floor of the rear compartment” of the van as officers beat them with batons. During this attack a Croatian authority, again wearing black uniform and a mask, took a knife and cut one man’s hand. Occurring just 5km from the other incident, the account offers a matching description of perpetrators and practices, suggesting this may have been carried out by the same police unit. What appear to be Croatian Interventna officers - infamous for their masks and black jumpsuits - are conspicuous in both cases, making identical slashing motions on people’s hands while they are immobilised on the floor.

In both cases, while the entire transit group was beaten, one person in particular was singled out for the most aggressive attack with the knife, marking the use of blades as a form of summary or performative punishment which inflicts both severe pain to the victim, but also creates psychological fear for the witnesses.
Since the initiation of pushbacks to BiH, the Croatian police have used communicative acts of violence to instil fear into transit populations and deter crossings. Speaking in 2019 Goran Matijević, the Chief of the infamous Korenica Police Station, bragged that “the migrants return by themselves when they sense that we are coming”, echoing the harrowing impact such physical abuse has on prospective victims running the gauntlet of the Croatian border. Reports recorded by BVMN also refer to this climate of fear instilled by officers, respondents often sharing that perpetrators threaten further reprisal or even death to those who dare reenter Croatia. Knives are both a physical instantiation of these threats and a metaphorical weapon used to emphasise the risk of crossing state borders. While knives are latent in most cases, the knowledge of their prior use - alongside other tools like guns and tasers - forms part of the imaginary of those facing contact with law enforcement in Croatia. Parallel to the recent knife attacks Amnesty and BVMN also spoke to a group affected by an incident where police used rifle butts to strike their heads till they bled (see 4.3). Officers compounded the attack by rubbing ketchup and mayonnaise into the wounds, serving to denigrate the injured bodies. These reports contribute to the growing understanding of pushbacks as acts of state sanctioned torture, a lens through which BVMN has analysed Croatian border practice before, both around the use of firearms and a myriad of other practices.

Beyond the incidents, the deep lacerations left in the men’s flesh also serve as a means of broadcasting the act, creating an enduring and public message to the transit community of the violence they can expect when crossing the Croatian border. This message was amplified within the context of COVID-19, because some of the injured people made their painful recovery in Miral TRC and the other residents became enduring witnesses during the lockdown of the camp. The UN Special Rapporteur, Felipe González Morales also released a statement in June saying that Croatia had “subjected migrants to torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment as prohibited under international law”. Knife attacks are part of this schema of torture and show how a consistent cruel pushback apparatus is sustained by symbolic cases of extreme violence. These are critical contours in the geography of the EU external border, shaping the acceptable threshold of corporal violence that can be conferred onto the bodies of people-on-the-move.
The climate in Greece, never warm for NGOs, has turned positively icy over the last month. In a bid to make the state a less attractive destination for people-on-the-move, the government has clamped down on groups working in camps, requiring them to register on a central database controlled by the Ministry of Migration. Whilst this has been touted as a move for greater transparency and coordination, the reality is starkly different. Refugee Support Aegean and Terres des Hommes Hellas have criticised the requirements for stigmatising solidarity work and creating “exorbitant costs” for government approved audits. The Expert Council on NGO Law also found the new legislation would require substantial revision to be in line with European standards.

While exploitative changes to the Greek asylum system are putting existing communities at risk, these swift collective expulsions for new arrivals highlight the two-pronged approach being taken by the Greek government. This has dire implications for the transit population who now have no safe space to access essential services such as medical care, food supplies and NFIs, and are at permanent risk of arrest and expulsion. Whilst such a brazen attack directly on people accessing aid has not been repeated, observers in the area say two other mass arrests have occurred nearby during the distribution time. The threat of being apprehended on the street is creating a crude dilemma between access to food and the likelihood of detention or removal to Turkey. In this climate more and more people go hungry, or suffer illness unaided. The trend of rendering essential services inaccessible to those most at need in Greece continues and remains worryingly tied up in the pushback process.

One person affected by the pushback was a new arrival to Greece and had been promised a regularisation document upon arrest. He shared with BVMN the perverse nature of the pushback:

“15 DAYS [TO ARRIVE TO THESSALONIKI] AND THEY TAKE US TO TURKEY IN FIVE HOURS”

While exploitative changes to the Greek asylum system are putting existing communities at risk, these swift collective expulsions for new arrivals highlight the two-pronged approach being taken by the Greek government. This has dire implications for the transit population who now have no safe space to access essential services such as medical care, food supplies and NFIs, and are at permanent risk of arrest and expulsion. Whilst such a brazen attack directly on people accessing aid has not been repeated, observers in the area say two other mass arrests have occurred nearby during the distribution time. The threat of being apprehended on the street is creating a crude dilemma between access to food and the likelihood of detention or removal to Turkey. In this climate more and more people go hungry, or suffer illness unaided. The trend of rendering essential services inaccessible to those most at need in Greece continues and remains worryingly tied up in the pushback process.
Local Serbian organisations such as the Asylum Protection Centre state that as many as 200 people are being violently removed every day from Romania into Serbia. A military ordinance was issued during the COVID-19 state of emergency, mandating the Romanian authorities to continue receiving claims for international protection, as per domestic and EU law. However, recent months have seen a marked rise in violent removals in contravention of these rights. This was picked up by the Financial Times in March, describing how Romanian forces drove “migrants back into the Serbian forest, donned masks and beat them with batons before speeding away”. In one case recently recorded by BVMN, a beaten family was even told “Romania is full” (see 1.4), denoting the informal closure of asylum access that border authorities are applying. While neighbouring Hungary has sought to achieve this through legislative change, Romanian authorities have ramped up the level of physical violence to all but choke off access. The four new cases published by BVMN in June also add an additional nuance to the understanding of removals from Romania. In three of the cases, the perpetrating officers alerted the Serbian police and returned transit groups into their custody at the border, which stands in contrast to the way that Hungarian officers commit pushbacks out of sight of their Serbian counterparts.

**USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN BORDER MANAGEMENT (SOURCE: TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE - FT RESEARCH)**

Other commonalities remain however, such as the use of drone surveillance in Romania and Hungary in order to track and apprehend groups. While there is some diversity in practice along the EU external border, it can be seen that the object of summary removal and violent deterrent are a unifying objective for authorities.
Since an agreement that entered into force in 2011, Italy and Slovenia have organised joint training, cross-border surveillance and pursuit, as well as mixed patrols in the border area of the two countries, in order to prevent people-on-the-move from crossing into Italy. Previous cases of removals to Slovenia from Trieste and Gorizia, have been noted by Italian legal network ASGI as occurring “without any formal procedure or decision”. Since May 2020 there has been a renewed emphasis placed on carrying out expansive readmissions under the bilateral agreement between ITA-SLO, a policy driven by the Italian Ministry of Interior and involving the deployment of the army to the border.

BVMN reporters spoke to several people removed under this “informal readmission” process, who had not only been returned to Slovenia, but subject to a “chain” pushback over two other borders. In a report from 25th May (see 3.1) a group of 14 people were “fingerprinted and given the indication they would be able to pursue an asylum claim in Italy”, before being illegally pushed back to Slovenia, then Croatia, and finally Bosnia-Herzegovina. In another case from 11th June (see 3.2), five Indian men apprehended in Muggia (ITA) were taken to a facility in the border area to claim asylum and be fingerprinted, but then were subject to the same triple pushback process.

What is unique in these cases is that the respondents describe being able to lodge their intent to claim asylum, which differs to the usual gatekeeping activity seen most violently in Croatia and at a bureaucratic level in Slovenia. Bizarrely, in some cases this was even done without the consent of the applicant. Some people held in custody during the COVID-19 measures claim they were not even “aware they had even asked for asylum” in Italy. However in the two cases published by BVMN, those who expressed intent for international protection were simply fast-tracked through the “informal readmission” procedure to Slovenia - activated within the first 24 hours after arrival.

In a public speech, during a hearing at the Italian parliament in front of the Schengen Committee, the Italian Minister of the Interior, Luciana Lamorgese, declared that from 1st January to 25th June 2020, 343 people whose fingerprints appeared in the EURODAC system were readmitted to Slovenia. However, EURODAC serves as the identification process linked to the Dublin Regulation, and its connection to the bilateral agreement with Slovenia has yet to be fully established. This inconsistency, among other willful violations, have led to the illegal expulsion of hundreds of people from Italy - where they had a right to claim asylum.

In the May report, BVMN published information regarding Frontex involvement in pushback operations on Albania’s land border with Greece. One testimony taken by field reporters documented excessive force used by Frontex officers during violent expulsions to Greece. Contrastingly, at the beginning of June, Frontex signed an agreement with the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), committing to help set up effective fundamental rights monitoring during their operations at the EU’s borders. In spite of this, further reports gathered by BVMN detail events that confirm Frontex’s continued involvement in pushback operations on the Albanian border. In one report, the interviewee refers to the Polish license plate of the 4x4 vehicle used by Frontex officers to apprehend them. This corresponds with information regarding Frontex’s use of a fleet of new Land Rover vehicles registered in Poland. Other vehicles used in the Albania mission include specialised surveillance vans, which may have been used in a recent case (see 5.2) where a transit group alludes to the use of night vision equip-
ment to detect them. Procedures relating to the use of force also appear to have been ramped up with interviewees (see 5.1) maintaining they were threatened with firearms, a development in line with new regulation allowing Frontex personnel to bear arms. Firearms, response vehicles and surveillance equipment define Frontex’s aggressive approach to stemming the movement of the transit communities from Northern Greece, impacting people primarily from the Middle East and Maghreb regions. This is particularly pertinent at a time when the UN’s Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism is investigating the intersection of new technologies and racial discrimination. Reports gathered by BVMN highlight the way extensive weaponry and technical equipment at Frontex’s disposal streamlines illegal pushback operations, negating the asylum rights of people-on-the-move. These violations deeply contrast the outward image of the agency as upholding fundamental rights.
The number of people who die on the Balkan Route will never be fully known. For instance, the bodies of people who drown often disappear into rivers along the route, forming a hidden list of fatalities. In June alone, several people-on-the-move drowned while crossing stretches of Croatia’s Mrežnice and Korana rivers. According to No Name Kitchen reports, at least six people were killed. This senseless human cost comes as a direct result of the covert routes groups are forced to take in order to avoid the Croatian police. The death and disappearance of these people is therefore the responsibility of the EU, and the system of violence that leaves them no option but to ford deep rivers, or cross mountain passes and live train tracks to avoid illegal pushbacks.

The Mrežnice and Korana are located in mid Croatia, marking the halfway point for those travelling from BiH to Slovenia. People taken fatally by their courses in June are a telling example of the reflexive way migration policy has weaponised the whole breadth of national interiors, bringing the border into the operation of everyday life. This borderisation of interiors can be seen across the experience of transit communities. It is overt in the way that police stations all over Croatia falsify records in order to pushback transit groups as if they had never entered the territory. Likewise, one can also observe it in the way linguistic borders are constructed by the abuse of translation services in custody, or the way racial profiling guides the apprehension of people in towns and cities.

RIVERS IN CROATIA (SOURCE: CROATIA.EU).
Rivers are perhaps the starkest example. Fearful of being spotted while using bridges, groups continually have to risk their lives to cross fast flowing and cold rivers. People often drown, either unable to swim or brought into shock by the temperature of the water. Sometimes these deaths occur at border rivers, like on the Kolpa, Drina, Danube or Evros. Like the fatalities in Croatia’s interior, these deaths remain entirely avoidable, but are part of a border system which puts undocumented persons in a terminally precarious state.

FRAUDULENT USE OF MONITORING FUNDS EXPOSED

Following months of investigation, Irish member of the LIBE committee MEP Clare Daly confirmed she found enough evidence to prove misuse of the EU funds. The funds were allocated for establishment of an independent border monitoring mechanism in Croatia under EMAS funding granted on 20th December 2018. At the time the press release from the European Commission (EC) stated:

“THE COMMISSION IS AWAR-DING €6.8 MILLION TO CROATIA TO HELP REINFORCE BORDER MANAGEMENT AT THE EU’S EXTERNAL BORDERS, IN FULL RESPECT OF EU RULES. (...) A MONITORING MECHANISM WILL BE PUT IN PLACE TO ENSURE THAT ALL MEASURES APPLIED AT THE EU EXTERNAL BORDERS ARE PROPORTIONATE AND ARE IN FULL COMPLIANCE WITH FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AND EU ASYLUM LAWS”

Out of the €300,000 (from the €6.8 million) allocated for the monitoring mechanism, a total of €84,672 was given to Croatian police and NGOs working with them, and the remainder reallocated for other purposes or not spent at all. These findings lead to stark questions about the role of EU funding. Which, rather than supporting the implementation of checks and accountability, has directly supported a police force implicated in illegal pushback practice. MEP Clare Daly’s investigation also revealed the attempt of the Commission officials to help cover-up Croatia’s failure to establish the aforementioned mechanism. In a leaked internal correspondence from the Commission, EC officials discussed how underspending of the €300,000 would be seen as a “scandal”, and discussed possibilities of putting some “final touches” to Croatian final technical implementation report for EMAS funding.

In correspondence with a LIBE member in April, regarding the lack of a border monitoring mechanism and the subsequent cover-up, commissioner Ylva Johansson confirmed the Commission received a final technical implementation report from the Croatian authorities on 28th February. According to the letter obtained by the BVMN, Croatian authorities were “promptly requested to submit additional information” to assess whether
implementation has fully respected fundamental rights and complied with EU asylum rules, something BVMN's 2019 report on the treatment of asylum seekers in Croatia clearly refutes.

Johannsson has announced the Commission will organise a fact-finding mission to Croatia, as soon as the restrictions imposed in the COVID-19 context are lifted, into similar activities financed under a different, ongoing grant. “This will be an opportunity to assess how this mechanism ensures that the Croatian border guard officers control the border in full compliance with fundamental rights”, commissioner Johannsson concluded. The announcement of this investigation was followed by the arrest of two police officers for misconduct during the capture of an Afghan man in Karlovac, Croatia. Yet within the context of ongoing illegal removals and torture practices at borders, it remains to be seen whether isolated attempts at accountability by the Croatian state and institutional whitewashing carried out by the EC can be overturned by such a probe. Until substantive action is taken, pushbacks will persist with the financial aid of the EU.

BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

The first witnesses to the EU sponsored pushback regime were, and remain, the local populations living in border areas. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Una-Sana Canton represents the final departure point for people attempting foot crossings through Croatia. Here the regular sightings of transit groups, and the help given by local people to pushed back groups, is a facet of daily life. For over two years, inhabitants of border villages in the areas around Velika Kladusa and Bihac have seen tens of thousands of people removed illegally from neighbouring Croatia, a process occurring night and day at the direction of the Croatian Ministry of Interior (MUP). Network member No Name Kitchen works with people in this area and heard from some of those whose homes face out onto the Croatian border. Most recently in the Trzac area, locals have reported a high volume of incidents where groups approached them for clothes, having been stripped down to their underwear by Croatian police:

“IT DIDN’T JUST HAPPEN TO ONE GROUP OF IMMIGRANTS THAT THEY TOOK ALL THEIR CLOTHES. MY SISTER HAD THREE GROUPS KNOCKING ON THE DOOR LATE AT NIGHT AND LOOKING FOR CLOTHES AND FOOD”

This is an all too familiar trend, mirroring evidence gathered by BVMN since 2018. That being: violent pushbacks from Croatia stranding people half naked, and often beaten, at the Bosnian border, seeking out help from the first people they can find. A report published in June (see 4.1) also alludes to this practice occurring in nearby Sturlic. A respondent from India stated:

“AND THEN DEPORTING TIME AT STURLIC, NEAR A RIVER, THEY TELL US: ‘[TAKE] OFF YOUR ALL CLOTHES’ AND THEN THEY BURNED EVERYTHING”
Alongside the physical assaults, these acts describe the material deterrence being witnessed at the Croatian border. The Croatian police place a physical check on people’s movement, particularly as they struggle to recoup essential items such as clothes and shoes prior to making a further attempt at crossing the border. While pressure has been ramped up on the informal support provided by locals and independent groups, the frontline of material assistance is still often being handled far from the centralised camp structures. Many Bosnian residents still provide food, clothes, shoes and often a nights rest to pushback groups returned to BiH. In a recent case (see 4.5), locals moved by the sight of a bleeding and beaten group of Pakistani men, came to their aid with water and money, the respondent explaining how “they were so upset at seeing us like this”. Such an onus on these villages to deal with the physical impact of migration policy at the EU external border hits at the heart of the hierarchical system of pushbacks. The acts radiate way beyond the incidents themselves, sharpening the divide between respect for human life and contemporary borders.

UNHCR slammed the Hungarian government in a recent report on Hungary’s decision to require asylum applications to be filed in neighboring countries’ embassies. The UNHCR report argues that the new law is in violation of “Hungary’s obligations under international refugee and human rights law” as well as EU law. Because the law requires asylum seekers to file their application extraterritorially, it also violates the Geneva Convention which prohibits punishing asylum seekers for crossing borders without authorisation. Given the recent European Court of Justice decisions, which have overturned both the substance and the practice of the Hungarian asylum system, it appears likely that this new law would not stand in court. But that may not be the point: Legal battles are drawn out and expensive - until the law is overturned, Hungary has effectively abolished the right to asylum for any new arrivals.
In March, the Serbian NGO Klikaktive, published a report “On the Situation of Refugees in Serbia”. As the report traverses the manifold humanitarian, legal, and bureaucratic challenges faced by refugees, a worrying picture emerges. It is almost impossible to access the Serbian asylum system with fewer than 3% of people-on-the-move in Serbia registered as asylum seekers. On the one hand, this extraordinarily low number appears to result from bureaucratic complications: separate bureaucracies are tasked with running the camps and administering asylum claims. At times it appears that even camp workers do not understand the rules asylum seekers have to follow in order to retain their status. On the other hand, legal hurdles are clearly designed to keep people-on-the-move outside the asylum system: deadlines are short, documents have to be filed in Serbian, and there is a lack of legal aid and redress mechanisms.

For the longest time, the low number of registered asylum seekers among people-on-the-move was no serious issue. Both the Serbian government and people-on-the-move saw Serbia almost exclusively as a transit country. Registering as asylum seekers seemed pointless to many people-on-the-move (and few knew about the possibility), even if that meant having a precarious legal status. Since the border with Hungary has been firmly shut, however, an increasing number of people-on-the-move have found themselves unable to leave Serbia (just in the official camps, there are at least 6,000 people-on-the-move at the moment). Recently, Serbia, unwilling to host such high numbers of people-on-the-move, is in the process of initiating multiple legal initiatives to alleviate themselves of this perceived burden. A “Law on Foreigners” has been adapted to make deportations easier. Additionally, Serbia appears to be working on readmission agreements with Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The “illegal” status of the people-on-the-move in Serbia could now be exploited by the Serbian government to deport many of them to their country of origin.

But the danger is not restricted to people-on-the-move inside of Serbia. Belgrade is planning to adopt the Dublin and EUROPAC directives pre-accession, opening up the opportunity for EU countries across the union to deport people to Serbia. Many of the system’s elements remain murky. It is unclear what the status of negotiations between Serbia and the EU and between Serbia and Afghanistan/Pakistan/Iraq is. The intransparency around Dublin and potential readmission agreements follows recent revelations that Serbia had a readmission agreement with Austria, which Serbian politicians continued to deny even after it was confirmed by the Austrian government. Without transparency, it will be ever harder to hold Serbia accountable to international standards.

After the end of the Covid-19 lockdown in Serbia, numbers in official accommodation have dropped significantly, from approximately 9,000 people at the beginning of May to less than 6,000 at the end of the month.

FENCE SEPARATING ROSZKE, HUNGARY, FROM HORGOS, SERBIA (SOURCE: REPORTING DEMOCRACY)
Favorable weather and the fact that camps were on lockdown during most of the spring, have prompted an increase in people trying to cross the border to Hungary in the last weeks, and a rise in groups sleeping rough throughout Northern Serbia. Reports of violent pushbacks by Hungarian border police increased in the last weeks according to volunteers on the ground who witnessed more transit groups in need of medical attention. Some of these injuries occurred as a result of physical hazards such as border rivers, fences and rough terrain, others were inflicted by beatings from the Hungarian border police. Inland, there have been increased reports of violence inflicted by local Serbian police, especially in Zapadna Bačka municipality, ranging from the theft of personal belongings, such as mobile phones or money, to physical violence. According to people-on-the-move staying in informal settlements there, some of them cannot afford to buy food anymore because they have had all of their money taken by police. The constant harassment in squats and at the border by respective police forces remains a daily concern for these communities.

VIOLENCE AT THE EVROS BORDER

BVMN published reports covering the pushback of 237 people from Greece to Turkey last month. The trends in crossings shifted during June, with a growing number of people attempting passage across the Aegean sea from the coast around Izmir (TUR). This has been reflected in the evidence gathered of pushbacks from respondents stranded on the Turkish side and their testimonies of the violence while on Greek land and especially territorial waters. Part of the reason for this changing of routes may be connected to the efforts by Athens to shore up existing fortification at the Evros land border, with more fencing and the increased militarisation of the area. Network member Josoor is observing first hand the fallout of these removals and the protracted struggle of those now recovering in Turkey. People who braved the land border in recent weeks were met with a wall of abhorrent violence on the part of Greek officials. Several respondents reported to volunteers the use of electric discharge weapons and attacks with batons. Meanwhile, one transit group shares how they were thrown into the Evros river with their hands cuffed with zip ties (see 6.6) - a potentially fatal tactic which has been observed in a previous case. While some of the people pushed back in this incident were new arrivals to Greece, others were violently removed to Turkey despite their documentation as asylum seekers. One respondent, who suffered lasting bruises to his torso, was ejected even though he held a valid white card and was employed in a company in Athens. The situation for people returned to Turkey is also becoming more precarious. Rising police harassment and the reinstatement of scheduled flights to Kabul has caused Afghans in Turkey to become increasingly fearful of possible deportation. Meanwhile the wider refugee and migrant population also face a limited set of options. The possibility to settle in Turkey is nonexistent for many of them, the chances of safely reaching Europe is becoming slimmer and returning to their countries of origin is often not an option.
In the Aegean sea, Greece has further developed its strategies of defence and illegal returns. Very few boats manage to cross from the Turkish coast to the islands anymore according to monitoring group Mare Liberum. The Hellenic Coast Guard (HCG) and Frontex have created a tight militarised net to keep vessels from reaching Greek territorial waters. Where they do, BVMN and outlets such as Spiegel have received further reports in June of boats being attacked by masked authorities who shoot guns into the air, use knives to puncture the hull (see 6.3), destroying the outboard motor and forcing them back into Turkish waters (see 6.2). An open source investigation by Bellingcat has gone some way in unmasking these perpetrators as members of the HCG, locating their vessels in successive attacks. Moreover, in at least 13 cases, arrivals to Greek waters (and even some who had reached land) were pushed back on life rafts and left to drift helplessly in the sea, a new and concerning phenomena. Greece has not only made this highly criminal practice a regular way of managing its maritime border, but has also tried to integrate scope for this within new EU policy. Giorgos Koumoutsakos, the Greek Alternate Minister for Migration and Asylum, wrote a letter to the EU co-signed by Bulgaria and Cyprus calling for the addition of an emergency clause in the European Pact on Immigration and Asylum. The aim of the clause would be to give states on the EU external border the freedom to deal with exceptional migration flows with preventative and response tactics. If the current practices, which facilitate drownings at sea, are to be vindicated by the new migration pact, the Aegean and other parts of the EU external border will become host to a total void in fundamental rights.
The Network covered the pushback of 351 people across 20 separate incidents in June. The reports account for a wide demographic of people including men, women and minors, those in official camp accommodation and others in informal settlements. The respondents also originate from a broad set of countries, including: Syria, Egypt, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Morocco, Algeria, Iran, Kurdistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The cases involved:

I Five pushbacks to Serbia (Four from Romania and one from Hungary)

II Six pushbacks to Bosnia-Herzegovina (two chain pushbacks from Italy and four direct pushbacks from Croatia)

III Three pushbacks to Greece from Albania

III Six pushbacks from Greece to Turkey

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BORDER VIOLENCE MONITORING NETWORK

BVMN is a volunteer led endeavour, acting as an alliance of organisations in the Western Balkans and Greece. BVMN is based on the efforts of participant organizations working in the field of documentation, media, advocacy and litigation. We finance the work through charitable grants and foundations, and are not in receipt of funds from any political organisation. The expenditures cover transport subsidies for volunteers in the field and four paid positions.

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JUNE REPORT 2020