



**ILLEGAL PUSH-BACKS
& BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS
BALKAN REGION
SEPTEMBER 2019**

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Executive Overview

The Border Violence Monitoring Network observed various trends in the field this month, and continued its work within the Balkan Region, systematically recording instances of pushbacks and border violence. The movement of people amongst these borders was pronounced in September, indicative of the Autumn season when groups seeking sanctuary in Europe hope to secure onward travel before the harsher weather conditions prevail. But these flows were met with a range of diversifying border practices by authorities, and as outlined in the testimony, the policing of the EU's external border, in particular, remains consistently violent.

Dog attacks, and the rising use of K9 units by border officials across the route illustrated some of the most brutal elements now common place within the pushback apparatus. Analysis of Croatia and Hungary's persistent use of dogs in apprehending and attacking transit groups revealed multiple cases of serious abuse, including the hospitalisation of bite victims. Alongside this, the use of border rivers to enact pushbacks was identified as a consistent method. Fifty percent of direct pushbacks recorded this month from Croatia included the use of rivers to immerse transit groups in cold water. These cases often included people being stripped of clothing by the police, and connect up to a common pool of torture-like practices which were covered this month, such as the use of a child's swimming pool to humiliate a transit group apprehended in Hungary.

A case from September again highlighted the use of improvised detention facilities in Croatia, and chain pushbacks from Slovenia/Croatia produced more evidence of the performative role of procedure in the representation of pushbacks. At EU level, the Commission's enlargement strategy once again signalled concerning repercussions for migration in the Western Balkans. Alongside this, Croatia's impending decision on Schengen Accession, Austria's joint border patrols with Slovenia and Bosnia's funding from the Czech Republic all look set to influence the situation at Europe's borders.



**Border Violence
Monitoring Network**

General

Methodology

The methodological process for these reports leverages the close social contact that we have as independent volunteers with refugees and migrants to monitor push-backs in the Western Balkans. When individuals return with significant injuries or stories of abuse, one of our violence reporting volunteers will sit down with the individuals 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 65 persons. We have a standardized 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.

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.

Abbreviations

BiH - Bosnia and Herzegovina

HR - Croatia

SRB - Serbia

SLO - Slovenia

AT - Austria

HUN - Hungary

EU - European Union

MNE - Montenegro

MKD - North Macedonia

GRK - Greece

Trends in Border Violence

Use of K9 Units in Croatia and Hungary

Police dogs are an integral assault tactic and a weapon of intimidation in the policing of Croatia and Hungary's borders. Case material from September gathered by BVMN show a marked rise in the use of muzzled and unmuzzled dogs against transit groups. The animals, most often German Shepherds and the more diminutive Belgian Malinois (featured in cover picture), are deployed in K9 units (police term for canine division) which also include police dog handlers and adapted response vehicles for transportation of the dogs.

Trained in detection, pacification and assault, the dogs are often described as being unleashed at a distance on groups, and forcing people to the ground. Used to immobilize targets on foot, dogs also frequently inflict severe bites, as [recorded in 2016 by activists](#) at the Hungarian-Serbian border. Since summer, multiple reports show an increased use of dogs on the Western Balkan Route, taken up most prominently in [BVMN's July edition](#) (pg 24), where a large [transit group of 120 people](#) was traumatized by twelve unmuzzled Slovenian police dogs, and again in September in North Macedonia where one person was attacked by multiple police dogs (see [5.1](#)).

In a report from 13th September (see [2.4](#)) a transit group were attacked by an unmuzzled Croatian police dog which severely mauled one individual, leading to hospitalisation due to puncture wounds and a fractured wrist. The victim's companion recalled the ordeal, stating:

"The police did not say 'stop'. There were two dogs; one had a muzzle, the second didn't. The dogs made us fall on the ground. My friend protected his face with his arm and was bitten by the dog."



Photo of bandaged arm from dog bite and wrist splint used to treat fracture.

The injuries sustained by the people were confirmed in medical reports issued by the hospital in Bihać (*BiH*). The group also described how this brutal behavior was rewarded by Croatian officers who openly validated the dogs actions. Referring the officers from the K9 unit, the respondent shared how:

“When the dogs attack you, the police don’t stop them. They smile and congratulate them.”

Seen within the wider political context of recent [social media](#) posts by [Interior Minister Davor Bozinovic](#), the mauling of transit groups looks to have tacit authorisation from the Croatian state. Bozinovic shared an intimate picture of himself with a border police dog during celebrations of Police Day, along with the message [“forever the pride of our people”](#), reinforcing his support for K9 border units.



Bozinovic greets K9 border unit, posted on Twitter on 28th September 2019.

The militarized Hungarian-Serbian border has also utilised K9 units since the supposed closing of the border in 2015. Cases involving dogs have been published by BVMN ([Dec '17](#)), [international media](#) and even [Frontex](#), who logged a [Serious Incident Report](#) in December 2016 describing the mauling of three minors by a police dog set upon a transit group by Hungarian officials.

Mirrored by the recent cases in Croatia, assaults by unmuzzled dogs set upon groups by police continue to occur on the Hungarian border. Volunteers from [Escuela con Alma](#) (ECA) published pictures from a vicious dog attack via [social media](#). The injuries were suffered by a patient who presented at their mobile clinic in Subotica (SRB), attributing the puncture wound to an assault by K9 units during a pushback conducted by Hungarian authorities.



Dog bite photographed by ECA, 24th September.

Alongside direct attacks, police dogs have also been used by Hungarian officials at the train station in Kelebia (*HUN*) to search freight carriages and guard apprehended groups. In a [report from August](#), the respondent described the intimidatory behaviour of the police officers handling the dogs which were guarding him, stating that:

“officers were laughing [...]. They wanted to make us afraid so we don’t come again.”

Alongside attacking, [apprehension](#) and guarding, recent developments have seen Hungarian officers use K9 vehicle cages to transport people back to the border with Serbia. Two cases from September stand out in corroborating this practice, and allude once again to the use of improvised forms of detention in order to brutalise people-in-transit. A report from 31st August (see [3.1](#)) stated that when loaded into a police van bound for the border with Serbia:

“the people-in-transit had to squeeze into a tiny ‘dog compartment,’ which was separated from the rest of the van with meshed wire panels”

Similarly, the case occurring a week later (see [3.2](#)) saw the transit group forced into “*the place of the dogs*”, suggesting the practice is potentially a regular method of dehumanising people-in-transit. These statements raise further concern about inhumane treatment during the course of an already illegal border practice, highlighting the potential further misuse of police infrastructure such as dog cages as modes of confinement.

Across the EU’s external border, the regularity of abuse by K9 units forms yet another serious infringement on the rights of people on the move. Given that Croatian pushbacks are arguably modelled on the prior technical developments of the Hungarian system, the use of dogs to detect, attack and deter transit groups is an ongoing commonality. This shared practice epitomises a system which views people crossing the border as a target, rather than a rights bearing individual as prescribed by law.

Water torture in Hungary

Over the past months, push-backs from Hungary to Serbia have exhibited high levels of institutionalization, facilitated by domestic Hungarian legislation and the Hungarian border fence. However, while the institutionalization of the border regimes tends to result in quick push-backs and limited violence which is mostly directed at large male groups, occasionally Hungarian authorities have made use of extremely degrading treatment, putting the people-in-transit's health at severe risk.

On September 6th, (see [3.2](#)) a transit group of eight Afghan men and minors attempted to cross from Serbia into Hungary near Kelebia (*HUN*) via freight train. Upon detection they were searched and beaten several times. One person-in-transit's nose was broken; the respondent described how:

"a lot of blood come from his nose."

After being brought to a police station, the people-in-transit were then told to get into an inflatable swimming pool filled with water, set up prior by the Hungarian police, with their clothes still on. The pool was around one meter deep, and the water was described by the respondent as *"too cold"*. The sun was going down at this point and the severe chill of the water shocked the group, particularly because they had been kept until that point in a hot container with little ventilation. The temperature change was very painful. Further, while the men were in the water Hungarian police officers stood around the pool and recorded the transit group with small digital cameras and their mobile phones.

"They were standing around the pool and laughing at us and taking pictures."

After what felt like 45 minutes, the people-in-transit were told to get out of the pool. No towels or new clothes were provided. With their trousers still wet, the people-in-transit had to wait in the yard for an additional ten minutes until a white van pulled into the police station, which returned them across the Serbian border.

Clearly this account illustrates treatment by Hungarian authorities which poses a very real danger to the physical integrity of the people-in-transit. Without access to medical care on the Serbian side of the border, hypothermia and connected illnesses can spread easily among the population, especially in informal settlements. Given the colder weather and constantly damp housing environments, people-in-transit often suffer more protracted illnesses and require extended recovery periods, during which they often pose spreading the risk of infection to others on the move.

Beyond the physical aspect of the "pool" treatment, the fact that the Hungarian officers were "taking pictures" and "laughing" at the people-in-transit shows what institutionalization of the border regime actually means. When comparing reports about Hungarian push-back practices with those in Croatia, the high degree of institutionalization in Hungary appears to facilitate quicker procedures. However, the legalization of pushbacks does not lead to accountability for Hungarian police officers and other state actors in the border regime. This is reinforced because no physical evidence is collected, in part to prevent challenges at the

European or international level. The result appears to be that authorities are able to engage in degrading and inhumane treatment without fear of consequence. This explains the continued reports of Hungarian officers transporting people-in-transit in dog cages, forcing them to remain in painful poses for hours (see [31.07](#)) or denying them access to sanitary facilities when detained (see [30.07](#), [12.08](#)).

In this way, trends in the Hungarian border regime continue to mirror events in other countries, particularly Croatia. As BVMN has documented extensively in last month's [report](#), Croatian authorities are engaged in a variety of extremely violent behaviors, including electrocution, water immersion and severe beatings. Whether for deterrence or out of personal animosity and racism, the brutality exhibited by Hungarian and Croatian authorities constitutes serious human rights violations tantamount to torture.

Improvised detention facilities near Zagreb

Case material from September revealed a recurrence in the practice of informal detainment, whereby a transit group was held in a hangar near Zagreb (HR) by apprehending officers. The incident (see [2.9](#)) again points towards the unlawful use of improvised spaces for processing and detention. Indeed, last winter, Croatian police officers were also found to be holding transit groups in a garage/outbuilding connected to the police station in Korenica (HR). This new testimony provides further evidence of the illegality of detainment practices and raises major concerns about the continued use of unlicensed spaces by Croatian officials.

On the 26th of September, a group of three people from Algeria and Morocco were apprehended by the police near Zagreb and driven by van for several minutes before being unloaded at a makeshift garage. The exact location is unknown, but one respondent was able to identify road signs indicating "Zagreb 3km", suggesting that the facility was on the outskirts of the capital. The conditions of the place they were taken to were described by the group as wholly unsanitary and they were immediately aware that they were not at an authorised state facility.

"It was not a police station, it was like a room, a garage, very dirty, smelling very bad, no nice people."

The testimony goes on to reveal that:

"When they entered, one of the men asked for a jacket because he was wet and cold from the journey on the truck. In response to the man's request one of the officers struck him with his police baton, to make him understand that the answer was negative. The same response (baton strike) given when another person in the group asked to go to the toilet."

The use of an unequipped site and complete abrogation of rights while in detention bears particular resemblance to the use of a garage in Korenica where multiple testimonies given to the BVMN have indicated that Croatian police were detaining and torturing people-in-transit. Use of this improvised location was described in an [incident from March](#) as follows:

“When they arrived they made them enter an old garage next to the police station, back then used for cars. Now it seems to be used to detain people on the move like a prison or a room especially for push-backs. [...] there is no water or food, no toilets, only dirty bottles on the cold, bare concrete ground.”

In May, [Ivana Perić](#), a Croatian journalist, published an article discussing several cases of people-in-transit being held in the [garage at Korenica](#) police station. Building off of a comprehensive analysis of the site in the BVMN [April Report](#) (pg. 9), Perić’s H-Alter article asserted that people were being beaten and starved by officers in the aforementioned garage. A [testimony from April](#) lists the detention conditions:

“The floor is all concrete, it is cold, we have to sleep on it. There is only one water faucet and a small heater on the wall.”

Concerns now may be levied at the site in Zagreb where in September a group were held in squalor, without due process, and with complete indifference to their verbalized requests for asylum. The only identification carried out involved the three transit group members holding boards in front of them while officers took photos. These practices are a clear breach of EU law as they disregard the common standards and procedures laid out in [Directive 2008/115/EC](#) which stipulates *“Detention shall take place as a rule in specialised detention facilities.”* along with obligations to appeal processes, visits, and third party oversight.

In a response to allegations over Korenica police station, the Croatian state defended itself against charges on the basis of facilities being over capacity. According to the [Ministry of Interior](#), the garage was used because *“the detention facilities did not have sufficient capacity to hold a larger group of people”*. However, such arguments ring hollow when the mobilization of other state resources seem to spring forth in abundance when it comes to the securitizing of Croatia’s border. In fact, unofficial locations such as these may be better understood as extra-judicial spaces opened up specifically for inflicting harm on transit groups behind the safety of closed doors. With the exposure of another garage, this time in Zagreb, observers may only wonder at the raft of similar detention sites which give police officers the license to operate even more unlawfully.

Wet Borders weaponized by the Croatian police

Multiple national boundaries along the so-called Balkan Route are marked by waterways. These rivers form a daily challenge for people on the move who cannot ford them at regular border crossings, and are forced to wade or swim through them at major risk to their safety. Rivers are not only an obstacle for people-in-transit when entering another state’s territory, authorities also use them to practice violent pushbacks. During September, 50% of cases recorded by BVMN where transit groups were apprehended in Croatia, led to people-in-transit being forced into rivers during their pushback. These are regularly accompanied by stripping of clothing and violent beatings.

Where water forms the border between Croatia and Bosnia, such as the boundaries along the Glina and Korana rivers, the police have found a simultaneous way to pushback groups

and physically harm them at the same time. Officers, regularly matching the description of Croatian *Interventna* forces, frequently use water courses to violently expel groups back into Bosnia's Una Sana Kanton. In these cases, people-in-transit report being pushed or kicked from the top of a hill, down into the bushes, and into the river (see [2.8](#)).



Hand and neck injury from being pushed down a slope by Croatian police into Korana river.

Another case (see [2.10](#)) details a group apprehended near Grabovac and brought to the Korana river where they were beaten, had their belongings burnt, and were subsequently “lined up horizontally along the river and told to look down”. Having stripped the group to their underwear, the police then began to laugh at the shivering men. The respondent recalls how:

“As I was shaking a police officer threw water from a bottle on me and said ‘I help you, I help you!’ I was so cold and I told him ‘my heart, my heart please stop’”

Flaunting the prospect of immersion in cold water, the quotes of the officer intimate that the use of rivers form an intentional accessory to these violent push-backs. Given that the men were then ordered, semi naked to the floor, and beaten into the water, the tactic is congruent with the ongoing use of border landscapes to abuse transit groups; combining blunt assault with the risks of hypothermia. Another case collected recently (see [2.4](#)), corroborates the use of these tactics, detailing the removal of the transit groups’ shoes by police, before they were forced to cross the Korana barefoot.

The stripping of people prior to their violent expulsion is a regular occurrence in Croatia’s policing of the border with Bosnia, and was also highlighted in a case from the border with Serbia (see [4.1](#)). The intention serves multiple purposes, including theft, dehumanisation, inhibiting future movement, and exposing people to the effects of cold temperatures. Add the beating of groups into a river, and the most dangerous consequences around hypothermia are only exacerbated, along with the risks of drowning.

Late in September, unconfirmed reports surfaced of a naked body being found in what appeared to be the Korana, adding to the multiple river deaths already reported along the Balkan Route. Disturbing footage of the body was aired on social media and the story was referenced by [AYS](#), leading to further questions about the catalogue of fatalities along green borders. It is too early to speculate on the provenance of this case, but the material collected by BVMN already points towards a dangerous pattern: one where the stripping and forced immersion of groups in rivers will add to the death toll were it to continue.

Performative procedures in pushbacks

The four trends above present some of the most extreme examples of the violence imparted during pushbacks. But alongside dog attacks, the use of rivers, water immersion and improvised detention, law enforcement and state authorities engage in quasi-procedural practices which are meant to portray pushbacks and the informal practices of police as justifiable and lawful border protection. States have a vested interest in controlling how pushbacks, or what they would term “removals”, are portrayed, ranging from avoiding legal repercussions to broader objectives like joining the Schengen zone, as in Croatia’s case.

There are multiple ways in which border policing is depicted as lawful. In [a telling case last month](#) of a chain refoulement from Italy to Bosnia, state authorities took pains to issue removal documents and officially notify a transit group of their return decision. Given this represents a case of multiple illegal refoulements, the perhaps counter-intuitive use of a paper trail emerges as a tactic used to create a facade of legality. Three cases recorded in September ([1.1](#), [1.2](#), and [1.3](#)) utilize this same performative practice. In one case in particular, Slovenian police in Novo Mesto coerced a minor from the Western Sahara into signing removal documentation as an adult (see [1.3](#)), thereby using “official” state documentation to warp events in their favor. The officers insisted on a signature to their form, but when confronted by an underage group member, they stated:

“No, you were born in 2001.”

Slovenian authorities appear to consider the processing of removal forms as mandatory, and yet that same diligence is completely abandoned over correct identification and their obligations towards minors. Thus it can be argued that such acts are indeed performances, encouraging viewers on the outside to see the daily violation of people on the move as formally and lawfully conducted, and thus no longer a violation at all.

A firm example of this came when Croatian police chose to publicise an “innocuous” forced removal carried out by officers in Pokupska (HR). Described by [Total Croatia](#), the report focused on the fact that the police had issued readmission paperwork and carried out the removal of twenty people found in the territory irregularly:

“They were processed in accordance with the law on foreign nationals and were given notices of readmission after they expressed no wish to apply for international protection in Croatia.”

Centering the case on adherence to the readmissions agreement with BiH and stressing that the transit group had presented themselves as “irregular migrants” are both acts meant to legitimate Croatian border practices. Taken out of context, such statements seem to bear the hallmarks of fair and proper policing. However, they are charades, used to cover the systematic use of violence to intimidate people from making verbal asylum requests or, where they do, ensuring no access is granted. And in the cases of physical removal, where obligations towards identification, non-refoulement and humane detention should stand, the framing of the readmissions paperwork helps to shroud the multiple unlawful elements that underpin push-backs such as the illegal use of collective expulsion.

Interestingly, the case was publicised exactly one month to the day after eighteen Pakistani men were admitted to the local hospital in Velika Kladuša with serious injuries from Croatian police who were accused of making a [territorial incursion](#) during a pushback. Aptly, the case chosen for publication by the Croatian police is about a similar group: twenty Pakistani and Bangladeshi men. The selection of this incident for official publication arguably acts as an indirect response to accusations of malpractice relating to the well-publicised August case by stating the group could be legally returned because:

[“it was established that they had entered Croatia illegally and after none of them applied for asylum or requested medical attention \[they could be returned\]”](#)

Paperwork is issued less for internal transparency but more to serve the use of external PR narratives, again suggesting that the feigned adherence to procedure is a constitutive element that allows authorities to sustain pushbacks on a political level. As seen in the presentation of removal statistics by the Croatian state in September, these press releases are techniques which respond to the fact that police cannot hide their operations when processing large numbers of people, but they can redefine their illegal actions within the prism of the rule of law in order to validate them. Performance and charade sustain, thinly at least, the idea of legality. From the perspective of monitoring and litigation however, they also open up avenues, exposing areas in which Croatia and companion states in the pushback apparatus potentially incriminate themselves.

Update on the Situation

Slovenia

Vigilante groups patrol the Slovenian border with Croatia

On September 17th the Associated Press [reported](#) on the alarming activities of a Slovenian para-military group called "[Stajerska Varda](#)", operating along the border with Croatia. Members of the group are reportedly taking part in vigilante activities, apprehending people-in-transit who try to cross the border, and calling the police to push them back. Until now the groups' members have not been observed carrying out any violent actions, but their rise in numbers and presence on the border is deeply concerning. A [video](#) from October 2018 shows a large number of armed people taking an oath near Maribor, stating their intent to take border security into their own hands.



Still taken from an AP published video of right wing paramilitaries swearing an oath of allegiance near Maribor (SLO).

Andrey Sisko, the leader of the far-right group, confirmed that at that time the militia had existed for longer than a year. Sisko himself was [arrested and detained](#) for six months with the charge of "[trying to subvert the constitutional order](#)". He was released in March. The open activities of far-right groups at the border are a telling development, not only for pressure on transit conditions, but also the growth in nationalist logic pervading Slovenia today. Stajerska Varda have stepped into the political void opened up by centre and right-wing politicians who have stoked domestic opinion against people-in-transit. While extreme right activists frame their role as a necessary defense, their actual ideology is explicitly aggressive. As shown in a [report](#) by European Eye on radicalization, Stajerska Varda has the nationalist ideas of "[Greater Slovenija](#)" as a reference point, and has inserted itself in a context of growing militarization as part of Slovenia's right.

Yet media response to this rise in armed groups presented some worrying attitudes towards the issue. Namely the views of Miha Kovac, a political analyst interviewed by AP for their report, is dangerous in two senses. Kovac dismisses radical groups as [“guys with big beer bellies \[...\] who don’t know what to do with themselves”](#), and even goes on to allege that the root cause of facism is the presence of migrants in Slovenia. Marking out people-in-transit as instigators falls into a traditional cycle of victim blaming, a route which absolves the role of fear mongering party politics in abetting radicalization.

As shown by right wing leaders around Europe, such as Matteo Salvini and Victor Orban, open praise for and facilitation of radical groups is an explicit tactic used to build a right wing consensus on the ground. The example of [vigilantes operating in Hungary](#) as early as 2015, suggests that the development of state borders and growth of the extra-parliamentary right go hand in hand. These two strands are evidently complicit in Slovenia, seen especially in the silence at the party and state levels in regards to a [self publicized military junta](#) operating on state soil. September’s revelations again highlight the liminal space between conservative migration politics and paramilitary fascism. The existence of these activities call into direct question the responsibilities of the Slovenian state, and are a concerning augmentation of the current institutional pushback framework.

Slovenia and Austria: Joint patrols tighten the lid on the Balkan Route

This month, the government of Slovenia proposed a deal on [joint border patrol to Austria](#), following a similar agreement signed in June with Italy. The purpose of this proposal is to make Austria open its border crossings again, after controls were re-established in 2015 in what at that time was called the first step towards the end of Schengen. Of course, only European citizens would benefit from these “open borders”, while people on the move will continue to suffer the discrimination and violence of which they already are a target. The joint border operations were already experimented by Slovenian and Italian police during the summer, and Italy’s new interior minister Lamorgese [announced the renewal](#) of the agreement on October the 4th.

The patrols did not have any significant effect on border control, since in the three months after the deal became effective 150 migrants were apprehended, on an estimated total of 3000 since the beginning of the year. Nevertheless Lamorgese enthusiastically accepted to renew the deal, showing how little “left” and “right” wing parliamentary politics differ at the moment. This did not stop right wing politicians from demanding a wall at the border with Slovenia, in a well-known vicious circle of securitization.

To the south of Slovenia, in Croatia, the agreement combined with the building of a further 40 km of wall by Slovenian authorities already raised concerns, as reported by us in the last monthly report, and claims for a stronger “defense” of the southern border with Bosnia. With Frontex officials supervising Albania, the Balkan route is becoming narrower week by week and every country seems willing to use as much force as possible to block People on the Move from transiting, in a domino effect that does not seem to have an end.

Croatia

11813 people “removed” from Croatia in 2019 and EU support

Statistics from the Croatian Ministry of the Interior at the end of September report that 11,813 people-in-transit were caught entering Croatia illegally in the first eight months of 2019. First reported by [Jutarnji List](#), this figure rises to 18,260 when inclusive of the 6,447 people-in-transit that were officially recorded to have been returned to Croatia from Slovenia, having made it through Croatian territory without detection. This means that, on average, Croatian authorities have apprehended and processed 49 people-in-transit daily in 2019. This is a marked increase from 2018 when 8,207 people were recorded to have irregularly crossed into Croatia. Even further, if we look at *just* the first 8 months of 2018, this number decreases to merely 3,794, roughly a third of the corresponding 2019 statistic, not accounting for the additional 6,447 entries from Slovenia.

Trying to ascertain where these 18,260 people ended up after being processed by Croatian authorities is difficult, as specific data is withheld. However, on a broad scale, the majority are now in BiH, leading Jutarnji List to conclude that the vast majority of these 18,260 people were pushed back illegally to Bosnian and Serbian territory. This conclusion is supported by BVMN’s testimonies, media accounts and Croatia’s meager official capacity to house people-in-transit and asylum-seekers. Illuminatingly, when questioned about the whereabouts of the 8,207 people who were caught in 2018, Croatian authorities answered that 1,438 were returned to a third country, 1,068 applied for asylum in Croatia and 536 were detained. This leaves 5,165 people unaccounted for, likely pushed-back illegally to a bordering country.

As much as we can condemn Croatia for its actions, the EU’s complicity in supporting Croatia’s border regime cannot be underestimated. This sentiment was clearly expressed by Austria’s foreign minister, Alexander Schallenberg, when he congratulated Croatia “for protecting the borders [of the EU] and its cooperation” in a meeting in the middle of the month. In this same meeting, Croatian foreign minister Gordan Grlić Radman made it clear that the EU can count on Croatia: Croatia’s “security and migration policy is highly praised. We protect national and European Union borders.”

This meeting comes as discussions of Croatia’s Schengen zone eligibility and its upcoming EU Presidency term are underway. Croatia’s accession to higher levels of European integration with scant or indeed positive discussions of Croatia’s border regime shows that essentially admitting to illegally pushing back thousands of people may not be in conflict to Croatia’s integration into Europe. In fact, it appears to be an essential part of it.

Bosnia

Mixed messages from Bosnian officials on border sovereignty

As covered in last month's report, internal debate among key figures in BiH centers around the infringement of Croatian officials onto its territory in the process of conducting illegal pushbacks. This month, Security Minister [Dragan Mektic](#) toughened his rhetoric, stating that BiH officials will ["stand at our border and will not let any foreign military or police force enter Bosnia and Herzegovina"](#) even at the risk of conflict with its neighbors. Mektic, who previously threatened to build a fence on the border, has reacted strongly to Croatian border practices which are increasingly under scrutiny, as shown with the case of [18 people-in-transit severely injured](#) at the Bosnian border last month. This case stimulated Una Sana Canton's Health Minister Nermina Cemalovic [to announce](#) that BiH authorities would begin recording people-in-transit's injuries and the origins of their injuries.

Ironically, a commitment to territorial sovereignty forms the stance of both states, with Croatia articulating its ability to uphold the outer Schengen border, and BiH advocating for the integrity of its national border. Amid this, escalating funding and infrastructure looks set to arrive on the contested boundary. Croatia already bolstered police numbers by 200 in the Lika region and have enlisted the ongoing support of Frontex, who are likely to commence operations in BiH next year. Meanwhile, the Czech government [recently announced](#) that it would send 1 million euros to BiH to fund equipment - thermal cameras, binoculars, drones, etc - for the policing of the border. With financial and political investment at play, both countries are becoming vessels for the externalization of EU borders, clearly at the cost of bilateral relations.

Despite Mektic's firm stance on Croatia's infractions, Border Police Director of BiH, [Zoran Galic](#) has sought to play down the claims, stating: ["We have not identified any incidents with the Republic of Croatia so far. Everything else is a fabrication with an attempt to unnecessarily raise tensions."](#) Moving from criticism of Croatian counterparts, Galic stated the problems lay in his under resourced border authorities, suggesting that the Czech funding could soon change the contours of border security within BiH, which, alongside policing the Croatian border, are already defined by protracted efforts to stem the flow of transit from neighbouring Serbia and Montenegro.

Complicating this discordant narrative are the larger political motions coming from the EU, particularly the cooperation [between Frontex and BiH](#), agreed upon in February this year. The official statement says:

["The Commission has committed to further strengthening the European Border and Coast Guard Agency's role in protecting the EU's borders, including closer cooperation with the EU's neighbours. Status agreements like the one initialled with Bosnia and Herzegovina will reinforce the Agency's ability to act in the EU's immediate neighbourhood, helping to manage irregular migration better and further enhancing security at the EU's external borders."](#)

The role of BiH as a transit space and now potential gatekeeper to movement encapsulates the current limbo of non-member states earmarked for the EU's border externalization

program. Domestically, the lack of consensus continues, with BiH officials presenting divergent aims over the protection of the border. While border officials such as Galic call for better resources and funding from external partners, the incursions of their Croatian counterparts, resourced by the same EU patrons, remains a highly contentious issue for national autonomy. A potential clinching factor will be the impending Frontex involvement in BiH. Framed as a “core element” of the European Commission’s enlargement strategy in the Balkans, Frontex deployment is already beginning to advance the migration frontier further south, and could be a determining factor in the functionality of the Bosnian-Croatian border and entry points further down the Balkan Route.

Camps in Una Sana Canton: Vučjak as a Red Herring

As we saw in the month of [June](#), calls for the unofficial site in Vučjak to be closed continued through September. During the month, [UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights González Morales](#) visited the site as part of a country-wide visit and called on the authorities to close the camp due to the “inhuman” conditions inside, stating:

“Winter is coming. To avoid loss of life, immediate action is needed to cease forcible escorting to the site and provide alternative location of accommodation for single male migrants who live outside reception centres.”

Located near Bihać in the foothills bordering Croatia, the Red Cross-administered site, initially opened by local government authorities, has been a consistent bone of contention between Bosnian authorities and international actors calling for better adherence to humanitarian standards. As described by BVMN in previous reports, the site choice (Vučjak is located on a landfill), the violent methods used by local police to transfer people to the camp and the poor living conditions within the camp have all contributed to growing calls for its closure.

On González’s visit, approximately 800 single men (double the official capacity) and 20 minors, a population officially not allowed in the camp, were present. Despite previous calls by Red Cross officials that the camp would be closed before September, this month saw no such moves to dismantle the camp but only the further degradation of internal conditions. This includes the BiH police and Cantonal Health Ministry halting, for an indefinite amount of time, the work of volunteer groups providing medical aid inside the camp, severely depriving camp residents of primary and emergency healthcare.

But while the issues surrounding Vučjak are well worthy of public outcry, it would seem again that the international community is taking the “cheap shot” in condemning an already recognised eyesore. Morales’ report was distinctly light on the issues of pushbacks and border violence by Croatia, which are the reasons why the Una-Sana Canton (USK) hosts such a large transit population in the first place. Furthermore, the issue of transit groups sleeping rough is not exclusive to Vučjak. The large UNHCR/IOM-managed reception centre in Bihać, Bira camp, erects consistent barriers to access to people-in-transit, forcing prospective residents to sleep in the field in front of the camp where they have been previously beaten and removed by police. Meanwhile in IOM-run Miral camp near Velika Kladuša, anonymous sources with anecdotal evidence allege that IOM staff are regularly preventing camp access to people of

Arab descent, based on informal agreements that the camp only contain South Asian residents. Thus, while the loudly-touted allegations made against Vučjak are valid, a telling silence persists from international organisations about the substandard conditions in USK's *official* reception centres.

Serbia

Local police pressure squat residents in Šid

There are currently 40-50 people living in the abandoned factory squat in the city of Šid (SRB) where No Name Kitchen (NNK) is providing daily dinner distributions, water, and other non-food-items such as blankets, tents and sleeping bags. Approximately another 50 people, who also attend the daily dinner distribution at the squat, sleep in the forest outside the city of Šid.

NNK field teams also provide a second food distribution on the outskirts of Šid, where they serve about 70 portions of food each day, mostly to single men coming from North Africa. Within this regular work, the recent services of a paramedic volunteering has been invaluable in dealing with the rising amount of serious skin infections and scabies, issues spreading both in the squat location and in the forest outside the city. In the month of September the number of scabies infections rose from approximately 5 to around 30-40 persons. The fact that scabies has now spread in many lodgings and camps has made it hard to treat the infections. Despite some interventions by Médecins Sans Frontières, the issues around dermatological health in Šid have not been brought under control.

Alongside this, there have been several testimonies about not only Croatian police violence, but also rising violence and aggression towards people-in-transit on the part of the Serbian police (including beating, kicking, and use of batons). A rise in pre-border checks by Serbian officials was reported by transit groups during September, with one group being beaten and detained after police detected them using a vehicle scanner near the border with Croatia.

NNK has observed a high presence of Serbian police at the factory squat in Šid, leading to a feeling of uncertainty among people-in-transit about safety there. The rationale for the increased harassment and spot checks has not yet been clarified because police are unwilling to engage with volunteers.



Serbian police making spot checks at the informal settlements in Šid.

Yet it would seem the tenure of such squat communities hangs among a balancing act of multiple factors. With winter coming and potential changes poised to come into force under the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, the autonomy of informal settlements are perhaps considered a threat to the cogency of a state-run camp system, which is currently half empty. Yet, as reported by [InfoMigrants](#) this September, shelter within one of Serbia's many official camp facilities represents its own form of entrapment, which many people living on the margins of Šid are also keen to avoid.

Under resourced groups in Subotica remain ill-prepared for winter

During September, the movement of people-in-transit in and around Subotica was in flux. While several groups managed to cross the border into Hungary, there were more arrivals in the north of Serbia as the pull-effect described last month invigorated transit for those faced with a narrowing set of travel options as the winter draws in. At the same time some people, discouraged because of repeated push-back experiences from Hungary, went to the camps in Belgrade (SRB) to recuperate. Alongside worsening weather conditions, these factors also encouraged the internal movement of families looking for a safer place to spend the winter.

The diversification of the arriving groups slowed in September, with demographics again predominantly made up of Afghans. Humanitarian assistance from Escuela con Alma (ECA) to these informal communities has been hampered by the weather and the ensuing factors related to health and accommodation. With the help of Médecins Sans Frontières and Collective Aid, ECA was able to restock some of its NFI supplies, but there is still a shortage of almost everything. High turnover and poor living conditions means that volunteers are unable to meet the clothing and hygienic needs of people-in-transit. Given that much of this population is made up of unaccompanied minors, the dearth in resources and seasonal change have put the most vulnerable in this community at further risk.

With the worsening weather situation, under-resourcing and the constant flux in transit, ECA states that they can only provide showers to approximately one sixth of the population on a regular basis. This compounds the health situation, to which access to primary care in Subotica is already very challenging. Co-operation with a local clinic had initially garnered

some results in referral pathways, but again in September ECA observed continual barriers to the acceptance of people-in-transit to medical facilities, even when they presented acute illnesses and injuries.

Hungary

Hungarian candidate László Trócsányi rejected for Commissioner

Even before the beginning of the new European Commission's term, it had to deal with replacing two designated commissioners, one of whom is László Trócsányi from Hungary. Trócsányi, Hungary's former Minister of Justice, was meant to be put in charge of the Neighborhood and Enlargement portfolio. This prestigious portfolio appears to have been given to Hungary because [Budapest supported the incoming Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's nomination](#). Since most of the candidates for EU admission are located in the Western Balkans and because "migration management" is a focal point of EU-relations with these states, the Commissioner for Enlargement can have [significant impact on conditions on the Balkan route](#) and the externalization of the EU's migration management into the Western Balkan countries.



Hungarian politician László Trócsányi (Source: [DW](#))

This fact makes Trócsányi's nomination even more troubling. As Minister of Justice, he oversaw not only the dismantling of Hungary's rule of law (cause for an Article 7 proceeding against the country) but was also a key player in constructing Hungary's draconian immigration laws, including its push-back regime. While his nomination was formally stalled by the European Parliament's (EP) legal affairs committee due to potential conflicts of interest, Hungarian Prime Minister [Viktor Orbán argued](#), probably rightly so, that his nomination failed because of his role in Hungary's migration regime.

The bigger picture points to a deep divide between the new Commission and the EP. The EP seems poised to prevent the "[irony](#)" of having a man who has facilitated Orbán's autocratic consolidation of power in Hungary oversee the democratization of the Western Balkans. The

Commission, on the other hand, is busy repaying electoral favors and is willing to accept the damning consequences such a nomination would have likely had for rule of law and people-in-transit in the Western Balkans.

North Macedonia

Large transit groups caught and pushed back from close to Serbian border

In September, late movement across the route saw last ditch efforts to travel north before the impending winter season places further restrictions on transit. This was exhibited in a case publicised by [InfoMigrants](#) where 81 people-in-transit were apprehended in one instance near the Serbian border in pre-border checks by North Macedonian authorities. It is likely that this group was pushed back to Greece, a practice regularly recorded by BVMN volunteers based in Thessaloniki.

Despite the majority of movement tracking west in recent years through Albania-Montenegro-BiH towards Croatia, this case reaffirms the continued existence of the central connection route via Greece-North Macedonia-Serbia into Hungary. Even further, this incident, which saw a large transit group crammed into a single HGV lorry, raises further concerns about the dangerous methods of transit that become increasingly prevalent during this time of year. As the threat of enduring an entire winter on the move grows, people become more likely to take extreme risks in order to continue their travel.

One consequence of this, as covered in BVMN's [August Report](#) (pg. 14), is the use of vehicles for clandestine transit, which brings multiple threats into play. These include unbearable temperatures and oxygen levels, and the possibility of becoming fatally trapped. The volume of cross border vehicle transit was highlighted across the Balkan route this September, with a similar case that [N1 reported](#) in Zvornik (*BiH*). Given the complete lack of legal recourse to asylum and safe transit, riskier methods with larger amounts of people-in-transit involved, exacerbated by harsh winter conditions, are only set to increase across the next six months, when prolonged foot travel becomes almost impossible.



Transit group who attempted to cross the border at Zvornik, between BiH and SRB (Source: [N1](#))

Greece

New Government Targets People in Transit as Arrival Numbers Rise

The situation in Greece has gradually worsened for people-in-transit since the change of government in early July 2019. The right-wing group, New Democracy, led by Prime Minister Mitsotakis, has been assembling a harsher response to transit groups and asylum seekers/procedures over the past few months. This has led to the destruction of the AMCA system, which helps migrants and refugees access medical care outside of emergency cases, along with a notable increase in police violence and a [crackdown on squats](#) in large cities.

Although conditions are declining, the flow of people into Greece has not slowed down. [UNHCR recorded](#) as many as 10,600 arrivals to the Greek islands in the months of July and August, double the amount of last year, with total reception numbers reaching above 22,000. This has led to the movement of large groups from Lesbos to the already overcrowded, and unprepared mainland. Transit patterns can be mapped back to the precipitated wave of movement along the Balkan Route which held late into September. Domestically, police in larger cities are unequipped to deal with the influx of groups to mainland Greece, especially in the case of processing white cards for people-in-transit. The team working at Philoxenia in Thessaloniki have noted that many beneficiaries are finding it impossible to access this initial stage of documentation, leaving the most vulnerable excluded from essential services in the city.

Another trend noted is the increased number of internal push-backs from the Greek interior close to the North Macedonian and Albanian borders. People-in-transit have noted an increase in police forces based in the transit cities of Kastoria and Polykastro (*GRK*), which often apprehend groups using violence and steal their valuables, such as phones and money, before sending them back to Thessaloniki.

Within a single week, the number of people accessing the service offered by Philoxenia fluctuates between 150 to 250, continually bolstered and offset by new arrivals, large groups leaving to cross the borders and others being pushed back, either internally or externally. In the broader regional context, the prospect of even higher turn over is wholly realistic given statements from [Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan](#) in September to the effect that Greece's neighbours would ["be forced to open the gates"](#) for people currently stranded in Turkey.

In Thessaloniki, the most evident change is the increase of police brutality against the transit population. Philoxenia, together with Medical Volunteers International, have been identifying and treating cases of beatings and attacks by police officers. People presenting at the drop-in center regularly express their fear of being in the streets at night, where they are left vulnerable to undetected police attacks. However, often these groups have nowhere else to go.

Glossary of Reports: September 2019

This month, the Border Violence Monitoring Network conducted 19 reports of pushbacks in total, involving 157 people-in-transit. Thirteen of these incidents were pushbacks to BiH (three chain pushbacks from Slovenia, and ten directly from Croatia), four incidents were to Serbia (three directly from Hungary, and one from Croatia), and two incidents were to Greece (both directly from North Macedonia). The reports were conducted with a wide demographic variety of respondents including adults and unaccompanied minors, men and women, and respondents with physical disabilities. The respondents in these reports also originate from a wide variety of places. Demographically, many respondents came from the Magreb countries of Algeria, Morocco, Western Sahara and Tunisia. Reports were also conducted with people from Ethiopia, Syria, Egypt, Palestine, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Report link	Date of Report	Date of Incident	Group Size	Countries of origin
<i>Pushbacks from Slovenia to BiH</i>				
1.1	9th September	11th September	7	Morocco
1.2	11th September	16th September	6	Western Sahara
1.3	11th September	18th September	14	Afghanistan, Egypt, Morocco
<i>Pushbacks from Croatia to BiH</i>				
2.1	21st August	4th September	12	Algeria
2.2	4th September	7th September	3	Morocco, Algeria
2.3	10th September	12th September	5	Morocco
2.4	13th September	16th September	9	Morocco, Algeria
2.5	15th September	18th September	3	Morocco
2.6	18th September	22nd September	8	Morocco, Algeria
2.7	22nd September	25th September	12	Pakistan, Syria, Algeria, Morocco
2.8	23rd September	25th September	6	Morocco, Algeria
2.9	26th September	28th September	3	Morocco, Algeria
2.10	27th September	29th September	5	Algeria

<i>Pushbacks from Hungary to Serbia</i>				
3.1	31st August	2nd September	3	Afghanistan
3.2	6th September	7th September	8	Afghanistan
3.3	23rd September	30th September	42	Afghanistan, Ethiopia
<i>Pushbacks from Croatia to Serbia</i>				
4.1	31st August	10th September	3	Morocco, Tunisia
<i>Pushbacks from North Macedonia to Greece</i>				
5.1	26th September	28th September	2	Morocco
5.2	8th September	16th September	6	Morocco, Palestine, Algeria

Network structure and contact

The Border Violence Monitoring Network is a volunteer led endeavour, relying on the efforts of participant organizations working in the field, in advocacy and in litigation. As of September 2019, the Network now receives grant funding from The Open Society Foundations, supporting three paid positions, and volunteer travel expenses.

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](#).

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