

BALKAN  
REGION

AUGUST  
2019

# ILLEGAL PUSH-BACKS AND BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS

Border Violence Monitoring Network

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## ***Executive Summary***

August saw a spike in violence connected with the continued practice of illegal pushbacks enacted from the EU's external borders in the Balkan region. Most concerning was the evidence of torture by police officers in Croatia hints at the license given to border forces in their removal operations, and the insipid racism that accompanies this.

More broadly, monitoring work continues to note the trans-national and bilateral co-operation between EU member states in the north of the Balkan route. Instances of chain pushbacks from Italy to Bosnia and Herzegovina, though relatively rare, offer insight into the web of actors engaged in the refoulement of groups across multiple borders, and liminality of due process in these cases. The intersection of unlawful acts also raises key concerns about aiding and abetting of pushbacks by Brussels. Specifically, analysis from this month elaborates on the involvement of Frontex in facilitating pushbacks. Picking up on its deployment across the region, including the first non-EU Frontex mission in Albania, the case material depicts a layering of orchestration from the blocs border police force, and critical involvement of Frontex personnel in apprehension, detention and forced expulsion.

The mobilization of terrain in both inhibiting transit and enacting pushbacks themselves also came to the fore once again. The further dispersion of returns along the Croatian-BiH border and continued practices of police confiscating shoes and burning belongings act as a humiliating deterrence tactic. Seen in tandem with the construction of extra border fencing by Slovenian authorities and the incidents of drowning across the Balkan route this month, observations about the reconfiguration of physical geography within reborderisation stand out as once again fatal.

## **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*

*EU - European Union*

*MNE - Montenegro*

## ***Trends in Border Violence***

### ***Torture: Recurrences of extreme violence and abuse***

The Serbian media outlet N1 [reported](#) at the end of August on the case of an unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan who was subject to severe and inhuman treatment at the hands of Croatian authorities. The minor, who at the time of reporting was in the custody of the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migrants, described being apprehended along with his friends in Croatia after an unsuccessful transit attempt. He was locked in a dark room, where officials questioned him and later;

[“forced him to take his clothes off, made him get into water, where they released electricity through a \[taser\], which led to him losing consciousness.”](#)

During the incident, he suffered a broken rib, internal bleeding, and lost a significant amount of blood. Cases such as this one, which describe a style of abuse from Croatian authorities akin to torture, step beyond the confines of systemic violence.

Earlier in August, a report was conducted in Velika Kladuša (BiH) with an 18-year-old from Algeria whose neck was ringed with a scar left after being choked by a Croatian police officer using his own shirt as a makeshift noose. In detail, the 18-year-old respondent described how, after screaming to the officers near him that he could not breathe, he was thrown onto the ground and kicked in the face. His nose was broken in the process.

*“Until that point there hasn’t been a fight. But after they took us to the border, they opened the door and we could see them getting ready for beating....They beat us one by one and then they told us to go to Bosnia. There was a river to cross to enter Bosnia. So each of us crossed the river after being beaten up. Some people got beaten up hard, some people got beaten up less. Me, the last one, they beat a lot. The first and the last ones get beaten up the most. One grabbed my shirt and another one punched me. Like that I couldn’t protect my face. When the policeman got tired from beating, the second one grabbed the back of my shirt. I told them: ‘Stop! You’re hurting me. I cannot breathe.’ He grabbed me like that and kicked my face two times with his leg... He [then] forced me on the ground and then kicked me...The one who kicked me on the face, hurt me so much. It felt like, when he beat me, my nose just cracked, it broke. And then I was bleeding for five hours. It was too much blood. When he saw that I was about to lose consciousness, he left me and within five seconds I ran. He was about to beat me more, but I ran. Because when you enter Bosnia, he won’t follow. So we went.”*

Instances such as this cannot simply be considered “structural” in the same manner and method as the procedural destruction of mobile phones or the routine batons strikes administered to many transit groups in the process of their push-back procedures.



*The scars ringing the neck of an 18-year-old Algerian in August after being pushed back by Croatian authorities to Sturlic (BiH).*

Akin to the brutality of this case are a number of testimonies collected within the last year detailing similarly prolonged, physical and psychological abuse from authorities. One [report](#) from December, for example, details an unaccompanied minor from Iraq who, similar to the case above, described being shocked by an electrical device until he fainted.

He reported being hit by the first two officers with batons who forced him to move towards the other officers down the line who, in turn, also hit him in the arms, shoulders, chest, and face. As the respondent progressed down the line, he recalled the sixth officer taking out a taser and shoving it into his chest, administering him an electric shock. The respondent reported that at this point, he “fell asleep”:

*“After [the electric shock], I don’t see anything. I was like sleep...like dream”*

He then reported that a police officer threw water onto his face from a bottle which woke him up. He recalled that:

*“When I wake up, the police hurt me in my hand and in my face”*

At one point, the minor in question put his hand over his head to protect his face from several baton blows from a Croatian police officer who was trying to hit him on his head. He was hit several times in the forearm as a result. These blows, he would later find out, broke his forearm in two places. He recalled crying out at this point “Ow, my arm!” but found no reaction from the officers present other than an insistence to keep moving as they switched to hitting him with batons in the legs. He also recalled receiving at least one direct punch from a closed fist to his face. At some point during the course of the pushback, he reported that he fell down:

*“After the police hurt me, I can’t walk. I was crawling on the ground and when the police see me, they came to me and started kicking me in the legs”*



*Image of an unaccompanied minor from Iraq, after reported left forearm fractures and subjection to electrical shocks (Velika Kladusa, December 2018).*

Extreme cases of targeted violence such as these do not match the same operative framework as other forms of violence, such as the destruction of mobile phones or baton strikes to the legs and torso, which have become ubiquitous during push-backs from Croatia. Prolonged assaults, repeated administration of electric shocks, and the forced immersion into extremely cold waterways - are not the mere byproduct of “regular” push-back procedures, but a recurrent motif within the unregulated policing of Croatia’s border regime. To this end, in certain cases, it is necessary to approach these incidents simultaneously as hate crimes, and not only constituent acts of violent border externalisation, but bearing their own weight as targeted individual abuse.

### ***Push-back from Italy***

Chain push-backs from Italy are comparatively rare. Yet notably one report ([see 1.1](#)) conducted last month provided evidence of this sequential phenomena of expulsion from Italy back to BiH, via Slovenia and Croatia; drawing into question why such uncommon and illegal procedure was conducted by Italian police officers.

The transit group was initially apprehended by Italian police officers in a small village on the outskirts of Trieste from where they described being brought to a government building. Both in Italy and later in Slovenia, the transit group in question was detained, made to give their fingerprints, had their pictures taken and were asked to sign papers written in languages that they did not understand.



*“We asked the woman, what was on the paper because it was in Italian. She didn’t translate and we didn’t understand what we signed.”*

*“I told the translator that they have to find a solution. They can’t just bring us back to Slovenia, knowing that we were in Italy. And they said, we are just migrants, we are not tourists.”*

Once they arrived in Croatia, the transit group was detained in a police station and interviewed one at a time before being brought to the border with Bosnia-Herzegovina where the group had their phones individually broken with a hammer by a Croatian police officer. They were then told to walk through a forest into Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The chronology of events above alludes also to the complicit nature of preliminary actors within the wider pushbacks. Arguably initiators such as Slovenia and Italy - who often afford groups with translators and legal documents - have an intimate relationship to the violence and terror that accompanies subsequent push-backs from Croatia to BiH. The feigning of due process by these countries, despite prior knowledge of violent chain refoulement, forms a central part of their conceit. Italy and Slovenia mask their actions in a malaise of procedures (regularly untranslated or explained), in order to hide the institutionalisation of illegal chain pushbacks. The nature of chain pushbacks are defined by these bit-part processes, which simultaneously imitate regular procedures, while providing ample space for state authorities to deviate from legal obligations.

### ***Beyond police: Actors within the pushback framework***

As with the case described above, pushbacks are often performed by multiple layers of actors, working both within and outside institutional remits. The testimonies recorded by BVMN in August once again show the diversity of perpetrators involved in the pushback regime. Considering the collaboration between these parties (such as police, military, Frontex, social workers and translators) is important, because it reinforces the evidence brought forward that pushbacks exist as an orchestrated policy, and not as a set of anomalous incidents. Reports this month show a prevalence of actors beyond domestic police forces; illustrated in the cases of military involvement in on the Hungarian- Serbian border; and engagement of Frontex officials in Croatia and North Macedonia.

**State military** perform a number of functions along the Balkan route, including deployment at borders, detection of of people in transit and forced removals. Tasks and remit can vary, for instance in Greece where people enter the route, [BVMN](#) has previously reported on the role Greek military play in the physical pushback of groups into Turkey over the Evros River [using small boats](#). Meanwhile in Croatia and Slovenia, the military involvement has generally



been confined to the initial seizure of transit groups, and subsequent handover to police forces to enact the pushback.

Hungary represents an example of intrinsic military participation in the pushback regime. Ever since the “summer of migration,” in 2015, the Hungarian Defense Forces (HDF) have been intimately involved in border security operations at Hungary’s Southern borders with Croatia and Serbia. Beyond building the border fence itself, [Hungary’s State of Emergency laws](#), which have just been [extended](#) once again, grant the HDF far-reaching responsibilities in migration management. These laws allow the HDF “to take part in border control activities and gave it the right to use coercive weapons designed to cause bodily harm, although in a non-lethal way, unless it cannot be avoided [...]”.

The HDF’s presence at the border is acutely felt by people-in-transit as the military participates in detection, detention, and expulsion efforts. In reports collected since late July and throughout August in Subotica (Serbia), respondents describe “private security officers” in “yellow vests” who discovered transit groups at the Kelebia (Hungary) train station and guarded them until they were pushed back into Serbia (see [6.2](#) and [6.4](#)). Sources in the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, who have been focusing on pushbacks at this border since the practice started, confirmed this month that these “private security officers” are in fact HDF representatives.

Importantly, the treatment meted out by these “Yellow Vests” has been consistently more violent than that of regular police officers. A transit-group of Afghan men caught by Yellow Vests in late July was beaten with such severity, that one man’s lip split open.

*“They beat a guy too much, and he is sick now. They hit him very much.”*

The same transit group’s shoes were confiscated by the Yellow Vests. This meant that they had to walk barefoot for four hours from the border fence to Subotica through rocky terrain (see [6.2](#)).

The second place of contact between military officers and people in transit is directly at the push-back sites. Since Hungary’s border fences are operated by the army, HDF officers are almost always present to open a “door in the fence” through which transit groups have to leave Hungarian territory. Respondents regularly point out that these army officers take videos or photographs of the people-in-transit, in addition to the photographs taken by Hungarian police officers (see [6.1](#), [6.2](#), [6.4](#), and [6.5](#)).

In a 2015 [report](#), Amnesty International pointed out how the use of armed forces, such as the HDF, in border management poses fundamental risks to people-in-transit because

[“military \[...\] are trained to confront an enemy in situations of armed conflict where force, including lethal force, is the first choice of action.”](#)



*Pictures of gates in the Hungarian border fence where transit groups are regularly pushed back to Serbia.*

**Frontex Involvement** is also a prominent aspect of the pushback regime that has added to and augmented domestic policing. BVMN has reported on multiple cases of The European Border and Coastguard Agency being involved in pushbacks across the Balkan Route. The reports from August also garnered further evidence to this end, citing two specific cases; in Croatia and the Greek-North Macedonian border. The presence of Frontex in both countries fits with an ongoing trend towards infrastructural support from the EU to its external borders and beyond. Case material (see [3.3](#)) from a Croatian pushback illustrates the experience of one transit group who were apprehended by three officers described as;

*“green military t-shirts and trousers. On the sleeve was a German flag and a blue armband”*

The officers, matching the uniform of Frontex officials, enacted the initial capture of the group and then held them at the point of apprehension for an hour until local Croatian police arrived. During this time, the group were searched and had all their belongings removed. Interestingly, the respondent in this case had the opportunity to speak to the Frontex officers for a concerted amount of time while they waited, describing their manner as casual and offering insight into the officers line of questioning. The Frontex officials held an off the record conversation with the transit group, without writing down any names or details (only taking the mens photos). The officers were primarily interested in where the men were from and what sect of Islam they identified with.

*“they are asking. ‘You are Muslim, Sunni, Shia?’ ‘you believe Allah, God?’”*

This information gathering is particularly noteworthy, given the group were then transferred to regular Croatian officers who took them to a police station, but did not perform any identity check, or formal procedure (eg. written forms, fingerprinting, interviews). The Frontex officials in this case display a further layering of informal practice within the application of pushbacks, carrying out a crude verbal screening of the transit group, but not lodging this within any formal process of asylum or forced removal. Their questions also adopt a highly suspect tone towards religion and ethnicity, presenting a fixed culturalist approach to border enforcement that views people-on-the-move as a suspicious Other.

Though the Frontex officers only physically participated in the capture of the group, their actions in detection, searching and transferring contributed directly to the pushback. From this point, the transit group of eight, were merged into a larger group of 24 persons, who were collectively expelled into BiH, with the use of violence by the Croatian police. The group also observed their belongings, initially confiscated by Frontex in Croatia, being burnt in a fire at the border. Some people were not even returned their shoes.

Here, the active involvement of trans-national policing lends further weight to the idea that pushbacks are a collective practice. [Frontex deployment](#) in Croatia, which was touted as a possible solution in last months meeting between Slovenian and Italian interior ministers, is indicative of the position of the EU in bolstering domestic controls on “irregular migration” via the Balkan Route. In its own words, the Frontex [agency](#) presents itself as “[a coordinator, setting up specialised networks between border authorities](#)”. Thus, Frontex can be seen here to be performing detection and link work with local actors in the pushback process. In this case, guiding the entry point of vulnerable transit groups into an informal system of expulsion which included direct violence, theft and abrogation of individual rights.

Cross comparisons can be drawn with the experience of people-on-the-move in Greece who face a marked Frontex presence on the border with North Macedonia. In testimony (see [7.1](#)) gathered in August the respondent and three companions were caught twice by Frontex officers, being pushed back first from Gevgelija (North Macedonia) to Polykastro (Greece). The second intervention led them to being processed at a camp near Gevgelija where the transit group had names and fingerprints taken, but were told directly by Frontex officials that they could not claim asylum in North Macedonia. Here, the remit of Frontex as gatekeepers to asylum, and their active position in carrying out the transport for pushbacks represents a stark level of investment on the part of the EU. Combined with the newly installed Frontex presence in Albania (see pg. 12) the layering of European forces alongside domestic divisions of police alludes to firm structural support at EU level.

In sum, the examples of state military and Frontex involvement illustrate tenets of a multifaceted border regime. Read in conjunction with the participation of translators, social workers and other third party actors, it is possible to understand the truly cross-

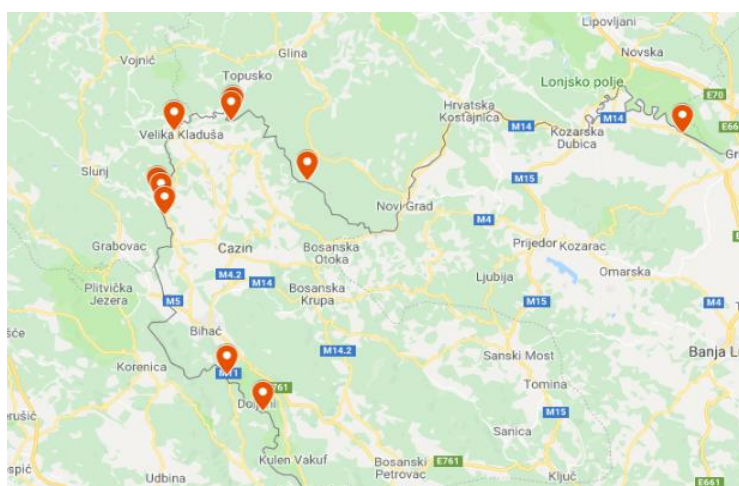
organisational approach underpinning pushbacks, and from this advocate for the review of all institutions involved.

### ***Further dispersion of pushback sites in NW Bosnia***

As noted previously by BVMN in July, the month of August also saw a further widening of the range of pushback sites from Croatia, into the north west of BiH. *Dispersion* as a tactic has been applied since the commencement of the illegal pushback regime at a detriment and deterrent to people-on-the-move. The process of returning people to a place far from their departure point may be viewed as one of the final indignities imparted on groups illegally deported, compounding their pushback experience with a potential days walk in order to return to temporary accommodation.

Previous analysis illustrated the prevalence of pushbacks from Croatia into the area around Sturlic (BiH), which is borne out once again in the testimony data from August. This represents a shrewdness on the part of Croatian authorities who effectively disrupt the return journey of transit groups from both Bihać and Velika Kladuša, given that Sturlic sits between the two. As key locations equipped with institutional accommodation, health care and some basic humanitarian assistance, the consistent dispersal of transit groups away from Bihać and VK represents a clear effort to hinder access to shelter, medicine and recuperation.

Furthermore, while access to public transport in BiH continues to be intermittently withheld to people on the move, additional dangers accompany internal travel exist. Being forced to walk along public roads used by high speed traffic is one such risk that groups face in order to return. Another is the combined impact of additional travel on foot with inadequate food and water which, via these tactics of dispersion, contributes to peoples' dehydration and exhaustion.



*Approximate coordinates of pushbacks from HR into BiH based on geolocation data from reports collected by BVMN in the month of August.*

Testimony from August (plotted on the map above) points toward an even further disaggregation of pushback sites, marked by several cases where Croatian officials opted to return transit groups well beyond the regular distances used. As featured, this month's location data depicts an increasing number of incidents where officers drove transit groups along western and northern borders, reaching as far as the Banja Luka region (Republika Srpska) and the south west of the Una Sana Canton.

These recent developments fit into a schema of indirect violence used by Croatian officials to harm people on the move. The creation of longer internal journeys in BiH are accompanied by the systematic removal of shoes and footwear by apprehending officers. While this is often understood as a measure to prevent captured groups running from police in Croatian territory, in combination with elongated foot travel inside BiH, it represents a regular physical cost to transit groups who face many hours walking barefoot on uneven ground.

With the [stationing](#) of up to 200 extra Croatian police officers in the region of Lika, as reported by [Total Croatia News](#), the capacity building around the pushback regime looks poised to use every possible avenue to disrupt the movement of persons in transit. Alongside the regular burning of property, theft of valuables such as phones and money, and removal of clothing; the growing trend towards dispersed pushback sites within an armoury of indirect violence practiced by Croatian officials.

### ***Trends in pushbacks to and from Greece***

Philoxenia, together with Mobile Info Team, have been taking reports in Thessaloniki (Greece) over the past two months regarding push backs and border violence. Much of the early material collected followed the expulsion of groups (some as large as ten), from Greek territory and back to Turkey. Transit groups apprehended in the Greek towns of Nea Vysa or Orestiada were regularly violently expelled over the Evros River, often after detention in cramped conditions, with a lack of information on their removal. Discussion with groups suggested that the threat of pushback to Turkey was not eliminated until they had made it safely to Thessaloniki. During these pushbacks, respondents report regular violence, and the frequent use of balaclavas by perpetrators to hide their faces. In all cases their phones were taken and destroyed in front of them, and often money was taken from them too. Some even assert that during the last winter, they were stripped naked and forced back to Turkey with no clothes.



The month of August saw a lull in interviews regarding the Turkish border and more pushbacks from Albania and North Macedonia to Greece. Most respondents pushed back from Albania had made their way to the Greek city of Kastoria and tried to cross to Bilisht, Albania. Meanwhile, those crossing to North Macedonia routinely attempt this through the Greek town of Polykastro, crossing into Gevgelija, North Macedonia. In both countries, respondents are regularly detained for more than 24 hours, with their fingerprints taken, before being handed back to the Greek authorities without explanation or answers to requests for asylum. So far respondents have reported incidents of racism by police officers, but not violence, and there has been a noted Frontex presence within the processing of these pushbacks.

## ***Update on the Situation***

### ***Croatia***

#### ***Dublin transfer to Croatia suspended by Swiss court***

August saw the court findings surface in the media from an appealed Dublin transfer dating back to Friday July 12th. In the case, the Swiss Supreme Administrative Court ruled to suspend the transfer of a Syrian asylum seeker from Switzerland to Croatia. The person in question was to be transferred to Croatia under the Dublin III Regulation, but appealed on the grounds that Croatia was not a safe third country. The basis for this contestation was the asylum seeker's experience of being pushed back violently from Croatia eighteen times. The appeal held that he was abused multiple times by Croatian police forces, and reportedly suffered "[physical and psychological consequences](#)" as later reported by the [Center for Peace Studies](#), Zagreb. Therefore, returning the defendant to Croatia would violate the principle of non-refoulement which is enshrined in European law.

The basis for the Court's decision was the established systemic deficiencies in Croatia's border practices, including denial of access to asylum procedures, collective pushbacks and Croatia's role in chain pushbacks in the region. More specifically, the Court criticized the lower court's failure to examine the risk of chain-refoulement from Croatia. In its [findings](#), the Court specifically referenced the *increasing* number of reports of illegal Croatian border practices as a basis for its decision, even citing an [article written by BVMN activists](#) published by [Are You Serious](#) last year. The reference to testimonial evidence in these procedures lends extra weight to the findings of BVMN, and wider condemnation of Croatia's border practices.

Where refoulement has become a practice suffered regularly by people-in-transit, this case is monumental, representing possible avenues to halt illegal removals by Croatia and other member states. Whether this case can lead to wider consensus that Croatia is not a safe third country is questionable, but it represents a key moment in litigation for organisations opposing both pushbacks and the flawed DublinIII Regulation.

### ***Drowning incident: Continued fatalities from “irregular” movement***

Six people drowned in rivers along the so-called Balkan route this month, creating again a morbid reminder of the fatal risks enforced on transit groups. Local volunteers have been developing a census of those persons who have died or disappeared while transiting the route, bringing this shameful number to light. The six people died either trying to cross rivers along a border, or attempting to wash themselves (denoting the lack of sanitary provision available).

Ultimately, it is difficult to say how reliable this statistic can be considered when accounting for the fact that a number of these bodies have still not been found. Moreover, the numbers might sadly be read as an underestimate, given that among the thousands of people taking the route every year, people often disappear and are not reported.

Many borders along the Balkan Route are marked by rivers or waterways, especially along the Slovenian/Croatian and Serbian/Bosnian borders. This becomes a recurring hazard for people-in-transit who often choose not to risk crossing over bridges, where towns or border crossings might be located, instead opting for the more dangerous method of crossing rivers. In these cases, many risk the crossings while holding onto logs or makeshift boats which function poorly in the fast and cold rivers often being forded. As routes become increasingly securitized by state authorities, transit groups increasingly attempt more dangerous and untested crossings, especially on river crossings.

Often, in the search for “safe” crossing of these natural barriers, people-in-transit use smugglers. The underlying supposition to these arrangements is that smugglers will be able to get their clients to their destinations quicker and more safely than they would otherwise by going on their own. But in practice, for a number of reasons, electing to travel with people smugglers can bring its own separate risks.

On the 25th of August, a van with German license plates attempted to [escape](#) from a police checkpoint in Croatia. It would later be discovered that the driver was attempting to smuggle a group through the country. In their escape, the driver drove into the Kupa river (HR) and subsequently fled, leaving eleven people including children and women in the van drowning. Later on, one of the women transported in the van died in hospital. At this point,



the driver has still not been apprehended, however on August 26th, Zoran Niceno, head of the Croatian Ministry of Interior's Border Directorate, [confirmed](#) that three people were arrested and held in detention at the Bajakovo border crossing, possibly having information about the driver.

During its monitoring capacity, BVMN has observed multiple, often fatal, ways in which transit methods can impact people-on-the-move. It may be argued that the violence of the Croatian authorities and the prospect of chain pushback from as far as Italy is forcing people to assume further risks in their journey. Walking along highways and train tracks, boarding the underside of freight trains, or in this case being at the mercy of a reckless driver, people continue to face disproportionate risks, and sadly, census numbers are unlikely to catch up with the number of lives lost on the Balkan route.

## **Bosnia**

### **18 people injured at the border by Croatian police**

August was scored by numerous acts of extreme violence on the part of Croatian authorities. One particular case that stands out as emblematic of the routinisation of violence within the pushback system occurred on 7th August where Bosnian police and local media intercepted a beaten transit group who had been chased into BiH territory by Croatian police officers.

This case gives credence to some of the tactics regularly applied by officers from Croatia, such as collective expulsion of multiple transit groups at one time, delivery to the border via inhumane conditions, and use of natural slopes where officers can charge groups over the brink with batons. But it also offers a rare moment of contestation between border officials, media and government, as BiH and Croatia sought to present their angle on the story.

Within this, BVMN had the unique opportunity to speak to some of the group members in this incident. In testimony (see [3.4](#)), they describe having walked seven days through the Croatian interior, where they were caught by police near Vrhova Gorica, close the Slovenian border. They were apprehended first by two plain clothes officers, stating that they were Croatian special forces, and then handed over to four regular Croatian police officers. The group described the regular officers:

*"They looked at us very angrily and showed us their batons, letting us understand that they will use them on us later."*

The group were conveyed in cramped and hot conditions. The van which drove them stopped at a police station in Croatia to add a further nine men (of Arabic descent) while on its journey to the border with BiH. At the border, two officers matching the description of Croatian Interventna officials (full black uniform) joined in the violent expulsion of the combined transit groups.

*"[They] beat them with sticks and kicked them down a hill towards the Croatian border with Bosnia and Herzegovina"*



*Pictures of injuries sustained by group members during the assault by Croatian police, including lateral bruising from baton strikes and bandaging to the elbow.*

Further to this, while the transit group attempted to recover and rest at the bottom of a field, the two Interventna officers ran into BiH territory and chased the group further across the field. Alerted to the commotion at the border, BiH police officers arrived on the scene and spoke with the transit group, who directed them to the infringement of the Croatian officials on BiH territory. The responding officers ran to the site of the pushback, and were heard arguing loudly with Croatian officials by the road. The aftermath saw, BiH police receive the group of 18 at a local police station for the night, and transport them to the Dom zdravlja in Velika Kladusa the next day for treatment. Bosnian media outlet [N1](#) quoted Dr. Evresa Okanovic, who stated that;

*"Radiological exams were performed at around 8 am and we'll know more details after 10 am. When it comes to other 12 migrants, we can confirm they suffered minor injuries,"*

Unique to this incident was the involvement of Bosnian press on the field. [Video](#), filmed by local residents who responded to the transit group (and called the BiH police) was released by Bosnian platform [Žurnal](#). In it, one of the group members relays the threats of the Croatian officers, as they pushed them into Bosnia; ["I'll shoot you"](#). The footage also features a receding Croatian police vehicle, leaving the ditch used as a natural obstacle within the pushback. Additional coverage was brought by press portal [Srpska Cafe](#), who

picked up on the incident, publishing a [picture](#) of bullet shells found at the road where the Croatian officers had reportedly shot at transit groups.

As the incident broke in the international press, [InfoMigrants](#) reported the lodging of the case with the state prosecutor of BiH, remarking on the escalation of procedures generally kept within local law enforcement jurisdiction. Quick rebuttals were formulated in the Croatian press. [Total Croatia](#) presented a strong scepticism of the story, citing the lack of ["evidence or official statements for their \[BiH media\] claims"](#). By the next day, the outlet led with a blank denial of the events reported, relaying [Croatian Interior Ministry statements](#) that no force had been used, and Croatia had simply acted to prevent illegal entries.

The latter article stated that separate transit groups had been observed in the Buhača (HR) area, and had been peacefully prevented by officers in making a border crossing to Croatia. Yet pitted against the evidence provided in first hand testimony, local witnesses who filmed the incident and involvement of BiH border police, these assertions appear fairly weak. The photographic evidence seems enough to dispel any idea that this incident was performed without force. Moreover, the detailed description of the pushback from deep in the Croatian interior, involving multiple transit groups, several hours of detention, and a combination of police divisions, calls into question the narrative that illegal entry was simply prevented.

Such open contestation between Croatia and BiH has been relatively limited, especially in light of the continual level of reported violence at this border. But the divergent accounts, and escalation of the case to the state prosecutor in Sarajevo represents an interesting development in bilateral relations. In conjunction with this, Security Minister for BiH, Dragan Mektić rose to prominence again August for his slating of Croatian migration policy. [N1](#) quoted Mektić, who made allegations of "torture" against the Croatian police, in response to [criticism](#) of camp locations near their shared border, namely Vučjak near Bihać. Such comments present a growing critique from the BiH state officials, especially towards the thinly veiled statements of the Croatian Interior Ministry, which fall well short of sounding convincing on the issue of *border prevention*.

### ***Living conditions and internal camp distribution***

The above interventions of Bosnian media and politicians can be usefully read in alongside the internal debate around the hosting of migrants. The growing rejection of Croatian pushbacks and physical incursions into BiH territory is intimately linked to domestic politics around camp distribution. Dragan Mektić's statements seek to pile the pressure on Zagreb and external bodies, such as the EU and implementing partners; organizations viewed as offloading their problems onto the prospective accession state of BiH. Narratives in Bosnia

around the accommodating of migrants depict a fractured approach; at once driven by practical necessity, and yet curbed by the reluctance to assume the position of host to a transit population which the EU border regime has created.

Symbolic use of camps such as Vučjak has become a vehicle for pressuring both internally and externally for change. The inhumane conditions of the camp, as reported on last month by BVMN, have acted as catalysts toward potential new facilities, coinciding with the [announcement](#) of new EU funding directed for “[additional temporary reception centres](#)”. However, the urgent need for winterised shelter in northwestern BiH is not likely to be resolved quickly, especially given last year’s faltering experiences with the camps of Miral, Borici and Bira. Debate around the location of new camps has already exposed a reluctance on the part of local leaders to allow new infrastructure, led by the Security Council in the city of Drvara, Livno Canton. [In statements](#), Mayor Dusica Runic warded off the prospect of reception centres in the city, stating they had no intention of making Drvara part of the route. Set against the growing number of transit attempts from a radius 50 km south of Bihać, and subsequent pushback points, the position of local government regarding camps will continue to be a sticking point in the critical period of autumn.

## ***Slovenia***

### ***Construction of further fencing along Slovenian-Croatian border***

This August the Slovenian government [authorized the construction](#) of a fence 40 kms long on the banks of the river Kolpa, on the border with Croatia. The security device, installed by Serbian firm LEGI SGS, will add up to an already existing fence, making the barrier a total of 219km long. The exact location of the construction was not made public, and a spokeswoman for the interior ministry said it will be a temporary measure to prevent people crossing the border. She did however directly cite migration as a threat to the security of citizens' in her statement, arguably reinforcing the ideological bordering that accompanies this further fencing. The construction is part of an escalating approach to border security which includes the [deployment of military](#), stationed on the border since 2016, and bolstered this year alongside regular police forces.

The opposition party NSi [demanded tighter controls](#) at the border with Croatia in July, and there seems little, or no will to challenge the mainstream rhetoric on migration. These demands, as BVMN [reported last month](#), coincided with concerns of Italy building a wall on the border with Slovenia, were the ongoing joint border not to stem movement from Slovenia into Italy. Thus it seems somewhat ironic to observe the construction of a barrier on Slovenia’s Southern border, preempting the machinations of Italian interior minister, Matteo Salvini.

Unfortunately, the domino effect being played out between these states only feeds into Croatia's intensifying security measures. While interior minister David Bozinovic was plethoric, stating that "[what Slovenians are doing, is their own decision](#)", his assertion that a joint European solution would be more welcome rings fairly hollow when viewed in tandem with the heightened repression around pushbacks this month and the already complicit role of Frontex. To this end, there seems to be no escape from the vicious circle of reborderization and loss of human rights in Europe, shown most recently by Slovenia's harder borders.

### ***Allegations of smuggling made against asylum center staff in Ljubljana***

A [statement](#) by the asylum seekers initiative La lutte de la Liberté, and released at the beginning of August highlights what may be a serious case of abuse by security personnel in the asylum seekers camp Vič, Slovenia. According to the group, a resident in the camp called Ibrahim witnessed a number of security guards smuggling migrants out of the camp with cars in exchange for money. After the incident, which took place at the beginning of July, Ibrahim told the director of the camp who flatly denied the allegations, yet simultaneously removed two guards from their posts, causing great suspicion. In retaliation, other guards started to mob Ibrahim resulting in a series of episodes of violence culminating in a fight, for which Ibrahim was taken to a detention centre in Postojna.

Ibrahim has now been released and three security guards in the camp are under investigation, a source from InfoKolpa shared. Even though the actual occurrence of smuggling remains a supposition, the event highlights an important grey zone in which camp staff are operating, and the potential for systemic abuse of the asylum system. It can be argued that such cases can only emerge in the void left by inaccessible procedures and it is well known that extremely long waiting times are built into the asylum system in Slovenia. The behavior of the security guards, in a position of absolute power over the migrants, can be explained by the fact that they are virtually invisible to the outside world, unless the migrants can organize themselves as in this case. There has already been proof of violent behavior by the guards in Vic, as shown in [this video](#) taken some six months ago.

People on the move, for their part, are in a position of structural and individual disadvantage, susceptible to many types of violence. As the statement correctly underlines, regardless of some staff being amenable, one person abusing a position of power is enough to ruin the life of someone held captive in a protracted asylum system. Infact, evidence would go further to suggest that in this case it seems like the guards were more of an organized mob, rather than rogue individuals.

The waiting period for asylum which reaches nine months maximum in theory (with only 18 euros a month granted to applicants by the state), makes the tenure of asylum seekers even more precarious, adding to the poor or nonexistent measures taken to integrate them into society: asylum seekers have no access to welfare, assistance in access to work or social housing and their placement in the detention center in Postojna is decided arbitrarily by the police. The entire Slovenian asylum system goes thus into inquiry, if viewed through the lens of this case, which both expounds its flaws and the potential corruption within.

## ***Serbia***

### ***Changing demographics in Subotica***

During the past month, the flux of people-in-transit in and around Subotica increased substantially. First, some people-in-transit, discouraged by repeated push-backs or due to health problems, chose to leave the informal squats in the Subotica area, which serve as starting points for train and taxi games, and move to camps in the vicinity of Belgrade.

However, recently, several transit-groups did manage to cross into Hungary, which may have created a slight pull-effect. Since the successful crossings at the beginning of the month, Escuela con Alma (ECA) volunteers have observed an uptake in arrivals around Subotica. These new arrivals are more geographically diverse, including Ethiopians, Indians, and Pakistanis; deviating from previous population flows, which were predominantly Afghan. Some infrequent fighting has broken out between Pakistanis and Afghans, denoting the tensions underlying this transit space and groups frustrations with being stuck in Serbia.

Additionally, the increased flux of people in combination with the worsening weather situation has made the difficult material and hygienic situation in the informal settlements even harder with ECA barely able to supply sufficient clothes, blankets, and medical support. Given that at least half of the people-in-transit in the Subotica area are minors this unstable situation is impacting the most vulnerable.

## ***Montenegro***

### ***Transit groups blocked from entering BiH***

In the first half of 2019, the Montenegrin border police state they have prevented nearly 300 migrants from crossing the border to Bosnia. Bosnian media outlet [Nezavisne](#) picked up on the [statistics of prevented entry](#), relaying statements from MNE border officials that the green belt between the two countries is patrolled by joint operations with BiH, and police are using thermal imaging cameras to thwart transit groups. With the Balkan Route tracking

to the West, due to the improbabilities of passage through Hungary, this border has gained growing importance for transit groups.

Interestingly, the Montenegrin authorities posit this reinforcement of the border within the context of safety, citing the [“inhumane conditions”](#) in which smugglers transport people on the move. However, given the evidence surfacing this spring around the detention of apprehended groups in [cages by BiH border forces](#), it would seem the collaboration in defending this national boundary has also transgressed standards of treatment. It is [reported](#) that BiH themselves have prevented the entry of 7,650 people to their territory between August and the beginning of this year, which combines attempted transit from both Montenegro and Serbia.

## ***Albania***

### ***Frontex advertise their non-EU operations***

The month of August saw early publicity from the new Frontex Operation in Albania which was installed in May of this year. The mission, first to be located outside EU territory, has an indefinite duration, within which Frontex officers are granted immunity from civil and criminal prosecution in Albania, a status that has raised valid concern. The mission was launched in the run up to talks between Albania and the EU over membership, displaying the crude bartering style often adopted towards non-member states by the bloc. [Albania's Prime Minister](#) welcomed the mission as a [“very important step in relations between Albania and the EU”](#), and EU migration commissioner [Dimitris Avramopoulos](#) praised it as [“a game changer \[..\], bringing Albania closer to the EU”](#).

With wider ramifications, in July the German government called the operation successful, announcing that the EU Commission had prepared similar agreements with Serbia, North Macedonia and Bosnia which are in the [“final stage of negotiations”](#). As with the insights from across the Balkan route this month, pushbacks and their perpetrators display a growing trans-national dynamic, and permutations from this first mission in Albania looks to be setting the tone for the entrenchment of EU border personnel in the region.





05:07 - 29 Aug, 2019

*Picture from Frontex twitter feed advertising its new operations in Albania in late August.*

## ***Glossary of August, 2019 reports***

This month, the Border Violence Monitoring Network conducted 20 reports of pushbacks in total, involving 378 people-in-transit. Eleven of these incidents were pushbacks to BiH (one chain pushback from Italy, three chain pushbacks from Slovenia, and seven directly from Croatia), seven were to Serbia (one chain pushback from Slovenia, one directly from BiH, and five directly from Hungary), and two were to Greece (both directly from North Macedonia). The reports were conducted with a wide demographic variety of respondents including adults and unaccompanied minors. The respondents in these reports also originate from a wide variety of places, including Algeria, Syria, Pakistan, Iraq, Morocco, Afghanistan and Bangladesh.

Report link	Date of Report	Date of Incident	Group Size	Countries of origin
<i>Pushback from Italy to BiH</i>				
<a href="#">1.1</a>	7 August	5 August	9	Algeria
<i>Push-backs from Slovenia to BiH</i>				
<a href="#">2.1</a>	13 August	10 August	22	Pakistan, Syria, Algeria
<a href="#">2.2</a>	26 August	24 August	42	Pakistan, Afghanistan
<a href="#">2.3</a>	28 August	27 August	11	Pakistan, Afghanistan

<i>Push-backs from Croatia to BiH</i>				
<a href="#">3.1</a>	2 August	27 July	10	Algeria
<a href="#">3.2</a>	7 August	5 August	10	Afghanistan, Algeria
<a href="#">3.3</a>	12 August	6 August	8	Pakistan
<a href="#">3.4</a>	9 August	7 August	23	Pakistan, Iraq
<a href="#">3.5</a>	20 August	18 August	10	Morocco, Algeria
<a href="#">3.6</a>	23 August	18 August	84	Pakistan
<a href="#">3.7</a>	26 August	26 August	30	Pakistan
<i>Push-backs from Slovenia to Serbia</i>				
<a href="#">4.1</a>	9 August	5 August	3	Algeria
<i>Push-backs from BiH to Serbia</i>				
<a href="#">5.1</a>	2 August	28 July	20	Afghanistan
<i>Push-backs from Hungary to Serbia</i>				
<a href="#">6.1</a>	10 August	20 July	20	Afghanistan
<a href="#">6.2</a>	2 August	31 July	12	Afghanistan
<a href="#">6.3</a>	10 August	8 August	3	Afghanistan
<a href="#">6.4</a>	13 August	12 August	11	Afghanistan
<a href="#">6.5</a>	24 August	19 August	16	Afghanistan
<i>Push-backs from North Macedonia to Greece</i>				
<a href="#">7.1</a>	7 August	13 July	4	Syria
<a href="#">7.2</a>	9 August	4 August	30	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Algeria, Bangladesh