

MONTHLY REPORT | JANUARY 2025

ILLEGAL PUSHBACKS AND BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS

BVMN is a network of watchdog organisations active in the Balkans, Greece, Turkey and Poland including Rigardu, Mobile Info Team, Collective Aid, Blindspots, Pushback Alarmphone Austria, I Have Rights, Center for Legal Aid, Mission Wings, InfoPark, Legal Centre Lesvos and We Are Monitoring.

Cover image: Surveillance in
Obrenovac (Serbia)
Source: Collective Aid



Border Violence
Monitoring Network

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**BL!ND
SPOTS**



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Methodology and Terminology

REPORTING NETWORK

BVMN [1] is a collaborative project between multiple grassroots organisations and NGOs working along the Western Balkan Route and Greece, documenting violations at borders directed towards people on the move. The partners have a common website database, used as a platform to collate testimonies of illegal pushbacks which are gathered through interviews.

METHODOLOGY

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

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. Pushback 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. Pushbacks have become an important, if unofficial, part of the migration regime of EU countries and elsewhere.

ABBREVIATIONS

BiH – Bosnia and Herzegovina
HRV – Croatia
SRB – Serbia
SLO – Slovenia
ROM – Romania
HUN – Hungary

AUT – Austria
MNK – North Macedonia
GRC – Greece
BGR – Bulgaria
TUR – Turkey
EU – European Union

[1] BVMN is a network of watchdog organisations active in the Balkans, Greece, Turkey and Poland including Rigardu, Mobile Info Team, Collective Aid, Blindspots, Pushback Alarmphone Austria, I Have Rights, Center for Legal Aid, Mission Wings. Legal Centre Lesbos, We Are Monitoring and InfoPark



Executive summary

This report gathers updates from the month of January and brings together first-hand testimonies from a range of countries in the Balkans, Turkey, Poland, Italy and France to look at the way European Union states and other actors are affecting systemic violence towards people crossing borders. Updates come from the different Member Organisations of BVMN, as well as Human Rights Observers (France) and Glocal Roots (Kos, Greece). We also welcome a section from new BVMN Member We Are Monitoring (Poland).

After nearly a decade of BVMN's documenting and advocating against the systematic pushbacks perpetrated against people on the move by the Greek state, the European Court of Human Rights has condemned the country for its *modus operandi*, on January 7th. The ruling constitutes the first time the Court has confirmed the systematic nature of this illegal practice in Greece.

While we welcome this critical development to hold Greece accountable, we remain aware that as the new year starts, old policies and discourses remain in vogue in the EU migration landscape, with a renewed push for securitisation, militarisation and externalisation made visible in most countries in and around the bloc. For example, the Polish government coalition has taken the next steps towards processing a bill that would suspend the right to seek asylum in the country in the context of – worryingly vaguely defined – “instrumentalisation of migration.” The decision seems to ignore international law, the widespread concerns raised by multiple human rights groups, as well as the dangerous and often deadly conditions and violations already faced by people on the move at the border between Poland and Belarus. In Bulgaria, the full Schengen accession came into force on January 1st, marking the continuation of a rampant EU-funded militarisation of the country's border with Turkey, increasing border checks and impunity. The very real effect of such policies became even more tragically visible with the death of three underage boys at that border at the end of December.

Further externalisation of EU violent migration strategies can also be seen in the expansion of Frontex operations and EU-driven policies in the Balkans. In Serbia, the Agency is now able to deploy officers at borders with non-EU countries, while Bosnia-Herzegovina aims to keep walking their accession path with the passing of increasingly restrictive EU-aligned laws with regards to border control. With security – of borders, not people – remaining at the centre of the political stage, the inadequacy and shortage of medical care in Bosnian camps and the continuation of violent (and illegal) pushbacks from Croatia to Bosnia and Hungary to Serbia don't even enter the discussion room.



Executive summary

The lack of health care, including psychological support, is one of the most pressing issues at the Kos Closed Controlled Access Center, in Greece, where the exit of MSF from the facility hasn't been replaced by another medical actor. The lack of access to essential services, as well as the unhygienic and overcrowded conditions in camps and detention centres in the country, constitutes a long-standing problem all across the country, from Serres and Sintiki in Northern Greece to the islands. The situation is aggravated by the isolated location of many of these facilities, which prevents people from seeking support in other places. Moreover, the halt in the cash assistance payments for asylum seekers, who haven't received any money since June 2024, contributes to the unsustainability of the situation for many people in and outside of the centres.

Despite the continuous violations, shortages, and appalling conditions at the detention centres, resources do not seem so scarce when it comes to increasing policing practices and border technology. An analysis of policing operations in Thessaloniki during 2024 carried out by BVMN reporters shows a surge in the number of police operations, especially those focusing on areas where there are squats, populations of people experiencing homelessness, as well as third-country nationals. Moreover, after pushing for exemptions to AI regulations in prisons and border zones in the context of the EU AI Act, Greece (and the EU) continues to channel billions towards operating as the testing ground for new surveillance technologies targeting people on the move.

Similarly, in Turkey, we focus on several reports highlighting the inhumane conditions at several Removal Centres in the country. The reports describe incidents of violence from the staff and lack of hygiene and essential services such as healthcare. Routine torture practices, often aimed at forcing returns to Syria, have been described in the Şanlıurfa camp, as well as Izmir and Aydın Removal Centers. In Şanlıurfa, two people attempted suicide this month, raising serious concerns about the conditions faced by detainees. The use of physical or psychological abuse to coerce people into signing "voluntary return" forms seems to be a widespread practice in the EU-funded detention and deportation system in the country.

Lastly, we discuss the violent manifestations of the European border regime in Western Europe, where routine harassment and abusive policies of deterrence remain omnipresent in train stations and cities alike. In France, the police have carried out at least 67 evictions this month despite the freezing temperatures, often destroying people's essential belongings – including shelter items – along the way. Meanwhile, at the French-Italian border, an estimated 35 pushbacks are carried out



Executive summary

every day, which, together with the constant surveillance at all legal and safer border crossings, forces people into life-threatening mountain crossings. Once again this month, these violent policies that prioritise the closure of all safe passage for people on the move to Europe forces us to report on the tragic death of 3 people in the English Channel, as well as at least 9 people in shipwrecks in the Aegean. Moreover, at the Turkish-Iran border, many have been reportedly found dead under the melting snow.

The need for documenting, reporting and, advocating is as pressing as ever. We call for an end to these violent policies and the establishment of a new solidarity framework based on justice, care and respect for people's right to move freely and live in safety.



Landmark ruling on pushbacks and enforced disappearances by the European Court of Human Rights

On January 7th, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) condemned Greece for systematically carrying out pushbacks of asylum seekers, a practice that BVMN and its members have been documenting and denouncing in various judicial, EU, and UN forums for nearly a decade. This ruling marks the first time the Court has confirmed the systematic nature of these practices and acknowledges that temporary forced disappearances were part of the Greek authorities' modus operandi. The cases concern the pushbacks of a Turkish citizen from Evros in 2019 (A.R.E. v. Greece (15783/21)) and an Afghan unaccompanied minor from Samos in 2020 (G.R.J. v. Greece (15067/21)). The ECtHR had previously held a hearing of these cases in June 2024.

In A.R.E. v. Greece, the ECtHR held Greece accountable for the majority of the alleged violations. The Court identified a "systematic practice of pushbacks by the Greek authorities of third-country nationals from the Evros region to Türkiye." It found that the applicant was illegally detained and expelled without the opportunity to seek asylum. The ECtHR determined that the Greek judicial authorities failed to conduct an effective investigation into the incident. Consequently, Greece was found in violation of Articles 3, 5, and 13 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which prohibit torture and inhuman or degrading treatment. This judgement further strengthens the growing body of evidence that Greece has long been engaged in pushbacks, particularly at its border with Turkey in the Evros region. Applications for interim measures submitted to ECtHR by organisations such as the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR), have long reported on pushbacks to Turkey through Evros, often involving rounding up people in large groups, violence, and unlawful detention by Greek authorities. In these cases, despite the ECtHR orders demanding that Greece refrain from removing people from its territory and ensure basic humanitarian assistance, the Greek authorities continued with these operations, disregarding the Court's rulings.

A statement by Maria Papamina, A.R.E.'s lawyer, underlines the weight this ruling carries: *"This is a landmark Judgment of the European Court of Human Rights. The ECtHR's recognition of this illegal practice of the Greek authorities is a vindication for the thousands of victims who denounce the Greek authorities' pushbacks at the Greek-Turkish border. Greek authorities must stop this illegal practice"*.

Whilst this ruling represents a critical step in holding Greece accountable, the Greek government remains fixated on so-called "border security" – a priority that has intensified in recent years. This is evident in Greece's plans for 2025 to complete



Landmark ruling on pushbacks and enforced disappearances by the European Court of Human Rights

its controversial fence along the Evros River. These measures are supported by EU funding and unfold against the backdrop of the EU's expanding border regime, with opaque preparations underway for the New Pact on Asylum and Migration, set to be implemented by 2026.

Moreover, the resolution for *G.R.J. v. Greece* raised other significant concerns regarding the ability of victims of pushbacks to seek justice. In *G.R.J. v. Greece*, the ECtHR determined that the applicant failed to provide adequate evidence demonstrating his presence in Greece and subsequent forced return to Türkiye from the island of Samos on the specified dates. This indicates that the ECtHR is unlikely to rule in favour of victims of pushbacks in the future unless the presented evidence meets these evidently high expectations. As documented through numerous testimonies of human rights violations against people on the move by coast guards and other authorities, the systematic destruction of evidence of border violence by, for instance, seizing or destroying phones, marks an obstruction of justice by the perpetrators and explains why collecting evidence of pushbacks is extremely challenging.

UPDATE ON THE SITUATION



**Border Violence
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How Serbia targets activists and people on the move with tech

January has seen an escalation of protest against the government in Serbia, instigated by the tragic events in Novi Sad in November, in which newly constructed roofing at the central train station collapsed killing fifteen people. These protests, led by students under the red hand motif, are challenging corner cutting and corruption, understood to be a factor causing the tragic Novi Sad railway collapse, and demanding accountability from the state. Since then, protests have gathered numbers and momentum, with the Novi Sad catastrophe becoming emblematic of widespread discontent towards corruption, incompetence, and cultures of oppression within the government - akin to the 'flower protests' of 2023.



Student Protests in Belgrade. Source: Anonymous



This is the largest anti-government movement Serbia has seen since the fall of Slobadan Milošević in 2000, and arguably the largest student-led protest in Europe since 1968. So far, tens of thousands have taken to the streets, with street blockades lasting days, universities have been occupied, and being called in the agriculture, legal, and education sectors.

One way authorities are policing the movement is through high-tech surveillance techniques, notably International Mobile Subscriber Identity -Catchers or IMSI catchers- these are often portable devices which impersonate cellphone towers and indiscriminately identify and geolocate users of mobile devices within a localised area. It is known that the Serbian state has bought over 20 of these devices in the past decade including a catcher from a Swiss company for over two hundred million euros in October 2023. IMSI catchers - or stingrays - have been used elsewhere in the contexts of border surveillance. Currently, there is no legal basis or regulation that supports the use of IMSI catchers in Serbia - in either the context of the protests or border 'management'.

This is not the first time the Serbian state has demonstrated its readiness in using advanced surveillance technologies on its civil population. The state has gradually installed high-tech CCTV cameras with facial recognition capabilities in various Serbian towns and cities. Meanwhile, an attempt to equip Belgrade with a system for indiscriminate real-time biometric data collection was blocked by data protection rights organizations due to a lack of legal basis.



Red Hand Motif Banner at Student Protests in Serbia.
Photo by Cansu Hangül



The system would have been provided by Chinese tech firm Huawei as part of their 'Smart city solution service' – Huawei is banned in the US and from 5G networks in the UK due to data security concerns. Further, a December report from Amnesty International confirmed that the Serbian state had installed and used spyware onto the phones of activists to surveil and suppress their movements.

There is serious likelihood that similar technologies are used and possibly tested on migrant populations described by the state as threats to national security. Serbia already has access to an arsenal of border surveillance technologies, some of which has been supplied using EU accession funds such as IPA, as well as procured or gifted by IOM.

On the perimeter of the Obrenovac asylum facility on the outskirts of Belgrade a surveillance camera produced by the Chinese tech company Dahua is visible. The model is part of the ITC413-PW4D Series, and according to its spec uses 'deep learning' and AI.

Dahua offers remote biometric data collection add-ons to their surveillance systems such as AI driven facial recognition – it appears that the model visible outside of Obrenovac is compatible with this software add-on. It is unclear whether this remote biometric data system is used in Obrenovac or other facilities, and if so, where the data is stored and who can access it.

Testimonies of pushbacks and internal violence show that the practice of mobile phone confiscation is almost the modus operandi by Serbian authorities when POM are apprehended. Testimonies also show that the extraction of biometric data (fingerprints) is commonplace. Given the state's history of installing spyware on activists' devices and its eagerness to collect biometric data, concerns grow over its potential use against POM and the remote extraction of biometric data in state reception centers already equipped for it.



Surveillance Camera in Obrenovac.
Source: Collective Aid



In opposition to demands for transparency and accountability from protesters in Serbia, procurement documents for various technical items from the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migrations (SCRM) to supply asylum and reception/transit centres are opaque. They are published on their website as *'Procurements to which the Public Procurement Act does not apply'* – meaning the technical specifications of the items and details of tender winners are not made public. These items include video surveillance systems, IT systems, social media monitoring services, and registration services – all of which have the potential to exploit the use of developing and experimental technologies such as AI and remote biometric data gathering from POM.

Update from the Hungarian border

In the first four weeks of January 2025, the Hungarian border police published that a total of 379 people have been pushed back at the border with Serbia. In their public statistics the Hungarian border police refer to their pushbacks as *"arrested and escorted through the IBH gate"* – the IBH refers to the provisional border security barrier, the border fence that covers most of the border between Hungary and Serbia. Although a useful statistic, the numbers published here only account for *'official'* pushbacks whereby official border gates. Testimonies of pushbacks collected on Serbia's northern border within the BVMN database account for people being forced to go back through holes in the fence, or other unofficial crossing points – therefore, the actual number of people pushed back is likely higher than those published by the Hungarian state.

Statistics provided by the Hungarian border police in January 2024 show that 86 people were pushed back 'through the IBH gate'. Whereas over the same January period in 2023, 4,676 people were shown to have been pushed back in this manner.

The 2025 statistics show that, more than a year after the 2023 winter special operation on the Serbian-Hungarian border – a violent military action that significantly altered migration patterns in Serbia – more people are again attempting to cross this border into the EU. However, compared to January 2023 data, the number of crossings remains significantly lower, highlighting the operation's lasting impact on migration in Serbia. Despite all this, the definite illegality and frequent violence during pushbacks at this border remain.



The testimony of a man from Afghanistan in his early 20s, collected by Collective Aid in Belgrade the previous month, details typical violent and degrading practices Hungarian police exercise on people on the move during pushbacks and detention:

The man had crossed the border into Hungary from Serbia as part of a group of 20 - within which were women and children. At around 6am the group were apprehended by allegedly 15 uniformed Hungarian border police officers in two marked police vans.

The respondent described the officers as being angry, aggressive, and violent. Five or six men from the group were subjected to beatings with batons. They were struck on their arms, legs, and feet. Children in the group were crying.

The group were forced into the two police vans. After spending six hours in the vans the group were taken to a Hungarian police station in which they were detained for a total of three days. During the first night he was denied access to the toilet and was not given any food or water. In response to requests he was told by the officers he could pay for food and water if he had any - he did not. Belongings of the group were confiscated during detention, and photo and fingerprints were taken from the group. No interpreters or explanations were provided at any point.

After the third day of detention the respondent was taken to the Preševo reception and transit centre (RTC) in the south of Serbia near the north Macedonia border. The items were returned after the group had been pushed back.

The Serbian civil society organisation Asylum Protection Center (APC) stated on X this month that POM keep being pushed back from Hungary to Serbia, where they are detained at the Horgoš border crossing for 12-24 hours before being taken to the Preševo or Bujanovac RTC's - once there are enough people to fill a bus (50). This reportedly occurs in the presence of Frontex.



Families seem to stay less time in the ad-hoc detention facility and are taken to police stations in relatively nearby Subotica and Kikinda, where biometric data such as fingerprints and photographs are taken before they receive camp registration cards.



Serbian-Hungarian Border. Source: Collective Aid

Greenlight to Frontex expansion

On January 21st the enhanced status agreement between Frontex and Serbia was ratified by the European parliament. The new agreement was written up in May 2024 and made public in June of the same year. What is significant about the enhanced agreement is that it allows the agency to have personnel deployed at Serbia's non-EU borders - previously their operations were limited to EU borders with Hungary, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania, now the agreement includes borders with North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia, and Kosovo. A greenlight from MEPs on the enhanced cooperation between Frontex and Serbia reflects changes to migration patterns in Serbia - previously highlighted by BVMN - as well as meeting deliverables within the EU action plan on the Western Balkans.



Frontex's expansion of activities in Serbia is a concerning development. Similarly to previous agreements with Serbia, as well as other signed cooperations between Frontex and third-countries at large, the new agreement generally lacks transparency concerning key details – namely regarding the operational activities of Frontex. Most specific determinations to the extents of Frontex activities – such as the the level of force permitted to be used by Frontex officers, as well as what tactical equipment personnel have access to – is conditional to what Frontex's operational activities in Serbia are.

Whilst the operational activities of Frontex remain opaque within the current and previous status agreements with Serbia, the door is left wide open for Frontex officers to perpetrate violence on Serbia's borders, and allowing access to Frontex' arsenal of high tech surveillance equipment. Already, testimonies from Serbia have highlighted the presence of Frontex at both pushbacks and the violent evictions of living sites. As the lack of transparency remains, the ability to properly scrutinise the activities of Frontex is very limited – this is surely a tactic of the agency to enable impunity on EU and non-EU borders.

The EU's border policing agency also plays a crucial role in third-countries like Serbia as a facilitator for the interoperability of databases. This is of particular concern considering the documented ill practices of biometric data extraction by Serbian state authorities. For instance, fingerprints are often reported to have been taken by force and without explanation or access to a translator. What the purpose of these extraction tactics, where biometrics are stored, and who has access are unknown.

It is also worth noting that this month the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (SCRM) – who manage both the asylum and reception / transit centres in Serbia – accused Frontex of guessing their published migration statistics for 2024, due to discrepancies in their annual stats.



Frontex in Horgoš. Source: Collective Aid.



General trends

During the month of January, 481 people were registered across the four temporary reception centres (TRCs) in the country, a significantly lower number if compared to previous months and the same period last year (2,953). This decline confirms a downward trend observed since last August, whose causes may not only be found in the colder and more challenging weather conditions, but also in local, regional and EU-level developments. As highlighted in last year's BVMN monthly reports, these factors shaped migration dynamics during the year and are expected to continue impacting trends in 2025 too. Notable examples include the initialling of the Frontex Status Agreement last December, as well as consistent funding by the EU under the Instrument of Pre-Accession (IPA) to strengthen border surveillance and infrastructure, support border police and provide specialized equipment for border management.

In the TRCs, the leading nationalities remain Morocco, Afghanistan, Syria, Egypt, Algeria, and Iran, and a significant number of individuals who have arrived from Azerbaijan. The relatively low number of registrations within reception centers can be attributed to a shift in migration patterns. An increasing number of individuals are opting for more expensive journeys that involve accommodation in private housing, which effectively prevents them from being captured by the registration processes. Moreover, reports have indicated an increased presence of individuals, particularly from China and Turkey, who enter Bosnia with regular visas and then attempt to cross the border with Croatia. Many of these people are employed by foreign companies operating in Bosnia, particularly in the infrastructure sector.

Lastly, after the severe snowstorm in December, which resulted in the complete disruption of services and the total isolation of the Lipa camp, an evacuation was carried out, and the affected individuals were temporarily transferred to the Borici camp. On January 9th 2025, the group was relocated back to TRC Lipa.

Shifting camp management: health challenges

The transition from IOM-managed temporary reception facilities to a state-led migration response began in 2021, but its practical effects only became evident last September, when the Red Cross Society of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in close cooperation with the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees (MHRR), took over the distribution of water, sanitation and hygiene facilities (WASH) in TRC Lipa and TRC Blažuj. Since then, IOM continued providing support to ensure a smooth transition.



On January 16th, 2025, the MHRR, the Red Cross Society of BiH, and the IOM signed a Cooperation Protocol to enhance humanitarian services in temporary reception centers and address migration challenges. Aligned with BiH's 2021-25 Migration and Asylum Strategy, the protocol focuses on strengthening institutional capacities. To support this, IOM will provide MHRR with vehicles, IT equipment, and funding for two officers in Una-Sana and Sarajevo cantons, where the TRCs are located.

This shift in camp management also brings new protocols regarding medical aid within the reception centres. On January 27th, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the Ministry of Civil Affairs of BiH, the Federal Ministry of Health, the Sarajevo Canton Ministry of Health, the Una Sana Canton Ministry of Health and Social Policy and IOM, on the provision of primary and secondary public health protection services to POM within the reception centres. The purpose of this agreement is to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their origin, have access to the same quality of care.

Within the TRCs, the Red Cross is not responsible for first aid. In TRC Blažuj, doctors from the public health service visit two to three times a week for general check-ups, while in TRC Lipa, doctors are available almost every weekday during working hours. However, residents of TRC Blažuj have reported that this is often insufficient, leaving them to manage medical emergencies and chronic conditions independently. This is a significant concern, given the high number of people suffering from mental health issues and severe injuries, including broken bones and amputations, reportedly caused by police violence or accidents on the dangerous route they are forced to take.

Hopefully, the new MoU will improve medical care for POM in Bosnia, which MVI, in a November 2024 interview with Collective Aid, described as inadequate and discriminatory. They reported that ambulances often refuse to visit border areas around Bihać, and medicine shortages persist across the country. Additionally, POM are frequently denied medical treatment due to a lack of approval from the Emergency Centre, a requirement for hospital access. Even when hospital care is granted, they must arrange their own transport, even for urgent and severe injuries, with taxis often charging disproportionate fees.

Language barriers further complicate access to care. When MVI attempts to coordinate transport to hospitals via the *Emergency Centre* but reaches a non-English-speaking worker, the necessary medical assistance is often denied. Forms of discrimination have also been reported in treatment itself. Though this is not always the case, there have been instances in which people were discharged before MVI deemed appropriate, thus compromising the effectiveness of the treatment they received.



New EU-aligned laws

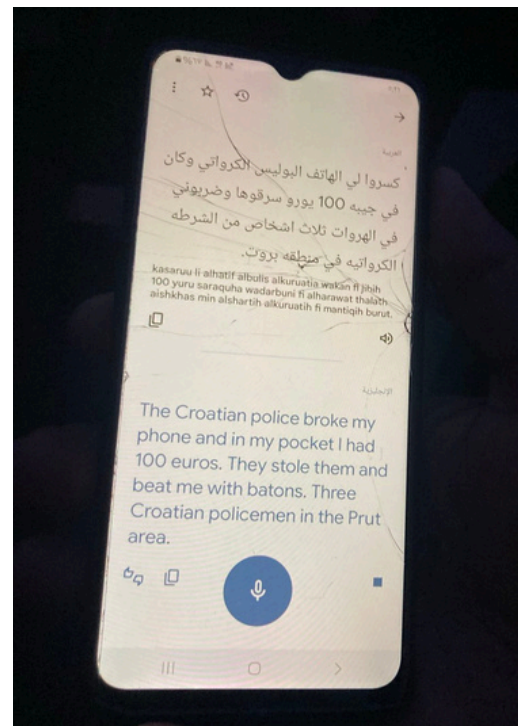
On January 23rd, the House of Representatives of Bosnia and Herzegovina passed new EU-aligned laws on border control and personal data protection, which are expected to significantly impact POM in the country. The border control law is designed to “strengthen the country’s capacity to address security challenges and threats at its border”, including cross-border crime and irregular migration”. It covers a range of topics such as border checks, the responsibilities of border control agencies, the management of border areas, and international border cooperation. Additionally, it regulates issues such as the transfer of weapons and the collection of personal data.

While the full impact on migration of BiH’s newly adopted border control law remains to be seen, its alignment with EU policies suggests it will likely follow a familiar trajectory. The EU’s general approach to migration prioritizes securitization and externalization, which places increasing barriers and challenges in the path of people seeking refuge. Within this framework, with stricter migration policies as a key prerequisite for BiH’s accession into the EU, it is likely that the new law will create a more restrictive environment, including an increasing focus on tightening border controls and enhancing security measures.

Violent pushbacks from Croatia to Bosnia persist

This month, many people residing in TRC Blažuj in Sarajevo reported being subjected to violent pushbacks from Croatia to Bosnia. The most recurrent pattern involves Croatian police confiscating or destroying people’s phones, a practice which deprives people of their independence and access to essential services such as Google Maps, as well as contact with their loved ones.

Additionally, people consistently reported being beaten with sticks and batons. Many have decided to delay crossing the border as conditions grow increasingly dangerous, while some others are seeking alternative routes.



Conversation excerpt with a person on the move.
Source: Collective Aid



The Collective Aid field team in Sarajevo also received reports of a fatal incident at the Izačić border checkpoint between January 20th and 26th. A man attempting to cross the border had hidden beneath a truck without the driver's knowledge. During police controls, he reportedly lost his grip or position and was tragically run over. While the exact circumstances remain unclear, preliminary accounts confirm that the incident resulted in his death.

A 19-year-old Syrian man told Collective Aid volunteers that he was pushed back from Croatia five times. BVMN reporters also heard testimonies of groups being hit in the face with guns and batons; one respondent showed us a deep cut on his forehead, inflicted during such beatings.



Necklace broken by Croatian police during pushback.
Source: Collective Aid

Additionally, we documented a pushback from December in which Croatian police unleashed their dogs on a group of 18 men and forced some into a river, despite the freezing weather at the time. The respondent recalled experiencing racist abuse, having his phone and money stolen, and his necklaces broken. One officer extinguished a cigarette on his ankle, leaving a scar, which we were shown. The group was then arrested and detained for twelve days, during which they were beaten, tortured – both physically and psychologically – and given just one meal a day consisting of a piece of cheese and a slice of bread. Finally, they were blindfolded, driven to the Bosnian border, and left in a forest, where police dogs attacked them again. They wandered for a day before reaching a Bosnian village, where they finally found help.



Full Schengen accession

On January 1st, Bulgaria and Romania became full members of the Schengen area, with the inclusion of their land borders. Until now both countries had only been granted partial accession by air and sea.

For a while now, and especially since March 2024, the EU has been ramping up the intensity of securitisation at the Bulgarian and EU external border with Turkey, in preparation for the country's full Schengen accession. This has included bolstering of both Frontex personnel and surveillance technologies in the area, in line with the associated cooperation framework, as previously reported by BVMN.

Historically, Bulgaria's now high-tech border has been synonymous with pushbacks and other human rights violations. Such abuses have continued alongside the additional securitisation of this border. Since March 2024, BVMN member organisations have collected numerous testimonies of violent pushbacks in circumstances that amount to torture. In some instances, these pushbacks have been facilitated by surveillance technologies, such as remote sensors. Several investigations and whistleblowers have also divulged that Frontex officers have been purposely kept away from so-called 'hot spot' areas, as well as reportedly intimidated into silence by the Bulgarian border guard.

Such illegal violent practices are not new at this border. Similar testimonies of abuses have been reported for nearly a decade now. Moreover, the EU-funded increased militarisation of the Bulgarian-Turkish border both legitimises and facilitates human rights violations using taxpayers money. Bulgaria's full Schengen accession has also resulted in the normalisation of racially driven identity checks at internal EU borders between the country and Greece and Romania, vindicated by the 2024 changes to the Schengen borders code. The revised Schengen borders code encourages extensive patrols and identity checks also at Schengen internal borders, which will increasingly include the collection of biometrics and use of AI facial recognition technologies. BVMN is a signatory in a collective call condemning the harmful Schengen borders code.

Worryingly, the EU's AI act, which aims to address the risks of AI technologies, has left the door open to the use of experimental AI at Schengen borders, even though AI facial recognition systems are already proven to be racially biased against those who are non-white.



Bulgaria and Romania's Schengen accession sees a continuation of the systematic disregard to human rights laws, as well as the expansion of racist and harmful EU policies, increasing violence against people on the move at Schengen external and internal border crossings.

Protests at Harmanli camp

People living in Bulgaria's biggest asylum centre in Harmanli, a town close to the border with Turkey, began a protest on January 20th against the mass rejection of Syrian asylum claims. They also called on the Bulgarian and European authorities to take urgent action against the hostile and degrading policies and conditions which govern their lives.

As mentioned in our December monthly report, following the fall of the Assad regime, Bulgarian authorities interrogated around 200 Syrian people residing in asylum camps, including women and children, and coerced them into signing voluntary return documents. They were not provided with translations nor explanations of the documents. Authorities sought to obtain forced confessions from asylum seekers that Syria had become a safe country, and people were asked whether they were happy with the fall of the regime. Their affirmative answers were then used as evidence against them to be forcibly returned to Syria, undermining their right to seek asylum and protection from persecution.

According to some brief conversations members of BVMN organisations had with IOM staff, there is no official plan for Syrian asylum seekers in Bulgaria yet. However, as protestors denounced, in the last few weeks there has been a de facto systematic rejection of Syrian nationals' asylum claims in Bulgaria after months of waiting. Therefore, these decisions seem to have been based on the change of leadership in the country, rather than on individual circumstances, as should be the case.

People living in Harmanli camp are calling for support and solidarity as they demand justice in the face of the systematic violation of their rights and an end to their confinement in hostile and degrading living conditions. Moreover, residents of the facility told us that they are being denied access to journalists to discuss their demands and reasons to protest. Despite this, they are standing firm. The Rotte Balcaniche Collective has published a full list of the protesters' demands, which we have summarized here.



Firstly, they want to be granted residency and for Bulgarian courts to acknowledge that Syria is not currently safe. In addition, they advocate for the issuing of ID cards, permits to leave the camp during the day and work permits for students and asylum seekers.

Secondly, they demand that people who obtain a third refusal to their asylum claims are not imprisoned, but rather given time to leave the country; those rejected should also be ensured fair treatment in court and be allowed to speak and defend themselves.

Moreover, they are calling for the improvement of living conditions within the camp, including medical services and food, which are considered as inadequate.

Most of the people we have spoken to have told us that they try to cook or eat outside the facility because the food standards are very poor. There are also not enough shower and toilet facilities, and those which do exist remain dirty. Despite freezing temperatures, the camp is being heated for only one hour a day. Even in these unacceptable circumstances, residents report that the accommodation provided in Harmanli is still better compared to centres in Sofia, which people describe as “horrible”.

The people in the Harmanli camp are fighting for justice and better treatment for people on the move across the whole country and plan to continue with the protests until the Bulgarian authorities allow their voices to be heard.

Three minors killed by Bulgarian border: report summary

In late December 2024, three Egyptian minors —Ahmed Samra (16), Ahmed Elawdan (17), and Seifalla Elbeltagy (15)— tragically lost their lives due to hypothermia near the Bulgarian-Turkish border. [This report](#), compiled by No Name Kitchen (NNK) and Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche (CRB), delves into the circumstances leading to their deaths, highlighting negligence and obstruction by Bulgarian authorities.



On December 27th, 2024, the three boys attempted to cross into Bulgaria through the dense forests of Burgas. Facing sub-zero temperatures, they became lost and distressed, prompting them to contact an emergency hotline operated by humanitarian organizations. The organizations, upon receiving the distress signals and GPS coordinates, immediately alerted Bulgarian emergency services and initiated their own rescue efforts.

Despite being provided with precise locations and the urgent nature of the situation, Bulgarian border police reportedly hindered rescue operations. Reports indicate that authorities ignored emergency calls and obstructed humanitarian teams attempting to reach the boys. One of the boys was found with "dog paw prints and boot prints around his body," suggesting that border police may have discovered him, either alive or deceased, but chose to leave him in the cold. Activists who later returned to the scene found that all traces of these prints had been erased.

The report further details systematic harassment of rescue teams by Bulgarian border police, such as the confiscation of passports and phones, forced strip searches – including a female activist who was made to undress in front of officers – and vandalism of rescue vehicles, with windows smashed and screws inserted into engines to disable them. Other intimidation tactics, such as forcing activists to walk miles to the nearest town while being followed by border police vehicles, have also been described.

The actions of the Bulgarian authorities, as detailed in the report, raise significant legal and human rights concerns. The deliberate obstruction of rescue efforts and the harassment of humanitarian workers may constitute violations of both Bulgarian law and international human rights standards. NNK and CRB have called for an independent investigation into these incidents to ensure accountability and justice for the three boys and to prevent future tragedies.

The deaths of Ahmed Samra, Ahmed Elawdan, and Seifalla Elbeltagy underscore the perilous conditions faced by migrants at Europe's borders and highlight systemic issues within border enforcement agencies. The report urges European civil society and policymakers to reflect on these events and to take immediate action to uphold human rights and prevent further loss of life.



Trends at the Polish–Belarusian border

Aid workers and volunteers have been collecting information on requests for help from people travelling across the Polish–Belarusian border since the beginning of September 2021. By the end of 2024, over 22,000 such requests had been registered.

In January 2024, the typical low number of requests for assistance for the winter months continued. For 9 days, the temperature in Białowieża did not exceed 0 °C, while on warmer days it reached a maximum of 7 °C. It rained or snowed in the Białowieża Forest for 15 out of the 31 January days. People who attempt to cross the border in winter are much more likely to suffer serious injury, hospitalisation or even death from hypothermia.

Despite bad weather conditions, several accounts reported that there are still people on the move trapped in the strip between the Polish and Belarusian border barriers*. We have also received further reports from people who have been pushed back despite their declared desire to apply for protection in Poland.

This month, We Are Monitoring recorded reports from 223 people traveling in 112 groups. Women accounted for as much as 18% of the total number of reports, while minors accounted for nearly 6% of all requests for assistance (8 of the 13 minors recorded in January were travelling not accompanied by a legal guardian or carer).

74 out of a total of 223 requests were from people declaring Somalia as their country of origin, 21 people from Ethiopia, 20 from Congo, 14 from Sudan and 13 from Cameroon. For the past several months, since the summer of 2024, the vast majority of requests have come from people from African countries. Before that, people from Middle Eastern countries accounted for the majority of requests in a given month.

*In addition to the 5,5 metres high Polish barrier, there is also a smaller fence on the Belarusian side delineating a strip of land, mostly about 1 kilometre wide, most of which lies on the Belarusian territory (the Polish wall is not built directly on the border, so there is a narrow strip between the border and the wall, which lies on the Polish territory and where people on the move should be able to request asylum. However, this is usually not respected). This zone between Polish and Belarusian barriers is controlled by Belarusian forces. People on the move are often trapped there, unable to cross the border to Poland (or being pushed back numerous times) and not allowed by the Belarusian forces to withdraw to Minsk or other Belarusian cities. This zone is often referred to by people on the move with an Arabic word muharrama – no man's land.



The vast majority of groups that requested humanitarian aid in January were located on the eastern side of the barrier when contact was made. Six groups were located in the strip between the barriers. These groups comprised a total of 24 people, including one child and three women, one of whom was pregnant. We emphasise that these figures are not complete and do not allow us to estimate, even approximately, the actual number of people stuck in the strip at any given time.

It is worth noting that more than 25% of all those asking for support declared a need for medical assistance. Among those contacting from Belarus, there were repeated accounts describing health issues – exhaustion caused by prolonged stay in the forest during winter, injuries from beatings and injuries acquired during attempts to cross the barrier.

There are handicapped people among us [...] There is a woman who was beaten up and she keeps bleeding. I received a blow to the head.

Excerpt from a conversation with a Cameroonian man staying with 5 others
on the east side of the border barrier, January 2025.

Unfortunately, even returning to the major cities of Belarus does not ensure safety and access to medical aid. People on the move contacting aid workers from Minsk and other places, report a lack of access to asylum procedures and health care, as well as insufficient capacity of the few independent aid organisations.

This month, humanitarian organizations also received reports of pushbacks from 45 people traveling in 24 groups. This number includes two minors and five women. 18 of these individuals experienced more than one pushback to Belarus. As in previous months, pushbacks were accompanied by brutal violence by Polish border guards. Individuals described primarily: physical and verbal violence, extortion, humiliation, intimidation, and theft and destruction of property. One of the men who contacted the organization in early January reported his experience at the Polish border:



Polish forces beat us every time we ask for asylum. When I was in trouble at the border between Belarus and Poland, I had the opportunity to cross into Poland for help. But I met the police when I asked for asylum, the police in Poland beat me. They threw me back as I was very sick.

[...]

But every time the Polish border troops beat me, they threw me into Belarus. They turned me away 11 times when I asked for help and asylum in Poland.

It is important to note that in the accounts of people on the move there are repeated descriptions about the increased violence of Belarusian border guards when a person returns to the eastern side of the border barrier after experiencing pushback.

I was shot Poland army me and my friend [...] Belarusian kills me, their dog bites me and army kill me. [...] They kill me and they back to me in Belarus.

Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Somalia, January 2025.

I was captured by Belarusian guards and subjected to beatings and cold water spraying—some of the worst torture—before being deported to Lithuania's borders.

Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Sudan, January 2025.

Processing the suspension of the Right to International Protection

On October 12th, 2024, the Civic Coalition held a convention in Warsaw, during which Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced the introduction of a migration strategy for Poland. The most controversial element of this announcement was the proposal to temporarily suspend the right to asylum in specific territories (in practice—suspending



the right to submit applications for international protection). Three days later, during a Council of Ministers meeting, the document “Regaining Control. Ensuring Security. A Comprehensive and Responsible Migration Strategy for Poland 2025-2030” was presented. During the same session, a resolution was adopted to approve the document. The strategy was made public. From October to December, various organizations and stakeholders voiced their criticism of the strategy, including Polish and international NGOs, UNHCR and academic institutions.

On December 11th, 2024, the Government Legislation Center published a draft bill amending the existing Act on Granting Protection to Foreigners on the Territory of the Republic of Poland. The core change proposed is the introduction of temporary, territorial suspension of the right to apply for international protection in response to migration instrumentalization by Belarus or Russia.

This suspension would be introduced through a regulation issued by the Council of Ministers (a lower-ranking legal act than a law). According to the draft, the following conditions must be met for the suspension of the right to apply for international protection:

1. Instrumentalization of migration is occurring;
2. Actions taken as part of migration instrumentalization pose a serious and real threat to national security or public safety;
3. Temporarily restricting the right to apply for international protection is necessary to prevent internal destabilization, and no other measures are sufficient to mitigate the threat.

The bill also specifies that the suspension would not apply to certain categories of persons (unless they had to be subjected to direct coercive measures or the use of weapons), namely:

1. Unaccompanied minors;
2. Pregnant women;
3. Persons requiring special treatment, particularly due to their age or health condition;
4. Persons whom the Border Guard determines would face a risk of serious harm in the country from which they arrived directly to Poland (currently Belarus, and potentially in the future, Russia’s Kaliningrad region);
5. Citizens of the country engaging in migration instrumentalization if they arrive in Poland from that country’s territory (currently Belarusian citizens).



On January 9th, 2025, the first reading of the bill took place in the Sejm (Polish Parliament's lower house). The bill was referred for further work in the parliamentary committee. Due to public pressure, MPs in the committee agreed to hold a public hearing, allowing civil society representatives to express their opinions on the bill. The hearing took place on February 4th. The proposed amendments faced overwhelming criticism from participants. Out of the dozens of entities that spoke, only the far-right think tank Ordo Iuris supported the bill. Unfortunately, the committee approved the bill the following day. The second reading in the Sejm's plenary session is scheduled for later in February. Human rights organizations expect that the bill will be passed and enter into force at the next legislative stages.

Violation of National and International Law

A wide range of legal and human rights organizations, including the Commissioner for Human Rights, Children's Rights Ombudsman, UNHCR Representative in Poland, Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Amnesty International, the National Bar Council, and the National Chamber of Legal Advisors, argue that the proposed legislation violates the Polish Constitution, as well as international law. A fundamental concern is that the draft law breaches the principle of non-refoulement.

Risks to Children and Families

Children's rights experts (including the Ombudsman for Children's Rights and NGOs such as Save the Children) emphasize that the list of exempted "vulnerable groups" is incomplete. For example, only unaccompanied minors are listed—not all children. If a family consisting of a pregnant woman, her husband, and their children were traveling together, only the pregnant woman would have the right to apply for protection, creating a serious risk of family separation.

Lack of Competence among Border Authorities

Organizations operating in Podlasie and working directly with the Border Guard (including Doctors Without Borders) highlight concerns about arbitrary decision-making regarding who qualifies for special treatment due to health conditions.

- Border Guard officers lack medical training and expertise in identifying victims of torture or trauma.
- Migrants are often apprehended at night, in forests, under stressful conditions, making proper assessment impossible.



- The mental health impact on Border Guard officers and other uniformed personnel is also severe— recent media reports indicate increasing rates of alcoholism and suicides among the Polish Army personnel deployed on the Belarusian border.

Experts warn that the proposed law would institutionalize the current legal uncertainty and abuses at the border.

Legal Ambiguity and Risk of Political Manipulation

NGOs and the Sejm Legislative Bureau point out that the draft lacks precision. For instance, the key term "migration instrumentalization" is so vaguely defined that it opens the door for arbitrary government decisions on when to suspend access to asylum. Critics fear that the Council of Ministers could introduce a suspension based on vague, undefined criteria — potentially for political convenience. Poland is currently in an election period, and anti-migration discourses are frequently used as a political tool. The suspension mechanism could be enacted for short-term political gains.

Criminalization of solidarity

On March 22nd, 2022, four activists were detained by the Polish Border Guard officers while attempting to assist a nine-member family from Iraq and an Egyptian citizen. The Border Guard stopped them in their vehicles, when they tried to give the family a short ride away from the border.

The four were charged with organizing an illegal border crossing, a crime punishable under Polish law by up to 8 years in prison. On the same day, the police searched the home and property of a resident of Podlasie, who was also engaged in humanitarian aid efforts. The prosecution filed a request for pretrial detention for three months, but the District Court in Hajnówka rejected the request, stating that there was no evidence to justify such serious charges and no grounds for detention.

After nearly 72 hours in custody, only three of them left the court building. One of them, who held a passport from an EU country other than Poland, was re-detained by the Border Guard, which—within a few hours—issued a surprising and highly controversial decision ordering him to leave Poland and imposing a five-year entry ban. The justification was that the activist allegedly posed a threat to Poland's security.



Over a year later, in December 2023, the Hajnówka Prosecutor's Office changed the charges – instead of organizing an illegal border crossing, they were now accused of facilitating the stay of persons who had crossed the Polish border irregularly. They also added the resident of Podlasie as a defendant. Previously, she had only been a witness in the case.

On January 28th, 2025, the trial began with the first hearing. Before opening the trial, the court held a lottery to determine which media representatives would be allowed in the courtroom, citing high media interest and limited space. The court then rejected the defense's motion to dismiss the criminal proceedings and spent nearly an hour deliberating behind closed doors on the prosecution's request to fully exclude public access to the trial. The public prosecutor argued that revealing case details could compromise national security. Eventually, the court decided on partial exclusion—meaning that the final part of the first hearing took place without public access. The trial was adjourned, but no new date was set.

Four of the five defendants appeared in court (the fifth remains abroad, having been expelled from Poland as part of this case). They agreed to have their names and images made public. One of the accused described the harsh realities at the Belarusian border: "Pushing people back from Polish territory into Belarus is, in essence, complicity in attempted murder with white gloves."

Both in court statements and at solidarity protests outside the courthouse, speakers emphasized the brutality of Border Guard officers against people on the move and the total impunity of law enforcement. At one protest, a testimony from Cumar, a Somali refugee, was read aloud. After crossing the Polish border, he was beaten, robbed, and forcibly pushed back.

This case is not an isolated incident, rather it aligns with a wider European trend of criminalizing solidarity. As EU states tighten migration policies, humanitarian organizations and volunteers are increasingly facing intimidation and criminal charges in several countries.



Violent pushback at Evros border, use of people on the move as police auxiliaries

During January, field reporters based in Thessaloniki documented a testimony of an Iranian national who was pushed back by Greek authorities in December 2024, just weeks before a landmark ruling by the European Court of Human Rights condemning Greece for systematic pushbacks at the Evros border between Greece and Turkey. In the reported pushback, the respondent was in a group of 9 individuals including minors and the pregnant wife of the man describing the incident. In line with [previous](#) and now [extensive reporting](#) on violent pushback operations at the Evros border, this pushback involved the confiscation of the group's phones, theft of money, and physical violence inflicted by police auxiliaries at the site of the pushback, including extended kicking, beating with a stick/baton, threats of rape and forced undressing. This violence was reportedly inflicted by Farsi-speaking police auxiliaries, who wore face coverings during the whole operation and also drove the boats which transported the group across the Evros river and back into Turkish territory. The practice of Greek authorities using auxiliaries from migrant backgrounds has been consistently documented by BVMN since late 2020 (see, for instance, [here](#) and [here](#)) and in a 2022 investigation by [Human Rights Watch](#). Previous testimonies [documented by BVMN](#) indicate that these individuals may be incentivised by the offer of residency documents, in exchange for working for the police.

Analysis of policing practices in Thessaloniki during 2024

Throughout 2024, BVMN field reporters in Northern Greece noted a rise in pre-emptive police operations in Thessaloniki and increasingly aggressive tactics used by the police force, with what appears to be a particular focus on marginalised groups. The local actions of the police in Thessaloniki seem to mirror an increase throughout Greece of hostile police operational methods against the public.

In Thessaloniki, there has been a significant increase in operations aimed at ["Increasing Citizens' Sense of Security"](#), which are most frequently carried out in areas of the city with large numbers of Roma residents, third country nationals (TCNs), low income or precarious housing and other marginalised population groups. The police's own reports make clear that these actions are not due to any evidence of a crime having taken place initially, nor is there an outstanding warrant or a specific individual that they are searching for, but rather, broad 'stop and search' operations. Moreover, looking at the statistics within the police's own reports, outlining how many people and



vehicles are checked, how many people are taken into custody and how many of these are then charged, it seems as though there is a high level of general police harassment of individuals, without justification. The frequent inclusion of officers from the 'Directorate of Aliens' further suggests that TCNs are a specific target of these operations.

During 2024, BVMN also noted a rise in the number of operations aimed at "Combating Illegal Outdoor Trade and Sale of Counterfeit Goods", concentrated in areas with large Roma and TCN populations. Again, the ratio of searches to arrests – high numbers of people searched, very few fines handed out and even fewer arrests or charges – indicates that these operations primarily serve to harass specific communities.

November and December 2024 and January 2025 additionally saw a surge in police operations specifically aimed at "Identifying Delinquency and Illegal Stay". These operations were carried out in a range of neighbourhoods, but with a notable focus on areas where there are squats, populations of people experiencing homelessness, as well as TCNs residing.

As reported in December's Monthly Report, BVMN's member in Thessaloniki has collected first-hand reports of public police harassment of third-country-nationals, even when they have been granted asylum in Greece. The respondents report that despite carrying documentation proving that they are not in breach of 'illegal stay' regulations, they are nonetheless subjected to frequent checks by police for no obvious reason other than to humiliate, harass or intimidate them.

These types of actions are indicative of a broader context of police violence towards the public in Greece, which includes frequent aggressive tactics and heavy handed policing at peaceful demonstrations. The death in police custody of a Pakistani national in September last year is also part of this concerning picture. There is rising public anger about the ongoing lack of official responses, inquiries or accountability for deaths and injuries at the hands of police officers in recent years, which is culminating in joint campaigns by the families of the victims.

Ongoing poor conditions in mainland Greek refugee camps and detention centres

Over the month of January, BVMN member organisation Mobile Info Team (MIT) continued to receive reports from people residing in refugee camps and pre-removal detention centres on mainland Greece, who have been facing dire conditions for



months. Recurring complaints denounce that both kinds of facilities are failing to meet basic and dignified living standards. MIT received an increase in complaints from the open camp facilities of Serres and Sintiki in particular, with people in the latter reporting that they are extremely isolated from support as the camp is 50km away from the nearest urban centre. The remote location of many mainland camps is a huge obstacle to accessing support services which are not available in camps – including specialised healthcare treatment, and some legal services. In addition, families living in Sintiki reported that they have not received the monthly cash payments they are legally entitled to as asylum seekers since registering their asylum claim, adding another obstacle to reaching services outside the camp (free transport from camps to cities is frequently unavailable or interrupted). In fact, the last cash payments issued to asylum seekers in Greece were for June 2024, meaning that thousands have been living without an income for over 6 months, with no official announcement from the Ministry regarding when they can expect payments to resume.

During January, MIT was in contact with tens of people detained in pre-removal facilities on the mainland, most of whom expressed severe distress at their prolonged detention in appalling conditions, which was also perceived to be unjustified. Messages from detention centres in northern Greece – where conditions are frequently dilapidated, unhygienic and overcrowded – indicate that there is an ongoing critical lack of non-food items (NFIs), with several people requesting basic items such as clothes, soap and shampoo. Greece continues to detain thousands of third country nationals every year, raising serious concerns of arbitrariness both for the reasons provided for detention and the extremely prolonged time periods, which exceed one year in many cases. Nationalities which make up the majority of people detained in Greece, including Moroccans, Algerians and Egyptians, face a very low prospect of removal, indicating that prolonged detention is often used without justification.

14 years after landmark ruling, Greece still fails to comply with judgement from the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)

I Have Rights, Equal Legal Aid, and Mobile Info Team submitted evidence to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, highlighting Greece's continued failure to fully implement the M.S.S. v. Belgium and Greece judgment, 14 years after the ruling. The submission raised concerns over inadequate reception conditions, de facto detention, lack of protection for vulnerable groups, and restricted access to fair asylum procedures and legal aid in reception facilities across Greece.



The AI Act: Securing borders, not rights

The EU AI Act fails to protect people on the move by exempting border zones and detention facilities from key safeguards, enabling unchecked AI-driven surveillance that criminalises migrants and asylum seekers without due process. This reflects a broader trend of prioritising security and industry interests over human rights, with Greece playing a central role in weakening protection standards and expanding AI-based border technology.

For years, the EU has enhanced its border security through advanced surveillance technology, including monitoring systems, satellites, and drones, creating so-called 'smart borders.' More recently, AI has become integral to this security framework. As of February 2nd 2025, EU member states must apply Chapters I & II of the AI Act, which regulates AI use in 'publicly accessible spaces' to limit civilian surveillance. However, the Act explicitly states that *"publicly accessible spaces should not include prisons or border control"* (EU AI Act, Recital 19). This exemption allows the unregulated use of AI in border zones and thus disproportionately targets people on the move. AI tools like Remote Biometric Identification (RBI) systems collect and store migrants' data without evidence, suspicion, or legal justification.

A 2024 report by [PICUM](#) details the numerous risks the AI Act poses to people on the move. A key concern is the EU's refusal to prohibit AI-driven practices that violate EU law and human rights. The Act does not ban AI-based analyses or tools that facilitate illegal practices such as pushbacks, despite evidence of their harmful impact. Frontex's Fundamental Rights Officer [warned](#) that AI-powered surveillance could further restrict access to asylum by creating additional barriers at EU borders.

The EU's research agenda and budget reflect its commitment to strengthening border surveillance through AI. The EU-commissioned 2020 [study](#) *Opportunities and Challenges for the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Border Control, Migration and Security* highlights the EU's aim to optimise border control using AI. Additionally, as revealed by [Statewatch](#), the EU's 2021–2027 financial framework increased funding for border policies by 94% (€113.3 billion) compared to the previous budget cycle. While only a fraction of this budget is allocated to border technology, let alone AI, billions of euros are available to states and companies developing such technologies.

Greece played a major role in shaping the AI Act's exemptions. During EU negotiations on November 29th 2023, the Greek delegate [demanded](#) that real-time AI tools such as



RBI should be used without restrictions in border zones and prisons. Greek authorities have not clarified whether Closed Control Access Centres (CCACs), Reception and Identification Centres (RCIs), or detention facilities fall under the exemption, but evidence suggests an intention to expand AI surveillance to these spaces. Shortly before pushing for the exemption in November 2023, Greek authorities had already deployed AI technologies at the Samos CCAC, as revealed by a January 2025 [Solomon](#) investigation. Correspondingly, [Statewatch's](#) "Follow the Money" investigation identifies Greece as a major testing ground for these technologies, receiving over €1 billion in EU funding for border control between 2021 and 2027 – a 248% increase from the previous budget cycle.

AI Surveillance Projects: ROBORDER and REACTION:

The first AI-oriented border security project deployed in Greece was [ROBORDER](#), which developed "unmanned mobile robots, including aerial, water surface, underwater, and ground vehicles that will operate both independently and in swarms." [Meetings](#) between the ROBORDER research team and Greek navy officers suggest plans to implement these systems along Greek borders. The Greek Centre for Research and Technology Hellas (CERTH) was tasked with the coordination of ROBORDER. However, inquiries made to CERTH by [Algorithm Watch](#) asking for the results of the project or the utilised components were left unanswered. This lack of transparency suggests that CERTH's work on border security would spark fierce criticism or cause exposure if made public.

Since 2021, the successor project [REACTION](#) has been reinforcing EU border security by developing AI-driven drones and automated monitoring systems. Thus, it enhances the capacity of border and coast guards to detect and prevent border crossings as the system's algorithm learns where to focus and how to operate, allowing authorities to cover vast areas without human control. CERTH, which is also coordinating REACTION, is developing advanced computer vision and algorithms that contribute to obtaining real-time information on border crossings. REACTION is integrated into existing infrastructures such as EUROSUR and linked to information platforms at RCIs and pre-removal detention centres to facilitate control measures. In sum, with adaptive algorithms and AI-based equipment, REACTION would significantly increase the capacity of authorities to migration control, particularly in remote and vast border regions. Its full deployment is anticipated in 2025.

***EU-Wide Expansion of AI Border Surveillance***

Greece is not alone in pushing for expanded surveillance. According to Investigative Europe, France and other member states intended to weaken the AI Act, advocating for real-time public surveillance, AI-based border monitoring, and facial recognition profiling linked to political or religious characteristics. These amendments took effect on February 2nd 2025. The revised legislation prioritises security and industry interests over civil liberties, enabling AI-driven border enforcement with little oversight.

Frontex has also actively sought AI-based border control technologies. On February 20th 2025, it hosted an Industry Day, inviting companies to showcase AI-driven solutions for border security. This event underscores the EU's commitment to integrating AI into its migration management and pursuing security interests at the expense of human rights.

The EU AI Act contains critical gaps in safeguarding the rights of people on the move, particularly due to Greece's efforts to exempt border zones and detention centres from key protections. The unchecked use of AI-driven surveillance risks criminalising people on the move and restricting their right to seek asylum. As several EU states continue expanding surveillance powers at the expense of human rights, urgent action is needed to advocate for stronger legal protections, transparency, and oversight to prevent the misuse of AI against people on the move.

Situation in the Closed Controlled Access Centres on Greek islands***Samos***

In January 2025, serious gaps in interpretation services, the poor treatment of unaccompanied minors and continued procedural irregularities in the de facto detention regime raised concerns. Furthermore, I Have Rights published a report on the (mis)use of technology on Samos and submitted evidence to the Council of Ministers highlighting Greece's continued failure to fully implement a 14-year-old judgement by the European Court on Human Rights.

Ongoing gaps in interpretation:

On January 27th, the Greek Minister of Migration Nikolaos Panagiotopoulos claimed that the Ministry had "solved the issue of interpretation" by contracting an NGO in early December 2024. Despite this, throughout January 2025 the persistent lack of interpreters continued to undermine the right to fair and efficient asylum procedure on Samos.



Multiple clients of I Have Rights reported delays of up to four months in their asylum cases due to the lack of interpretation. Additionally, two clients stated that they had no interpreter during their full registration and were instead required to use Google Translate, significantly impairing their ability to communicate with the authorities. Difficulties in accessing legal support further raised concerns about the fairness of asylum procedures. One respondent reported receiving their interview invitation only three working days in advance of their interview, limiting their ability to seek legal aid.

Dire conditions for unaccompanied minors:

The situation of unaccompanied minors in the Samos CCAC remained dire. According to the Samos-based Human Rights Legal Project, up to 485 unaccompanied minors were held in appalling conditions within the so-called “safe zone,” an area of the facility designed for just 200 people. As reported by EfSyn, some unaccompanied minors were detained for almost 100 days. In the report, the Human Rights Legal Project indicated a severe shortage of access to essential services and items, including a lack of beds, mattresses, blankets and hygiene products.

Continued procedural irregularities in the “de facto” detention regime

Inconsistencies in providing documentation and delayed notification of Restriction of Freedom Orders continued to raise concerns. For example, one I Have Rights client reported being detained for five days before being provided with a Restriction of Freedom Order.

New report uncovers covert operation against asylum seekers and Invasive use of technology

In January 2025, I Have Rights and the Border Violence Monitoring Network published a report uncovering the widespread and forcible removal of phones of people on the move upon their arrival on Samos, revealing an alarming contradiction by the authorities: while local police deny phone removals, Frontex’s Fundamental Rights Office has confirmed the practice in confidential operational plans. The report further highlighted how surveillance technology, including drones, CCTV, AI systems, and biometric scans, creates a prison-like environment in the CCAC that risks further undermining the fundamental rights of people on the move.

**Lesvos***Changes in the population of the CCAC*

By January 31st, the population of the CCAC stood at 2,915, a significant decrease from the 3,836 residents in December, when the CCAC had exceeded its maximum capacity. The decline is partly due to the 87% drop in arrivals (172 in January) and transfers to the mainland (433 in January). One possible factor leading to the important decrease in arrivals might be the large-scale military exercise 'Mavi Vatan' (Blue Homeland) conducted by the Turkish military in the Aegean Sea and the subsequent increased surveillance by the Greek military. Even though the exercise is mainly restricted to the maritime zone between Rhodes and Cyprus, the additional vigilance of both militaries is likely to deter people on the move from crossing to Lesvos and other Aegean islands.

Overcrowding and ongoing gaps in services, and safety incidents

Despite the reduced population, certain parts of the CCAC remain overcrowded. Moreover, as mentioned above, cash allowances for asylum-seekers have not been distributed since July, and no information has been shared on when (or if) payments will resume. The persistent lack of hot water continues to add to hardships during the winter months.

Lastly, as is the case on Samos, there is also a continuous lack of interpreters, particularly for Dari and Pashto. The lack of adequate interpretation services exacerbates other problems. For example, some victims might be prevented from reporting threats or seeking protection in the context of several reports of knife attacks in the facility, which have raised serious safety concerns. Since there is no dedicated support line available on weekends, police often constitute the only point of contact. In a recent case, the police released a perpetrator back into the same space as the victim, leading to a second attack. Despite the availability of safety containers meant to protect those at risk, they were reportedly not used.

Kos*Decrease in population and lack of healthcare*

The population in the Kos CCAC has been drastically decreasing, with 1,506 individuals recorded on January 1st and 1,097 on January 31st, mostly as a result of transfers to the mainland. While transfers are expected to continue in February, the situation on the island remains concerning, particularly due to the lack of medical and mental health



support. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has left the facility, with no replacement for the vital medical services they provided, as there is still no doctor from the EU-funded Hippocrates program. Furthermore, after Praxis left the island in December, no protection actors or psychologists have been made available, leaving many at risk without adequate support. These gaps in services are especially alarming for the most vulnerable in the CCAC.

New report from Kos: First hand testimonies of inhumane migration policies

A new report from Kos-based organisation Glocal Roots exposes the severe hardships faced by people on the move on the island. Through first hand testimonies, it highlights illegal pushbacks, inhumane conditions in the CCAC, and the struggles of those left homeless and unprotected after eviction. While similar to other migration hotspots, Kos presents unique challenges that remain largely undocumented.

As G from Palestine states, “Let me tell you something. There’s a difference between what you hear from officials and what you hear from the one who lived the experience himself. [...] You need just to ask those who lived the experience.” This report aims to amplify the voices of those affected and calls for urgent action towards a more humane migration policy.

Read the full report [here](#)

Aegean crossings: official statistics for January 2025

According to the data published by the Turkish government, in January 2025, 1,399 people were rescued by the Turkish Coast Guard in the Aegean. When a pushback wasn’t reported, the reason for rescue was nearly always listed as “engine failure”.

In four cases the boats were found half sunk. Among those rescued, 452 people had been pushed back in 15 different cases. 2,028 people were apprehended by the Turkish Coast Guard before leaving the country. Meanwhile, 2,514 people arrived in the Aegean islands this month.

The numbers are similar to those from December 2024, when 1,173 people were rescued, 452 of whom had been pushed back. However, a significant decrease is noted with regards to the number of people arriving in the islands, which went down from 3,981 in December. As of the comparison with the same period last year, most numbers have decreased slightly. In January 2024, 1,987 people were rescued, 1,099 of whom had been pushed back in 35 different cases. Moreover, 1,688 were apprehended and 2,961 were registered after arriving on the islands.



Regarding the means of crossing, the use of fiberboats seems to continue increasing. Thus, in January 2025, 15 of these boats were used, 3 more than the previous month and 13 more than in January 2024. Importantly, in the past several months there seems to have been an increase in the violence used by the Greek Coast Guard towards people traveling on Fibre-Hull inflatable boats, which they often try to stop by all means necessary, thus increasing the dangers for people on the move even more.

At least 9 more people lose their lives in the Aegean

On January 16th at 21.32, the Turkish Coast Guard approached a Fibre-Hull inflatable boat with 38 people on board off the coast of Aydın's Kuşadası. As the Turkish Coast Guard moved closer to the vessel, some of the people fell into the sea, as they "tried to escape". During the search and rescue operations, 18 adults and 13 children were rescued, and the lifeless bodies of three more people were found. Another operation was carried out that recovered four more bodies of people who traveled on this boat.

A week before that, on January 7th, a shipwreck off the coast of Rhodes resulted in the death of at least two more people. 63 people were rescued, but the number of people missing remains unknown. These avoidable deaths are the direct result of the lack of safe routes to migrate and the violence displayed by the authorities at both sides of the border.



Government apprehension statistics

According to [statistics](#) published by the Presidency of Migration Management, 12,529 “irregular migrants” were apprehended in the first month of 2025. The top groups of nationals affected by apprehensions were: Afghans (4,829), Syrians (1,726), Egyptians (1,003), Uzbeks (780), and Turkmen (658). Furthermore, authorities apprehended 937 so-called “organizers”, or those accused of facilitating irregular transit.

Authorities continued with their Kalkan, or “shield”, operations, targeting “irregular migration and organizers”. On the last day of 2024, Operation [Kalkan-37 was carried out](#) countrywide, resulting in the apprehension of 764 individuals and 42 so-called organizers. As part of the operation, 380,807 identity checks were conducted across 81 provinces, utilising 270 Mobile Migration Units equipped with fingerprint scanners, migration experts, and interpreters. As described in the [February 2024 BVMN report](#), these units were implemented by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and aim to facilitate and expedite the identification of irregular migrants.

Update on Turkey’s response to developments in Syria

Following the fall of the regime of Bashar al Assad in early December, the situation for Turkey’s Syrian population continues to develop with a focus on how people are to return. On January 9th, the Turkish Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya announced that one adult member from each Syrian household under temporary protection in Turkey will be allowed to visit Syria and return to Turkey three times during the next six months.

The measure has been welcomed by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). UNHCR Turkey spokesperson Selin Ünal commended the approach, suggesting other countries should follow Turkey’s example. Syrian refugees should be given the flexibility to assess the conditions upon returning to their home country, Ünal said.

On January 31st, UNHCR Commissioner Filippo Grandi joined the Turkish Head of Migration Management on a visit to Cilvegözü Border Gate in the southeastern province of Hatay. Cilvegözü crossing has processed the highest number of returns to Syria during the last two months. Upon his meeting with Syrian President Ahmed al Sharaa, Grandi called for investments in services and security, and for sanctions on Syria to be lifted. The move would be critical, he said, in facilitating the return of Syrian refugees.



At the end of January, government figures placed the number of Syrian people under temporary protection in Turkey at 2,863,472, a decrease of about 38,000 people when compared to the end of December. This continues a stark decrease in the overall population of Syrians with temporary protection in Turkey, with UNHCR figures for February 2024 having placed that total at 3.3 million.

Moreover, at the beginning of January, Turkish Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya held a press conference at the Cilvegözü Border Gate in Hatay, where he announced that 52,622 Syrians had undertaken “voluntary return” in the one-month period starting December 8th, 2024. It must be noted that numerous testimonies and reports prior to the fall of Assad have pointed to routine conditions of forced returns from Turkey to Syria — and other countries — under the guise of “voluntary return”. Despite the enormous change in circumstances brought about by the fall of the Assad regime, coercive returns to Syria are still reported, as described in the section below on Urfa’s Harran Temporary Accommodation Center.

Reports of suicide attempts, torture and forced deportations at Şanlıurfa camp

Two brothers staying in the Harran Temporary Shelter Center for migrants in the Şanlıurfa province of southeast Turkey reportedly attempted suicide on January 23rd. According to a statement in English shared by the Göçmenlerle Kardeşiz Initiative, the individuals were taken to a hospital, but their condition remains unclear. The statement reads as follows:

Harran’s Center. A shelter or a death camp?

Earlier this evening, according to a reliable source within the Harran Temporary Shelter Center, two of our migrant brothers, among the many who are struggling to survive under awful conditions, attempted suicide out of desperation.

Both were taken to the hospital, but there is still no clear information regarding their conditions.

This incident once again highlights the severe mental and physical pressure and stress hundreds of migrants living in shelter camps experience.

We call on the Ministry of Interior to immediately launch an investigation into this tragic event and to take urgent steps to improve the conditions of the camp. We refuse to accept a situation where human life is devalued to this extent!



On January 29th, [another report](#) describing brutal conditions in Harran was made public, based on direct testimony from H.E., a Syrian refugee. H.E., whose gender is not explicitly shared in the article, recounts how refugees, particularly Syrians, are subjected to cruel treatment, with a focus on women being forcibly deported. They describe the routineness of torture in the camp, stating:

"Torture is usually done on Thursdays. They usually call this day 'beating day'. When Thursdays come, those who are there are definitely tortured. The main reason for torture is to send them back to Syria. They are forcing those who are there to go to Syria. This has been the case especially in the last few months. Many of them continue to be beaten because they refuse to sign to go. But many of them sign to avoid being beaten and are forced to go to Syria."

When asked why they had not tried to complain about this treatment, H.E. replied:

"I have no security here. If I weren't living in Turkey right now, I would say many things. However, I am here and my life has no security."

Their testimony describes the forced deportation process, specifically targeting women, who are sent to regions in northern Syria, particularly Afrin and Idlib. Until recently, with the fall of Assad, these areas would have been described as under Turkish-backed opposition control. The regions are known to be dangerous and unstable, with significant risks to the deported individuals' safety.

Mülteci Der releases report on Izmir and Aydın removal centers

The Izmir-based Refugee Solidarity Association, or Mülteci Der, has published a [new report](#) on conditions in Izmir Harmandalı and Aydın Removal Centers. The report provides direct testimonies from people detained at both of these [EU-funded removal centers](#) in Turkey's Aegean region. The region is a key transit area for migrants trying to



reach Greece by sea. Turkish authorities often apprehend people on the move in the area, either after being pushed back from Greece or in the process of trying to exit Turkey. Most are then detained and given a deportation order.

The report offers analysis of the conditions and practices in the removal centers, based on visits by Mülteci Der legal teams between July and September 2024. The main objectives of the visits were to “provide legal aid to detained migrants, evaluate the living conditions and treatment of detainees, and assess the procedural fairness in the handling of international protection and deportation cases.” They aimed to document “the adequacy of food, water, sanitation, and housing,” and cite overcrowding, poor hygiene, and a lack of essential services as widespread in Izmir Harmandalı and Aydın. The Mülteci Der legal teams also evaluated the treatment of detainees and their interactions with staff, reported occurrences of violence or abuse, and provision of medical care, especially the treatment of more vulnerable groups. The testimonies included one from a mother detained at Izmir Harmandalı:

My children are sick, and the rooms are so hot. My daughter has sores all over her body from the insects, and no one will help us. We've been here for over a month, and they haven't seen a doctor. I don't know what to do.

Some testimonies focus on procedural issues regarding international protection claims and deportation processes, documenting reports of coercive returns — physical or psychological abuse in order to get a detained person to sign a “voluntary return” form. As one detained person in Aydın told the legal team:

A few days before you came, they called us into the office in groups and told us we had to sign the papers to go back, or we'd be deported anyway. They didn't explain anything, and some people were scared, so they signed.

Overall, the report provides a valuable and rare insight into the claims of reported systematic violence taking place unchecked in Turkey's EU-funded deportation centers. It is only thanks to the concerted efforts — and capacities — of the few rights



groups reporting on this that we have access to these testimonies. Moreover, solidarity activists should live up to the need for solidarity with those who take the risk to speak out about the conditions directly affecting them.

The report covers only two of the 30-plus removal centers in Turkey, most of which do not receive as much scrutiny by rights groups and activists. The only organisation authorised to visit removal centers is TiHEK, the Human Rights and Equality Institution of Turkey, which has been criticised for its lack of visits and failure to address accusations of torture and abuse in these centers for many years. Likewise, the EU should be held accountable for the policies of outsourcing its “migration management” fixes of deterrence via detention and deportations.



Aydın Removal Center, Aydın Province, Turkey.
Source: Google maps street view

Uzbek woman blames Istanbul Çatalca Removal Center conditions for miscarriage

Ozoda Dzhabbarova, of Uzbek origin, reported the conditions of her detention at a Turkish removal center caused her to have a miscarriage. Dzhabbarova has been held at Istanbul’s women-only Çatalca Removal Center for more than seven months. The time period of administrative detention is in most circumstances supposed to be limited to six months, but can be extended by a further six.



Dzhabbarova is a mother of six children, ages two to 18, and she was three months pregnant when she was first detained and transferred to Çatalca Removal Center. On September 2nd, 2024, she was taken to a hospital after her health worsened, which she describes was due to poor living conditions in detention. She had a miscarriage in hospital on September 21st, and was then sent back to detention.

As reported in November's [BVMN monthly report](#), Çatalca Removal Center is known for severe rights violations, heating issues, insufficient and inadequate nutrition, and illegal restraint measures. Various detainees have accused authorities there of drugging their food, claiming that those who refused to eat were threatened with starvation. Detainees have reported being placed in what have been dubbed "refrigerator rooms", spaces where the temperature is set extremely low.

Dzhabbarova has stated that she and her family fled Uzbekistan in 2004 for political and religious reasons, seeking refuge in Russia. But after they faced persecution there, they sought safety in Turkey, arriving in 2016. The Dzhabbarova family's legal issues in Turkey began in May 2024, when authorities raided their home and detained Dzhabbarova due to an investigation involving her husband. Although he was cleared of charges in October 2024, Dzhabbarova and her husband remain in custody, and repeated legal appeals for their release have been denied, leaving their children without parental care.

Severe state [restrictions on religion](#) have been a major issue in Uzbekistan throughout its Soviet and post-Soviet periods, and Turkey has been a destination for many, especially during the era of the ruling Justice and Development Party. However, with the Turkish government's current efforts to show it has control over the migration situation, many people from Central Asian countries have been among those facing detention and deportation.

Trans Sudanese doctor released from Istanbul Çatalca Removal Center

On January 24th, Sudanese human rights defender and transgender doctor Mujja was released from a removal center, as confirmed by the LGBTQIA+ Medical Students Network, which published a [statement](#), saying "Our friend and comrade Mujja has been released. They are safe and reunited with their loved ones. Solidarity keeps us alive."

The case gained attention after the Almees organization, which advocates for trans and queer refugees, issued an [urgent action call](#) on January 23rd. They highlighted Mujja's well-known activism and warned that deportation would put her life at serious risk.



According to an [Instagram post](#), Mujja had been awaiting permits to resettle in Canada before being detained when her residence permit and protection status were revoked by Turkish authorities. She was arrested at the migration office and detained for two days in a men's section of Arnavutköy Removal Center, despite her trans identity. During this time, Mujja was deprived of water, food and restroom access.

Following interventions by her lawyers, Mujja transferred to the Çatalca Removal Center for women (details of various rights violations at Çatalca can be read in the section above). Upon contacting the Canadian Consulate in Ankara, advocates were able to secure Mujja's release. The incident was Mujja's second experience of detention. During the first, she was also racially profiled, and subjected to sexual violence in a men's detention center.

The Asylum Information Database (AIDA) [Turkey Report 2023](#) describes how in several detention centers transgender individuals are often held alongside other groups, significantly increasing their risk of facing violence and discrimination. Additionally, transgender people face challenges in continuing their hormone treatments while in detention and can experience severe isolation.

Van Bar Association: "Migrants are freezing to death at the border"

Migrants are freezing to death in Turkey's eastern Van province, on the border with Iran. Due to increased border security, migrants who try to cross the border in the cold of the winter months are in danger of losing their lives, according to a January 25th [statement](#) from the Van Bar Association. On January 8th it was reported that an Afghan person experiencing frostbite had to be rescued by helicopter ambulance. A distress call had been made and initially a land vehicle had tried to reach the group but could not because of the weather and environmental conditions. [Video footage](#) from the helicopter locating the group was also shared later.

Van Bar Migration and Asylum Commission member Sercan Cihan commented on the conditions in Van, how those who arrive in Turkey often want to apply for international protection but face only prolonged bureaucratic hurdles and end up staying without any status. He also described how the right to life of people on the move is often violated through the conditions they now face on that route.



“Van is a border city, and our districts of Çaldıran, Saray, Özalp and Başkale border Iran. Unfortunately, until 2021, there was intense migration through these districts, especially in the summer months. But afterwards, with the change in the government's border policy, with the walls, barbed wire, and intensive security measures taken at the borders, refugees actually slowed down their crossings in the summer and started to come in the winter months. Migrants arriving in the winter suffer from hypothermia while crossing the border due to bad weather conditions. This leads to frostbite.”

Cihan also said that after the snow melted, dozens of migrants were found frozen to death at the border, their bodies torn apart by wild animals. He added that three migrants who were treated in hospital for hypothermia had made applications to the Van Bar Association this year. The increased walls, barbed wire and security measures that Cihan describes have been largely paid for as part of the billions in EU funding given towards migration and border management.



Gravestones of unidentified migrants who have died crossing the Turkish-Iran border.

Source: [Ozan Kose/AFP via Getty Images](#)



Deaths at the border

In January, 3 men died trying to cross the border between France and the UK: Abdul Raheem Quasem, Suliman Alhusien, and a person not yet identified. These deaths are direct consequences of the repressive, violent and racist policies implemented by the French, British and EU governments.

Update on evictions

Though the emergency plan to shelter people during freezing temperatures has been activated for several nights, both in Calais and Dunkirk, not all unhoused people on the move in the region accessed it, either because of a lack of information, underestimation of the capacity of the shelter, or by choice. Meanwhile, people who remained in the informal living sites have been evicted, despite the weather, thus further undermining the living conditions of those who were facing the elements. Around Dunkirk, it happened on January 7th, 14th and 15th. Around Calais, at least 25 evictions took place whilst the emergency plan was active.

In January 2025, Human Rights Observers (HRO) recorded at least 59 evictions of 9 informal living sites in and around Calais and counted at least 203 people evicted. During these evictions:

- At least 14 people on the move were arbitrarily controlled and arrested by the border police. It is 3 times more than in December.
- At least 86 tents, 8 tarps, 3 sleeping bags and 1 blanket were seized by the private cleaning company appointed by the State.

Once again, HRO clearly witnessed the targeted nature of the seizing of belongings, aimed at depriving people from essential shelter equipment:

- Whilst authorities affirm seizing only the belongings whose owner is absent, on January 27th, the police prevented 12 people on the move from accessing their living site to retrieve their belongings.
- On January 29th, on a living site, the cleaning company emptied the tents, seized the tents, and left the remaining items on the site. This shows the authorities' strategy to deter movement by inflicting suffering to people surviving in already precarious conditions.
- On January 30, a group of people on the move reported having been evicted from their living site during the night, and that the police took their belongings. People on the move are exposed to police harassment anywhere and anytime.



Cleaning company at the eviction site. Source: @elio_j_

Meanwhile, in the area around Dunkirk, HRO recorded at least 8 evictions of 5 informal living sites in January. Buses were chartered to drive people to shelters away from the border. People who did not board onto these buses returned to the living sites to find, in many cases, that the cleaning company had destroyed several areas:

- On January 7th and 27th, the living sites were wrecked, with the remaining belongings scattered around in the mud.
- Also on January 7th, a support organisation noted that trees had been cut to make the area more hostile

During the evictions around Dunkirk:

- At least 39 tents were seized
- At least 4 people were arrested by the border police
- On January 7th, people reported having been tear gassed by the police

At least 3 evictions were carried out in an unusual way (without the usual eviction convoy and at unusual times in the day and evening). It is likely that these were implemented without legal basis.



Eviction convoy. Source: @elio_j_

Surveillance and violence outside of evictions

People on the move continue to face permanent police harassment, arbitrary arrests and surveillance. This month, the police intervened many times at the Calais-Ville train station, exercising a dissuasive presence and proceeding to controls and arrests. For instance, on January 8th, HRO witnessed the police searching and controlling at least 3 racialized people inside the train station, and a few other people at the bus station. The border police arrested 3 people.

Hindrances to documentation work and intimidation

Human Rights Observers and fellow organizations and activists at the border continue to face daily hindrances and intimidation. In January, observers were pushed, physically prevented from filming, threatened to be placed in custody, yelled at by the police, ID checked multiple times (including on the same day), filmed by the police without being notified of it and followed by police cars, amongst others. Observers were kept away from the operations repeatedly, leading to a complete lack of visibility on the eviction at least 25 times in Calais.



Update from the French–Italian border

The state border between the French city of Menton and the Italian Ventimiglia crosses one of the main migration routes leading out of Italy, where inadequate housing and work conditions for people on the move are structurally leading to homelessness and precarity.

Similarly to many other parts of Europe, in Ventimiglia, evictions of informal tent settlements under bridges and next to parking lots occur regularly. Importantly, there is no shelter for adult men on the move in the city. Moreover, public places where people on the move can be seen resting, such as the beach, get constantly patrolled by military and police. During these patrols, people on the move are often forced to display their belongings in racist controls. Police and military are also constantly present at the train station, where the access to the train platforms is controlled. ID checks in trains going to Ventimiglia also take place regularly in other Italian cities, such as Milano, as well as in trains and buses crossing the border between Ventimiglia and Menton.

As many people move further away from the city to try to cross the border, away from these controls and harassment, state surveillance has expanded to other routes. Thus, the dangerous mountain paths between Italy and France are patrolled by drones and helicopters on the French side. Soldiers of Opération Sentinelle, an ongoing French military operation, also patrol the border crossings and mountain paths in jeeps. People arrested in such controls get transferred to the border police station in Menton. Here, people are detained in two cells in the basement, which don't allow for a separation of detainees along genders when overcrowded. There is also a metal container outside of the building for unaccompanied minors.

An estimated 35 pushbacks are carried out from this police station everyday. Those pushed back are sent to the Italian police station about 100 metres up the same road. When released from the Italian police station people find themselves on a steep mountain road with no shade, ten kilometres away from Ventimiglia. The bus operating a few times a day refuses to take people who can't show or buy a ticket.

Most people who are pushed back from France to Italy don't receive any documentation explaining the procedure, nor any information about their rights to claim asylum or their rights while in detention. In most cases there has been no translation given. As in most other regions, the pushback thus remains effectively juridically incontestable for individuals. In some cases, the French police have also reportedly kept documents proving the residency of arrested people in France.



The existence of border controls at all possible safe passages from Italy to France regularly forces people to attempt passage in life-threatening conditions – such as walking along train tracks or the highway, climbing across steep cliffs and sea crossings – leading to deaths at the border.

Illegitimately long detentions at the border

People detained by the French police by the border with Italy often experience variable and frequently illegitimately long detentions, up to 14 hours or even 23 hours, instead of the four hours expected in a regular “garde à vue” (police custody). For some people arrested in a bus at the toll booth near Nice this month, release only took place after almost 48 hours.

Arbitrary age assessments

Contrary to what is the case in the rest of France, the age assessment of minors in the Menton police station is dependent on the evaluation of answers to a set of questions asked by individual police officers. As a consequence, people under 18 also get regularly pushed back to Italy, sometimes even those who possess documents stating their date of birth. The age assessment procedure in Menton has been contested by several NGOs with no changes.



**Border Violence
Monitoring Network**

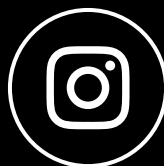
Network structure and contact

BVMN acts as an alliance of organisations in the Balkans and Greece. BVMN is based on the efforts of partner organizations working in the field of documentation, media, advocacy and litigation.

We finance the work through charitable grants and foundations, and are not in receipt of funds from any political organisation. The expenditures cover transport subsidies, several part-time paid coordination positions and some costs incurred by partner organisations for their contributions to our shared work.

To follow more from the Border Violence Monitoring Network, check out our website for the entire testimony archive, previous monthly reports and regular news pieces. To follow us on social media, find us on Twitter handle @Border_Violence and on Facebook.

For further information regarding this report or more on how to become involved, and for press and media requests please email us at mail@borderviolence.eu.



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