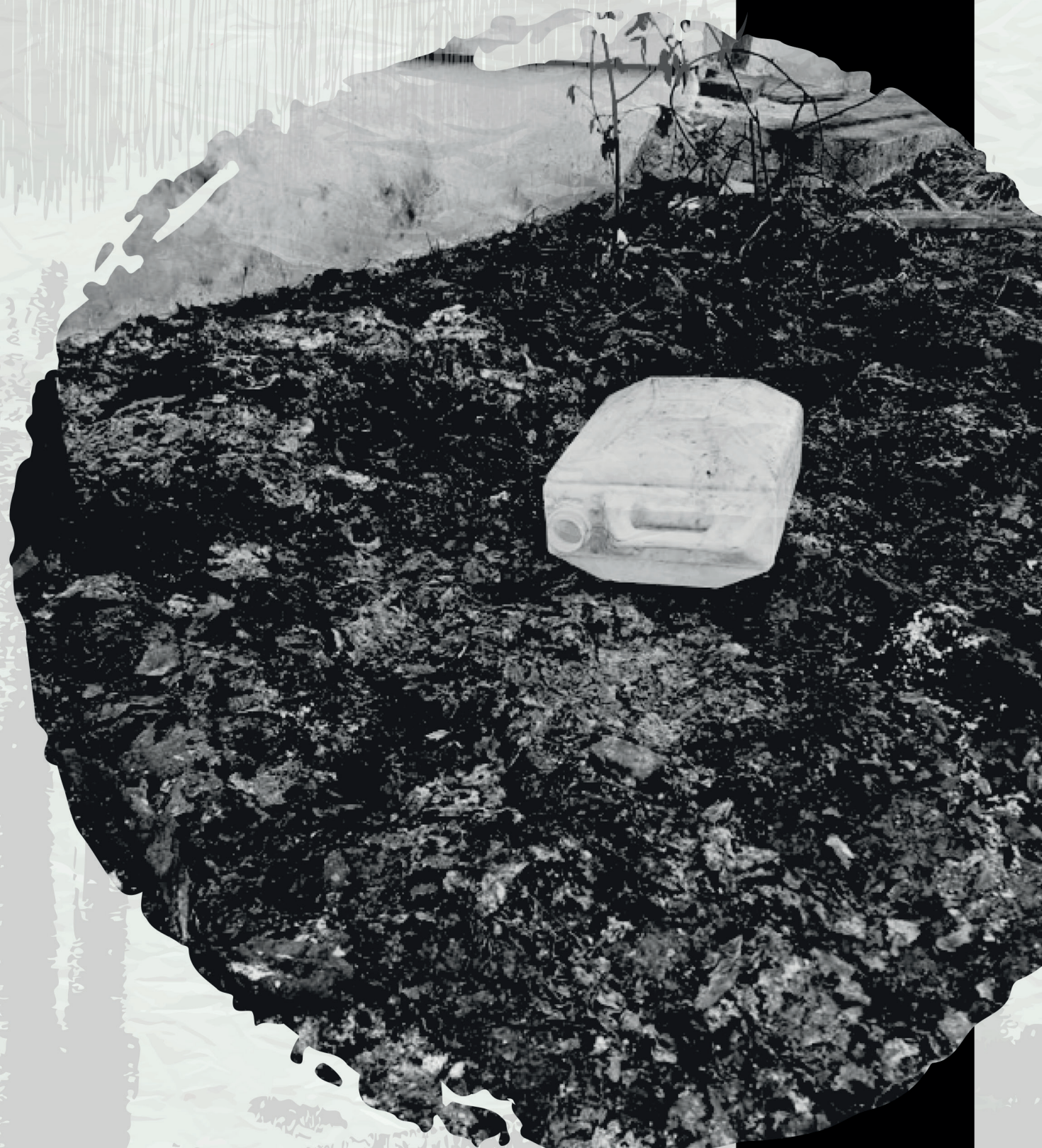


# **VIOLENCE WITHIN THE STATE BORDER**

## **BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA**



**Border Violence  
Monitoring Network**



# **VIOLENCE WITHIN THE STATE BORDER**

## **BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA**

This report is the product of the Border Violence Monitoring Network's (BVMN) efforts to document violence occurring against people-on-the-move (herein POM) within the borders of countries along the Balkan Route. In addition to identifying cross-border pushbacks, BVMN collects evidence of physical, material, and structural violence against PoM within Bosnia-Herzegovina. The quantitative and qualitative data included in this report was collected via a questionnaire from volunteers who interacted daily with POM in cities such as Bihać, Velika Kladuša and Sarajevo.

Additionally, information was drawn from the testimonies of POM and from the observations of long-term volunteers and activists, which collectively illustrate the complex factors influencing the well-being of POM in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Through analysis of data collected in the field, the first section of this report will discuss the direct physical aggression either against POM or against their immediate necessities such as food and shelter. The second will examine psychological violence and the living conditions in the transit reception centers (TRCs) present in the region, while the third will report instances of criminalisation of solidarity against activists and grassroots organizations supporting PoM. Specific examples of structural violence reported by POM and the organizations which support them include restricted access to asylum, collective expulsions, evictions, harassment, and criminalization of solidarity.

## EVICTON IN UNA SANA CANTON

In general, the situation for people-on-the-move staying in squats in Northwestern Bosnia-Herzegovina has become more difficult. There has been an increase in hostile acts against people-on-the-move and support structures. The following cases highlight two specific episodes of eviction and direct violence towards basic necessities and infrastructure of people-on-the-move in one of the towns in Una Sana Canton.

On November 11th 2022, three squats - temporary settlements - inhabited by people-on-the-move were evicted and approximately around 30-20 individuals living there were forced into buses and taken into Lipa camp, 27 kilometers far from the city of Bihać and far from any social and commercial areas and isolated from support structures. According to different testimonies, the individuals wearing uniforms that resemble police uniforms appeared early in the morning while people-on-the-move were sleeping, woke them up in an aggressive way and searched their rooms. Three people that were living in one of the informal camps were reported to be beaten by the authorities during the raid. They also took personal belongings (e.g., power banks, phone chargers, and other electronic devices) and destroyed different infrastructures that had been built to keep the squats a bit warmer, (like plastic windows and makeshift doors). Additionally, they took and uninstalled stoves and they threw blankets, mattresses, clothes, and trash all over the rooms. The respondents claimed that, while quickly returning to the squat in the following days, the abandoned buildings were left unlivable, all the rooms trashed and destroyed; it took some days to clean and tidy up everything again.

The destruction and eviction of informal camps are tactics used by the authorities to remove the presence of people-on-the-move in the city center and move them to camps funded by the European Union and European countries. It is also a tactic of externalizing the border in such a way that attempts to block people-on-the-move from moving around freely, and taking away their autonomy to stay in temporary settlements close to the border instead of camps where they are surveilled and isolated from support networks.



## HARASSMENT AGAINST PEOPLE-ON-THE-MOVE AND DESTRUCTION OF THEIR FACILITIES

In the month of January, two other informal camps where people-on-the-move from Pakistan had taken shelter were set on fire.

The respondents describe that at first, a silver car arrived and parked in front of the house where they were staying. Two men stepped out of the car, approached the house and with sticks and stones smashed the windows' glasses while intimidating the group in the house to go away.

"You go outside, you go you go you go", they said.

The group of respondents remained inside the building in silence and did not react back. The two people poured gasoline on the house walls, set it on fire and again intimidated the group to leave. Then, they started the engine of their car and drove some meters further away from the house.



Source: Blindspots

According to the respondents, the aggressors came with guns and shouted at them from outside the building. The group of people-on-the-move in the house managed to escape, but they did not have time to take their personal belongings with them. The respondents stated that once outside of the house, people-on-the-move met four local men holding long wooden sticks in their hands and two of the men had guns. Their faces were covered with black ski masks, nonetheless, the respondents recognized one member of the group by his eyes and his voice. They claim that person is the same aggressor who previously had kicked them out of another abandoned building where they were living.

The respondents suspect that the four men were behaving under the influence of alcohol, as their behavior looked altered: "They are very crazy", the respondents say.

The four men intimidated the group of respondents to go away, repeating continuously "go go go, go away" and menacing them with the sticks. One of the respondents asked them what they wanted and what was wrong with them, but the four men kept on threatening and one of the locals shot three times with his gun in the air. The group decided to escape in the forest and the man who shot followed them for around one kilometer.

The group of respondents scattered in the woods and one person separated from the rest. He did not have any phone with him, since it got stolen two days before from the same house. Consequently, the rest of the group did not have news about him until the night of the following day.



Source: Blindspots



It must be noticed that forcing the group of respondents to escape in the woods exposed their lives to further risk, since the whole area is marked as a potential minefield.

They roamed all night in the nearby woods, searching for a place to spend the night, knowing, as reported, that “this area is not safe [for us]”.

The respondent who separated from the group while running in the forest reports what follows: that night, he reached one house in the area to ask for help, but the people living there refused.

They asked him “what do you want? Go”. Thus, the respondent approached another house asking for help. “Some thieves are in my house, please call the police”, he asked the woman living in that house.

The woman called the police, who answered “immigrants no problem, you go to Lipa camp”. Thus, the woman insisted with the police saying that she was the one calling and that they should come.

The officers arrived after around 30 minutes and went with the respondent to the house which suffered the attack. Then, the police officers told him “you don’t stay here, you go Lipa camp”.

The following morning, the transit group returned to the house hoping to get their personal belongings and to assess the situation: they found that their clothes, blankets and mattresses had been set on fire and that one of the two batteries used to charge their phones had been stolen.

The group that suffered the attack had already reported that in the past some residents had broken into their houses and stolen two phones.



Source: Blindspots



Source: Blindspots

The destruction of infrastructure and places where people-on-the-move find shelter is a common means of repression that further aggravates the conditions of people-on-the-move at the EU's external borders, since it is making these places - if possible - even more uninhabitable. As soon as people-on-the-move leave the squat, stoves and batteries to charge phones are stolen, blankets and mattresses are burned, and the buildings themselves are destroyed in various ways: doors and window frames are torn out, window panes are smashed. An increasing trend in this kind of aggression has been noticed in the last month. It must be mentioned that not only these attacks remain unaddressed by the local authorities, but also that the authorities themselves often play an active role in this type of attrition strategies.



## LIVING CONDITIONS WITHIN THE CAMPS

The European Commission has taken a new step in the externalization of the EU's migration management in the Balkans by increasing funding to the region for security-related purposes by 60 percent, amounting to 350 million EUR by 2024. Frontex has signed new and renewed agreements with Balkan countries, including Bosnia-Herzegovina, for border controls not only at the external EU borders but also between non-EU states.

In addition, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has been granted for voluntary and forced repatriation of people-on-the-move to the countries of origin and for the construction of a detention center within TRC Lipa.

### TRC BORICI AND TRC LIPA

At TRC Borici, the center for families and unaccompanied minors, a strict curfew is still in place. People-on-the-move are allowed to leave the camp only between 8:00 am and 4:00 pm. This means that residents inside the camp are not allowed to leave the camp after this time, thus limiting their freedom of movement. The consequence of this is that people-on-the-move have no other space beyond the camp for many hours a day, unable to go shopping, walk or hang out in the park.

In TRC Lipa, the center for single men, the official curfew is at 10 pm but, according to the testimonies collected on the field, police authorities can randomly decide to not allow people to go out after 6 pm.

TRC Lipa is situated 27 km from Bihać, in an unpopulated area with no infrastructure of any kind and no transport connection to Bihać or any other place. So people are completely isolated both from services and the local community.

The services in the camp make people stay without their dignity, many people-on-the-move claim that the food provided there is not enough in terms of quantity and nutrition, and the containers and bathrooms don't allow people to have any privacy.

Some people-on-the-move reported that breakfast consists of a banana and a few nuts, sometimes with a cup of tea that is usually cold. Sometimes, you can have a dairy product and some honey. During lunchtime, they also gave dinner, consisting in a bag of two or three slices of bread and either a small can of tuna or some cheese and maybe a fruit.

There are many showers in a container, and none of them can be closed.

In January 2023, with the decrease in temperature and the snowfall, the temperature in Lipa dropped below zero which made the movement of people-on-the-move inside the camp more difficult.



Source: Blindspots



Source: Blindspots



Source: Blindspots



## TRC Blažuj

Collective Aid is regularly being asked for medical services, for example, one person was asking for an anti-itch ointment as he stated: "This place is not clean", referring to the TRC Blažuj. A significant number of people-on-the-move throughout the past 6 months consistently show signs of scabies and this has been confirmed by other aid organizations in the camp. A considerable number of people-on-the-move who have sought medical attention within the camp report that the treatment provided (mostly creams) does not help relieve the symptoms. In January there have been several reports of severe itching since arriving in the camp as well as bed bugs. Pictures show that the mattresses in the camp are unhygienic, with mold seen in this picture taken in early February 2023.

To add to the inadequate hygienic care, two respondents reported that when they wanted to collect their belongings (clothes, including coats) from the laundry they were confronted by the staff who denied ever receiving their items and refused to accept any fault on their part.

The respondents were left with only the clothes they were currently wearing, unsuitable for winter temperatures in Bosnia. Moreover, in November a group of people informed Collective Aid that there was currently no hot water in the camp and that the heating was only on for a few hours at night.



Source: Blindspots

## TRC Ušivak

While most people are pleased that the Bosnian reception centers are better than the ones in Serbia, different sources allege that the organizations in the camp are actively denying available resources to people-on-the-move. Furthermore, if people arrive on the weekend, they are not even supplied with basic hygiene items



Source: Blindspots



Source: Blindspots

which has left people without toothbrushes, diapers for their children or sanitary pads for people on their period, for more than two days. Additionally, the respondents stated that, in the past few months, there has been a serious decline in the quality and quantity of meals provided in the TRC. Current comestibles ostensibly do not meet nutritional requirements.

Residents of the camp report having to spend 20 minutes cleaning the sanitary facilities before they can use them. The showers also function as toilets which means that often the showerhead falls into the latrine.



Source: Blindspots



## Inhospitable environment and restriction of movements in Una Sana Canton

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is the only organization that is authorized and responsible to facilitate transportation in Una Sana Canton. However, despite numerous attempts by the NNK team to contact them to assist people-on-the-move who were pushed back and in dire situations in Bihać and Velika Kladusa, IOM has not responded positively or provided transportation to the affected individuals. The justification for this was that IOM only responds to an emergency situation, but it is unclear what IOM considers as an emergency. As per our criteria, individuals who are starving, injured, unable to walk, and have no place to stay are undoubtedly in urgent need of assistance.

As a result, since unfortunately taking buses to reach the TRC Lipa is not feasible, people-on-the-move are forced to rely on taxi services that charge them exorbitant rates, which are usually double the local rates and may discriminate against them based on their race. Additionally, in the Bihać bus station, individuals are often subjected to racist treatment when buying bus tickets. Often, bus ticket prices are higher for people-on-the-move, and the staff at the bus station in Bihać sometimes even denies individuals access to the waiting room or forces them to sit at the back of the station.

A guy paid 10KM for a ticket which was supposed to cost him 7KM. He asked why, the answer: "you're a clandestine".



Source: No Name Kitchen

## Hostile environment at the main bus station in Sarajevo

When people-on-the-move who are transiting through BiH arrive in Sarajevo, it is usually at the Sarajevo Central bus station. It takes around 35 minutes to reach Ušivak and around 25 minutes to reach Blažuj from the bus station by car, depending on the traffic. However, when walking the journey turns into more than two and a half hours to Blažuj and four hours to Ušivak, partly due to the lack of footpaths on the way. Since the closure of the Balkan route people-on-the-move have been transiting through BiH and therefore Sarajevo. The increase in movement goes hand in hand with the increased presence of taxi drivers at the Central bus station who then charge vulnerable people capricious prices to bring them to either of the two camps. It is an unwritten rule that when buses arrive, the taxi drivers approach first, try and make their sale and only then can humanitarian aid worker's approach. This rule applies to all organizations, whether it be an NGO or state funded. This makes it exceptionally difficult for aid organizations to do their work as they are actively being prohibited from informing people of the available services. January has seen a strong decline in numbers of people-on-the-move arriving and staying in Sarajevo and the already intimidating taxi driver reign has been exacerbated. One individual in particular, who introduced himself saying: "I am the boss here" to one Collective Aid member, is in full control of the way people-on-the-move are being approached and provided for within and around Sarajevo. Currently, the irate taxi driver has all aid organizations under his control, their employees are lined up onlookers to the situation while he dominates the interaction, makes his offers and if people decline, he abuses them verbally. One example of these insults recorded by Collective Aid was him shouting "All Muslims are liars!" at a group of people who explained to him that they have no money to pay for his service. He then turned away from the group, pulled a stupendous amount of cash out of his pocket and provocatively started counting it in front of them. Exploiting another obstacle for people-on-the-move, respondents claimed that this person also provides currency exchanges, as the licensed teller stations require the display of identification documents and are therefore inaccessible for many people on the move. Local authorities and police officers fail to intervene.



## Repression against support structures in the region of Bihac and Velika Kladuša

During the last months, the activists on the field in Velika Kladuša have been the focus of different forms of criminalization of solidarity. The harassment of the Bosnian authorities has been constant, with the sole aim of being an obstacle and impeding the work of the activists on the field. This harassment has ranged from random police checks where volunteers had to hand over their documentation, and was sometimes forced to follow the officers to a police station; to thorough searches of the activists' vehicles. It is worth mentioning the collaboration of large institutional NGOs in this criminalization, as activists on the ground have more than once been reported to the police or threatened to do so by them.

Nonetheless, the harassment and intimidation were explicitly manifested in the first week of December, when officers of the "Uprava za Indirektno Oporezivanje" (Directorate for Indirect Taxation) showed up in No Name Kitchens' warehouse asking to enter without having a physical warrant. This warehouse was recently built and had been in operation just for 2 months, since the eviction from the former warehouse in September, when, due to authorities' intimidation, support work had to be stopped to find and build a new warehouse from scratch.

This time the officers accused the activist of storing illegally imported goods at the address of the warehouse. After hours of waiting they obtained a warrant to enter the warehouse, search for new items and confiscate them. All of this happened while using intimidation and pressure strategies towards the activists and the local landlord and landlady of the warehouse.

In the second half of 2022, those supporting people-on-the-move in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the region of Velika Kladuša experienced ongoing repression.

Support for people-on-the-move outside of official, government-run camps in the form of medical care, and distribution of clothing, food and firewood is being repressed and restricted by both local authorities and the local population. Parts of the local population are organized in right-wing structures that openly act in a racist manner against people-on-the-move, for example, denying them access to supermarkets or organizing demonstrations in front of camps. A large part of the local population initially welcomed the arriving people-on-the-move in 2018, when the migration route shifted to Bosnia and Herzegovina, openly, friendly, and in solidarity. However, over time, solidarity turned into frustration at the lack of an appropriate political response, as well as anger at the under-provisioning of people-on-the-move and the resulting permanent impact on local structures. Nevertheless, there is still a local population in solidarity, which is also affected by repression.

The aim of the repression is to intimidate supporters, even to the point of restricting their work. Supporters of Blindspots have experienced a series of repressions in the second half of 2022: work materials were stolen, car tires were slashed, car windows were smashed, number plates were stolen, routes were blocked and cars were repeatedly followed and observed by unknown persons. From the civilian population, supporters experienced verbal threats, such as insults and threats to contact the police, as well as physical threats with weapons and tools. In addition, supporters' IDs were increasingly checked by police officers in apparent traffic controls.

The ongoing evictions of squats in the border region also have an impact on support structures. The repeated destruction of infrastructure such as ovens, windows, and doors and the associated reconstruction costs time and money and leads to frustration among supporters.

The effects of the demoralizing repression have, on the one hand, psychosocial consequences for supporters, as the feeling of being constantly observed leads to restrictions in their sense of security. On the other hand, the repression leads to delays and restrictions in the support of people on the move, as work assignments have to be canceled and postponed and money has to be spent on repairs of material damage. However, the repression of supporters cannot be compared to the repression that people-on-the-move experience daily in the form of violent human rights violations such as pushbacks and squat evictions. The support structures are only the indirect target of the repression. The real target is the restriction of the freedom of movement of people-on-the-move in the border region.

In January 2023, the car belonging to the No Name Kitchen team in Bihac was vandalized near a squat where people-on-the-move reside. The NNK team had been distributing goods to two individuals in the informal facility and, when the team returned to the car, discovered that almost all the car's windows had been broken.

Since nothing was taken from the car, it is suspected that the incident was an attack and criminalization of solidarity by individuals who were aware of NNK's support to people-on-the-move.



The police were called to file a report for the insurance and to investigate the incident, but their handling of the situation was peculiar and questionable. They arrived over an hour later, took photographs of the passports and faces of the NNK team members, and repeatedly inquired about their presence in Bosnia-Herzegovina and their involvement in supporting people-on-the-move.



Source: No Name Kitchen



Source: No Name Kitchen

### Individual case of Internal Violence

On the 3rd of December 2022 a group of seven people crossed the Montenegrin border and entered Bosnia-Herzegovina. They were ambushed by two police officers, three people-on-the-move managed to run away but the respondent and a family with one child were caught. According to the respondent, the officers took the interviewee's phone and money and said: "You cannot pass through Bosnia". They were grabbed by the police and beaten with fists and kicked. The respondent was beaten with a baton for about 10 minutes, causing him to be unable to walk. The police officers also threw away his food and water to deter him from coming back. The armed police officers did not allow them to speak rendering them unable to express their wish to apply for asylum. The officers then drove the interviewee and the family for two hours, back over the Montenegrin border.