
ILLEGAL PUSH-BACKS & BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS



BALKAN REGION
DECEMBER
2019



Border Violence
Monitoring Network

Contents

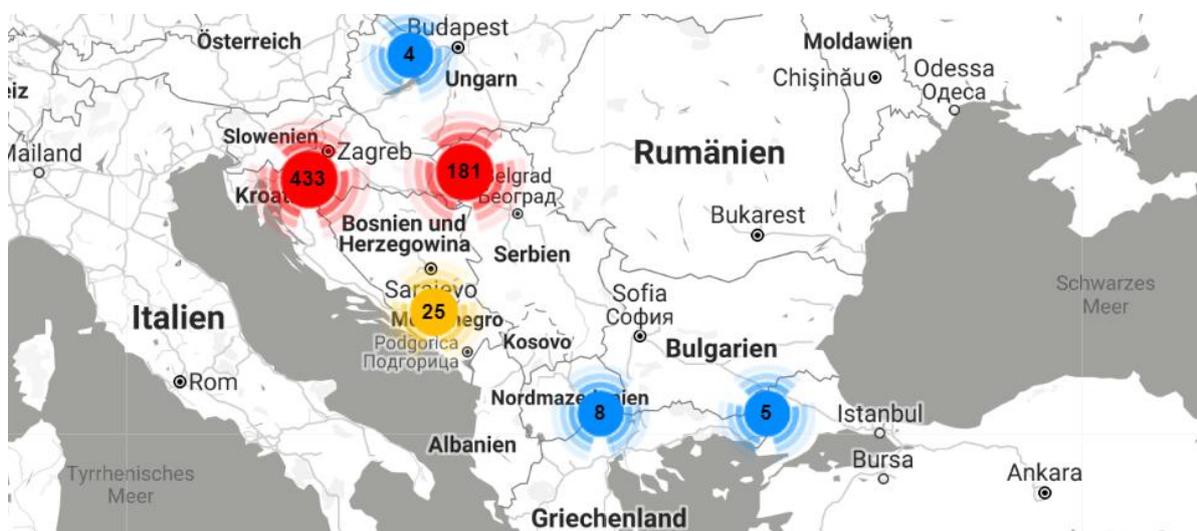
Executive Overview.....	2
General.....	3
Reporting Network.....	3
Methodology.....	3
Terminology.....	3
Abbreviations.....	3
Trends in Border Violence.....	4
Pushback statistics from 2019.....	4
Transport controls and racial profiling.....	5
Brutal dog attacks recur in Croatia.....	6
Withholding of emergency medical care.....	8
Pushback observed on Croatian border.....	9
Update on the Situation.....	11
Croatia.....	11
Nigerian students pushed back despite valid visa.....	11
Bosnia-Herzegovina.....	12
Closure of Vučjak and internal redistribution.....	12
Serbia.....	13
Growing movement at Hungarian border.....	13
Transit related deaths on Croatia’s eastern border.....	14
Train related deaths.....	14
Six people remain missing in a Danube drowning.....	14
Greece.....	15
Bolstering of Greek border in Evros.....	15
Glossary of Reports, December 2019.....	16
Network Structure and Contact.....	17

Executive Overview

The Border Violence Monitoring Network covered the pushbacks of 128 people in December, bringing the recorded total of collective expulsions during 2019 to 3251 people. Monitoring work identified consistent violence which continued into December, alongside deepening trends specific to the winter conditions on the Balkan Route. Cases covered pushbacks from Croatia to Bosnia-Herzegovina, and from Greece to Turkey.

Alongside a breakdown of statistics from the calendar year, this monthly update looks at several incidents which offer particular insight on the situation at the European Union's external border. Analysis of another severe dog attack shone light on the use of canine units in Croatia and the complicity of Frontex with its recent training programs. Moreover, the potentially fatal denial of emergency medical care within pushbacks was reinforced by a case where an elderly Palestinian man was left having a seizure outside a police station for five minutes unattended. Alongside this comes eyewitness evidence from a pushback observed near to Đurin Potok, Croatia.

Across the Balkan Route colder weather forced people to use alternative, often more dangerous, transport options. Several deaths were reported from the border of Serbia with Croatia; one man killed by overhead power lines on a train and two people drowned after a boat capsized on the Danube, along with a family of six still missing. Croatian police concentrated controls on private/public vehicles, with 50% of direct pushbacks from Croatia involving transport locations. Updates also include a summary of the situation in the Greek Evros region, the eviction of Vučjak camp in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the pushback of two Nigerian men from Croatia despite valid visas and increased movement in Northern Serbia.



Full database of pushback reports recorded between 2017 - 2019 (Source: [BVMN](#))

General

Reporting Network

Testimony analysed in this December field report was recorded by volunteers from No Name Kitchen, Philoxenia and The Border Violence Monitoring Network. Field updates were also provided by Collective Aid and Escuela con Alma



**Border Violence
Monitoring Network**

Methodology

The methodological process for these reports leverages the close social contact that we have as independent volunteers with refugees and migrants to monitor push-backs in the Western Balkans. When individuals return with significant injuries or stories of abuse, one of our violence reporting volunteers will sit down with them to collect their testimony. Although the testimony collection itself is typically with a group no larger than five persons, the pushback groups which they represent can be as large as 37 persons. We have a standardized framework for our interview structure which blends the collection of hard data (dates, geo-locations, officer descriptions, photos of injuries/medical reports, etc.) with open narratives of the abuse.

Terminology

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

Abbreviations

BiH - Bosnia and Herzegovina
HR - Croatia
SRB - Serbia
SLO - Slovenia

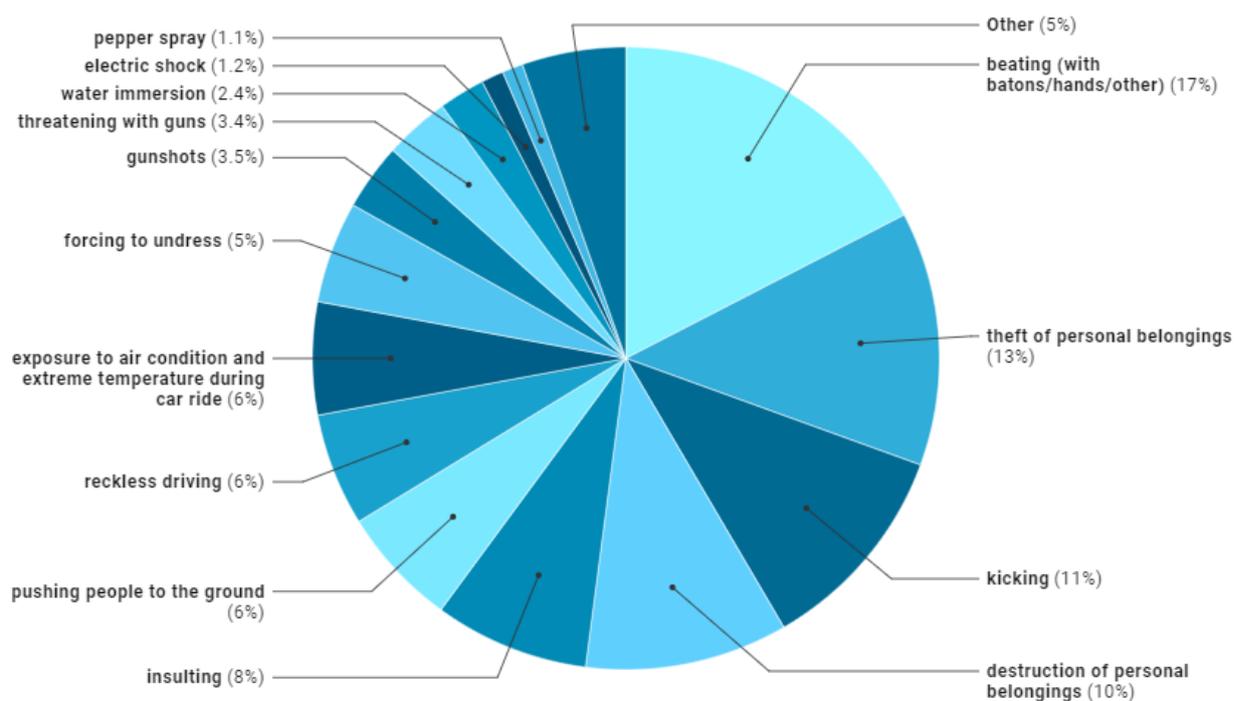
HUN - Hungary
TUR - Turkey
GRK - Greece
EU - European Union

Trends in Border Violence

Pushback statistics from 2019

Statistics gathered from the last 12 months provide a stark reminder of the level of institutionalised violence that underpins pushbacks on the Balkan Route. Here are just some of the more marked violations, some of which were analysed in a [recent Are You Serious article](#).

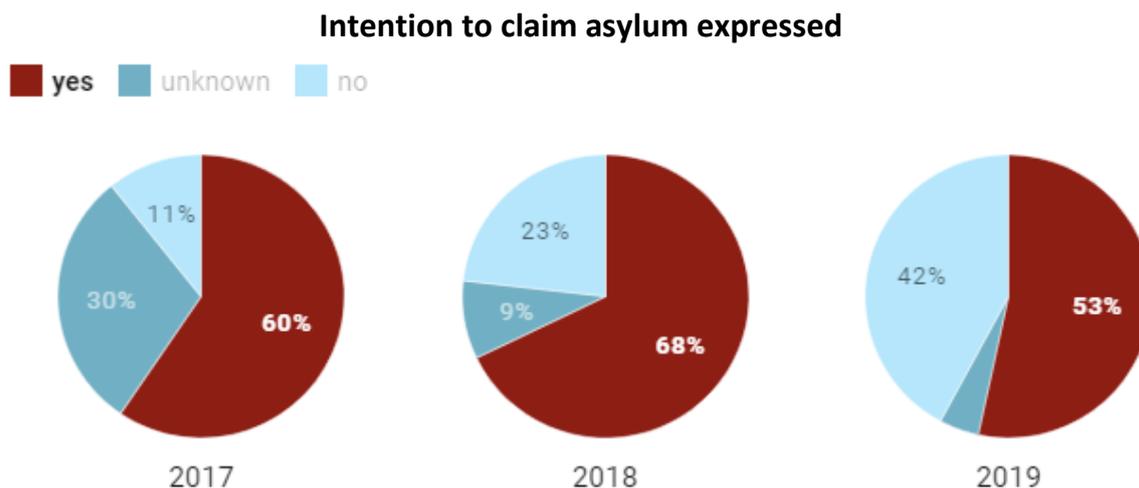
Types of violence used 2019



(Source: [BVMN](#))

This wheel of violence confirms the daily reports made by people-on-the-move, backed up again by December's findings. Data gathered by the Network lists an extraordinary level of violence and use of blunt force, alongside a set of brutal police tactics which are equal in many instances to torture. It is important to note that these acts are not isolated, but often occur simultaneously within the same case, causing deep physical and psychological harm through the layering of abuse.

The wider objectives of this systemic violence map to the narrowing adherence to asylum procedure. The consistent level of violent deterrence at the EU's external border is a primary aid in the gatekeeping of international protection and aiding collective expulsion.



(Source: [BVMN](#))

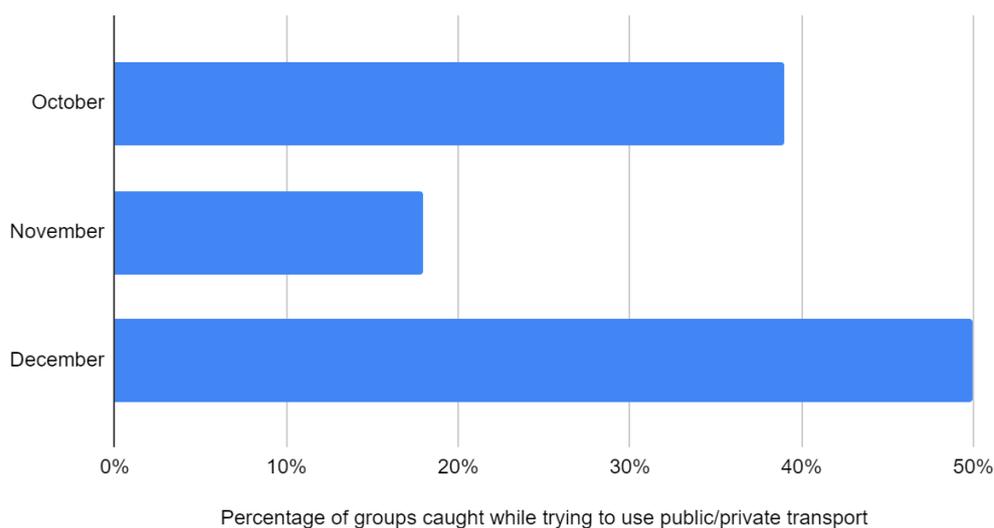
Over half of transit groups [requested asylum](#) in 2019, but they were all pushed back from the respective territories, the highest number from Croatia. There has been a downward trend in claims in 2019, which is arguably linked to the systematised violence charted above.

Transport controls and racial profiling

Data from the last three months of 2019 reveals there has been a noticeable increase in authorities apprehending people on/or attempting to board transport in Croatia. One influencing factor is worsening weather conditions, including nightfall temperatures between 10° and -3°, which makes foot travel extremely dangerous. The life-threatening elements of winter force people-in-transit to pursue alternative routes: such as buses, trains and private cars. These modes of transport increase their visibility in urban areas and are met with increased control by police.

In one [case](#) from November, a group of four men in transit were violently apprehended by Croatian officers at the Tovarnik train station (HR). The men were hidden in a freight carriage when they were detected by officers searching the train. The transit group were sworn at, *‘the officer shouting “pičku mater”*, and one respondent was dragged out of the carriage by his hair. During the incident 40 people were removed from the train, including families and minors, and were all ejected into Serbia. In December, 50% of direct pushbacks from Croatia involved capture of groups as they attempted to board or use transport, the highest in the last quarter of 2019.

Apprehension in Transport - Direct pushbacks from Croatia



With heightened movement on vehicle transport during winter, increased police controls on these routes are also emergent. One marker of illegality within these enhanced controls is the screening of persons with darker skin by authorities. Respondents report the regular spot checks, based on racial profiling, that Croatian authorities carry out around transport hubs like bus and train stations. Checks also allegedly rely on information from transport operators and members of the public, and occur on private vehicles too (see [1.4](#)).

The most prominent case from December from a media perspective was the [illegal push-back of two Nigerian students](#) who were mistaken for undocumented people-in-transit. Croatian police detained them on a tram in Zagreb (HR) and when the two men attempted to provide documents proving their legal right to be in the country, the officers dismissed their visas and removed them to BiH. This serves as a stark reminder of the racist filtering of cases used by the Croatian authorities, and raises key concerns about the legality of officials monitoring transport routes and their link within the pushback apparatus.

Brutal dog attacks recur in Croatia

An institutionalised part of pushbacks, the use of unmuzzled dogs by Croatian authorities - occurring in [5% of recorded cases in 2019](#) - not only results in intimidation, but also serious injury to people-in-transit. In an extreme case (see [1.3](#)) that occurred on the 2nd December, a transit group caught by the police had to lie on the ground as Croatian officers “*urged the animal to jump all over them and bite them*”. One person received permanent injuries during the attack, the report revealing;

“the dogs jaw clamped around his leg and the animal mauled his upper calf, tearing the flesh and almost hitting a major blood vessel.”



Injury from a dog bite (Source:[BVMN](#))

K9 unit on Croatian border (Source:[Guardian](#))

This is not the first dog attack that has occurred on the Balkan Route. The Networks [September Report](#) already highlighted this increasing trend within both Croatian and Hungarian policing, and Slovenian cases emerged as early as [July](#). The actions show clear intent, according to witnesses in both the most recent incident, and another [from October](#), police dog handlers not only allowed the violent behavior but encouraged the animals as they punctured peoples skin or broke their bones.

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

This method is part of an overarching strategy, that according to [Miroslav Ilic from Doctors Without Borders](#) is “a policy designed to render migrants physically incapable of crossing the border”. Deployment of police dogs within border securitisation was already in a 2008 statement by the Croatian [MUP](#). At the time, Mr Dragovic, the Assistant Interior Minister for Peacekeeping Missions was already urging the formation of more police dog units, underlining that with the aim to enter Schengen, Croatia needed “good handlers” for “border enforcement”.



Frontex canine training held in Zagreb during summer of 2019 (Source:[Frontex](#))

The European Border and Coastguard Agency has been taking this commitment to even further lengths, running several [canine training programs in Zagreb](#) (HR) during the summer of 2019. The spate of severe and brutal dog attacks that have since followed on the border with Bosnia-Herzegovina draw into question this involvement of EU agencies to “*help border guards in their daily work*”. Where the “*daily work*” of Croatian authorities involves the violent expulsion of transit groups out of the territory, it is of note and of deep concern that such technical support is being provided by the EU.

Withholding of emergency medical care

Another case from last month revealed inhumane treatment by Croatian authorities while transferring people into a van (see [1.1](#)). Despite authorities being legally obliged to provide necessary medical care to detained persons, witnesses to the incident explain how an older Palestinian male was left seizing on the ground for about five minutes, while the officers present refused to respond. This is a disturbing, but not uncommon reminder of the approach taken towards people-on-the-move and shows the dehumanization encouraged by the pushback regime.

Describing the police reaction, one witness shared the following comment:

“They just stood and watched like nothing happened. I was shocked, I didn’t know the man, but I was shocked. He is a human-being and he fell on his head and he shocked me...but the police thought he was acting...How can you act falling on your head? I was shocked.”

The case, which occurred outside the police station in Delnice (HR), supports other abuses around mandated medical provision, such as the beating of people with hospital documents

(see [November](#)). The man was eventually transferred by ambulance to a hospital, but it is unclear what lasting damage may have been caused by the seizure due to not receiving immediate attention.



"The group in transit begged the officers to help them as the man was not moving, but the officers just stood back and watched for five minutes"

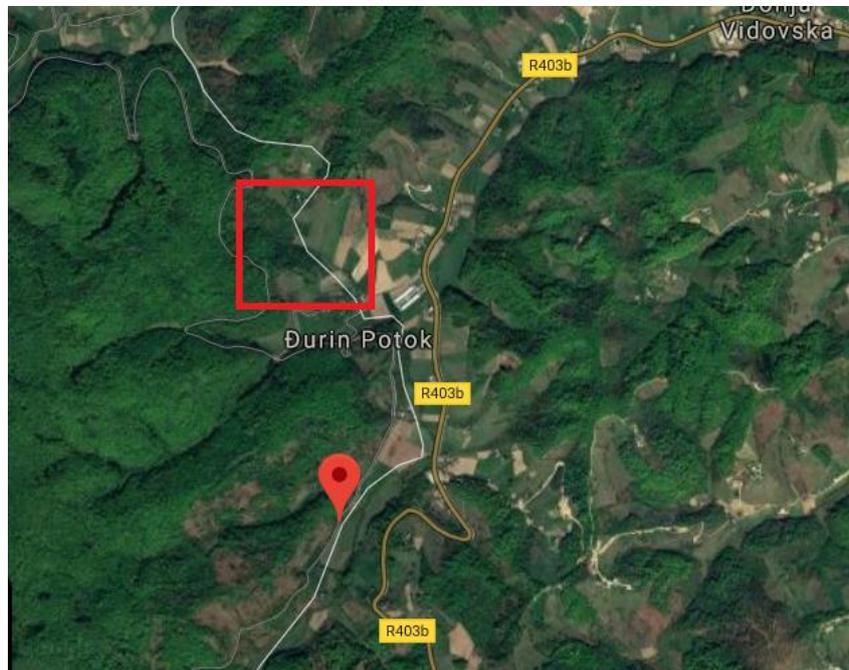
HR police with transit person (Source:[MUP](#)) Quote from reported seizure in Delnice (Source:[BVMN](#))

It is worth comparing these incidents to recent [Croatian MUP statements](#), such as the response to a [Human Rights Watch](#) report from November. Denying all charges, the ministry cast their interpretation of Croatian law enforcement as humane and conforming to international law. They even cite cases where officers were “*rescuing migrants who were in life-threatening situations at the state border,*” such as the photo above where water is being given to a person sat on the ground. These assertions are patently inaccurate when considering the militarized search for people-on-the-move in Croatia forces people to walk for weeks in remote areas of the countryside, putting them at risk of hypothermia, kidney failure and other transit related sickness. It is the informal border policy which is inducing this situation, as seen in the firearms incidents from November, when the MUP again led with a whitewashing narrative about the [medical response of officers](#). The state’s remarks continue to conflict with the regular cases presented to BVMN. Unfortunately more deaths on the route, especially while in police custody, are likely to follow if this approach persists.

Pushback observed on Croatian border

More eye witness accounts of pushbacks from Croatia were delivered last month. On the 14th of December Croatian police vans were observed leaving the scene of a pushback where 37 people-on-the-move had been violently ejected into BiH (see [1.7](#)). Testimonies gathered on-site revealed the transit group had been crammed into the back of one vehicle, brought to the border and pushed back into BiH through the Vidovska river.

Three vans were observed fleeing the scene as witnessed by multiple people who stood on the R403b near Đurin Potok (HR). The eye witnesses included journalists and a visiting [delegation of EU parliamentarians](#) who saw the retreating vehicles (one of which was still carrying approximately 17 people-on-the-move who were pushed back minutes afterwards in a nearby location).



Red pin: Pushback of 20 persons. Red square: Pushback of further 17
(Source: [BVMN](#))

Several aspects of the incident align with a consistent set of Croatian pushback practices. First, the method of merging transit groups is in violation of collective expulsion. 35 people caught near the Slovenian border were combined with men found on a bus in Slunj (HR). Within this, the only pretense at an identification procedure was when the:

“Transit group were lined up and photographed with a mobile phone.”

All 37 were transported in the rear of one van and taken to the border with BiH in a procession of three vehicles. It can be inferred that the other two accompanying vans were used to convey the 15 Croatian officers who were present at the border.

At the border, a corridor effect was used by these officers who formed two lines outside the van doors, as in other cases from December (see [1.6](#)). Twenty people were made to disembark from the van and pass through the lines of armed officers who targeted their bodies with *“baton swings.”* This group was then forced into the small river marking the border. Ongoing investigation of the case is pending, but the brazen execution of a pushback in front of

international media, policy makers and members of the public - shows a concerning disregard by Croatian authorities of the laws they supposedly enforce.

Update on the Situation

Croatia

Nigerian students pushed back despite valid visas

In a case that has received coverage from major international outlets, including the [New York Times](#) and [the Guardian](#), two Nigerian students were deported from Croatia to BiH at the end of November. After having participated in a university table tennis tournament, they spent time in the country prior to their return flight leaving from Zagreb (HR). According to an interview the two students gave to the Bosnian magazine [Zurnal](#), they were apprehended by Croatian police in a tram.

“We tried to explain who we were and that our documents were in the hostel. They did not pay attention to what we were saying.”



The men pictured in Miral TRC, Bosnia-Herzegovina (Source:[Zurnal](#))

Two days later they were pushed back into Bosnia. The story they recount sounds all too familiar:

“We don't know what time it was, but it was dark ... They took us out of the station and put us in a van. They drove us to an unknown place. Two police officers told us ‘You are going to Bosnia.’ I've never been to Bosnia. I came by plane to Zagreb. I told them I didn't know Bosnia.

They told us ‘No, you are going to Bosnia.’ After a while, the van stopped and we were pushed into the bushes. I refused to go into the woods, then the cop told me if I didn't move he was going to shoot me.”

The account is consistent with the pushback practices of Croatian officers that BVMN has been reporting on for over a year, including apprehensions without any semblance of due process, physical violence, and the use of guns. This December further cases saw a prolific level of firearms abuse, including a case where up to 30 bullets were discharged and the respondent claiming he stopped due to fear of being shot by police (See [1.5](#)).

[The Croatian interior ministry](#) has since attempted to construct a narrative which denies the involvement of Croatian police, making the unlikely claim that smugglers may have brought the Nigerians to BiH. Focusing on the Nigerian's potential, but unlikely intention to ask for asylum in Croatia and news outlets stating that, after all, they [returned voluntarily](#) to Nigeria some weeks later is drawing away focus from the crucial, largely undisputed fact that these young men have become collateral damage of Croatia's violent pushback regime. They were pushed into a country they had never set foot in, despite having a valid visa.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

Closure of camp Vučjak and internal redistribution

The first snow fell and landed on the improvised Vučjak settlement on the 2nd of December, followed by the mass relocation of people who had been dwelling there (in an average nighttime temperature of [8 degrees celsius](#)). The now demolished site which had been open as an unofficial camp since summer 2019, has received regular criticism for its unsafe and unsanitary conditions, most recently by the [Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović](#).

Buses came to the camp outside of Bihać in western BiH's Una Sana Canton (USK) removing 600 people [according to police sources](#). Though reported as a voluntary relocation, it is notable that in the days prior to the closure, the USK police continued their systematic forced movement of transit groups from the inner city limits of Bihać out to Vučjak. One prime example came just days before with the flushing of a large squat in the abandoned [Krajina Metal](#) site.



Video - Krajna Metal eviction (Source:[Klix.ba](https://www.klix.ba)).

Photo of Vučjak (Source:[B1](https://www.b1.rs))

Much of the displaced Vučjak population was bussed to accommodation sites in Sarajevo, their freedom to make this decision arguably marred by local police actions and the lack of access to USK accommodation centres. The relocation, closely shepherded by International Organisation for Migration (IOM), also raises further doubts about the intention of EU funded partners within Bosnia's migration response. Facilities in the border area and in the capital continue to bear little resemblance to humane standards, and while Vučjak was slated for being a hazardous ex-landfill site, the centre in Blazuje (an old army barracks near Sarajevo) was found in December to still be [dotted with explosives](#), even after opening as a reception centre. Thus, as noted in a recent article by [Open Democracy](#), the relocation of people into camps around the capital has done little to ["resolve the humanitarian crisis for migrants in Bosnia."](#)

Serbia

Growing movement at Hungarian border

From mid November into December, the areas around Subotica, Horgoš and Kanjiža - north of Serbia - have registered an increased number of people-on-the-move. A demographic shift from a previously Afghan majority, the border area with Hungary has recently hosted more Syrians, Pakistanis, Palestinians, Algerians, Tunisians and Moroccans. This flux has been matched with controls on the Hungarian side, with police recently cracking down on the [use of tunnels](#) to pass under the border fence.

The growth of informal populations in squats and shelters around the city of Subotica has also attracted attention from local authorities. By pressure of the police, the team of volunteers from Collective Aid and Escuela con Alma were forced to stop providing showers and laundry for a month within city limits. Outside the town, continued rural settlements near Horgoš have also seen an increase in inhabitants needing winter resources.

To the east, the town of Kanjiža represents a relatively new site of movement. During December, Volunteers encountered more than 70 people per day in the town, including three syrian families with children as young as two sleeping in tents outside. Transit groups reported that people were forced to sleep rough in the parks or streets, live in tents near the bus station, or use the abandoned railway station for shelter. Again, local police and private security have been conspicuous, raiding and evicting the station building and damaging tents that have been erected near the town in order to displace people. Access to local amenities such as shops and transport is inconsistent, though some people have been able to use hotel accommodation in the area, albeit for inflated prices.

Transit related deaths on Croatia's eastern border

Transit groups crossing from Serbia into Croatia faced extreme risks again during December. The convergence of harsher weather conditions and need to use covert transport methods resulted in several avoidable deaths. The impasse at the Croatian border, built of the violence and illegality of pushbacks, has contributed directly to this loss of life.

Train related deaths recurred as a 35 year old man from Palestine hoping to cross the border near Šid, from Serbia to Croatia on 15th December became the latest fatality. As No Name Kitchen volunteers report, he was the first of a group of four to climb on a train carriage close to the station in Šid. Having reached the top of the train, the man came into contact with overhead power lines and received an electric shock which knocked him onto the tracks where he was found dead.

The deceased leaves behind his wife and their three children, who now - on top of living under difficult circumstances in the overcrowded family camp in Šid - must deal with the loss of their husband and father. With the cold temperatures, and efforts by police to force informal communities into the already overcrowded camps, people continue to take desperate measures in order to cross the border. Alongside the hazards of boarding moving trains, people-on-the-move also contend with spending hours in below freezing temperatures inside of trucks with the risk of hypothermia or suffocating.

Six people remain missing in a Danube drowning, while two other bodies of people-on-the-move were [found dead](#) in the border river on Serbia's western frontier with Croatia. The fatalities, who fell after their boat capsized, were travelling with six people who are missing, deemed to have also drowned. [The search goes on](#) for the group, who are believed to be a family, including two children. The incident, which occurred on 23rd December in the early hours of the morning, is a dark reminder of the risks taken by transit groups in order to seek safe sanctuary in Europe. The site of the drowning near Odzak (SRB) sits halfway between two

primary pushback points around Sombor and Šid (SRB), a reminder that in order to circumvent the violent border regime people are forced to risk their lives.



Serbian police search Danube river for missing six people (Source: Klix.ba)

Greece

Bolstering of Greek border in Evros

The Greek government is planning to increase security in northeastern Greece in order to control the flow of asylum seekers crossing the border from Turkey. One approach is to deploy 400 border guards at the Evros river by March 2020. In early December 2019, the Citizens' Protection Minister Michalis Chrysochoidis announced that the recruitment process had already begun, whilst visiting the city of Alexandroupoli. Illegal push backs are already reported to take place in this region and this move is likely to lead to their increase.

There has been an escalation in the number of police checks and night patrols taking place on the Egnatia Highway, in order to intercept those that have successfully managed to cross the Evros river en route to Thessaloniki. Those that are intercepted and arrested will be held in four previously closed pre-departure centres, one in the Thessaloniki area and three in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace.

In tandem with these measures, the Greek government is deliberating whether to extend the barbed wire fence at Orestiada along the length of the Evros river, over 230km. The fence at Orestiada is deemed an effective method to deter and prevent asylum seekers from crossing the Evros river in this region, despite the financial costs and logistical difficulties it will present. Again, in December BVMN reported on police brutality during pushbacks over this river (see [2.1](#)), which is now set to be supported with additional physical barriers.

In the meantime, numbers of new arrivals continue to slowly rise despite a drop in temperature, harsh weather conditions, and increased security measures on the border. Daily numbers in the distribution centre for homeless migrants are regularly reaching above 400 in the past weeks, signalling that these measures will not deter the flow of migrants across Evros.

Glossary of Reports, December 2019

The Border Violence Monitoring Network recorded nine interviews during the month of October, recording the pushback of 128 people. The transit groups affected varied in size, the smallest being as low as three people, and the largest up to 37 people. Eight cases were direct pushbacks from Croatia to Bosnia-Herzegovina, while one case was a direct pushback from Greece to Turkey. The reports were conducted with a wide demographic variety of respondents including adults and unaccompanied minors. The respondents in these reports also originate from a wide variety of places including Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Link	Incident	Recorded	Group	Demographic
<i>Croatia to BiH</i>				
1.1	28th November	12th December	30	Palestine, Morocco, Algeria
1.2	30th November	13th December	6	Morocco, Algeria
1.3	3rd December	6th December	6	Syria
1.4	5th December	5th December	11	Morocco
1.5	5th December	7th December	20	Syria, Morocco, Algeria
1.6	8th December	16th December	6	Pakistan, Algeria

1.7	14th December	14th December	37	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Morocco, Tunisia, India
1.8	18th December	23rd December	9	Morocco, Egypt
<i>Greece to Turkey</i>				
2.1	29th November	24th December	3	Morocco
<i>Find all reports on the database here.</i>				

Network Structure and Contact

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

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

For further information regarding this report contact: mail@borderviolence.eu

For press and media requests please contact: press@borderviolence.eu