

ILLEGAL PUSHBACKS AND BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS

NOVEMBER 2022
BALKAN REGION





Border Violence
Monitoring Network

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NOVEMBER 2022



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PRAVNO-INFORMACIJSKI CENTER
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SYRIOUS

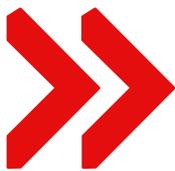


I HAVE
RIGHTS.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In November, the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) shared 13 testimonies of pushbacks impacting 175 people-on-the-move (POM) across the Balkans and Greece. This report brings together first-hand testimonies from a range of countries in the region to look at the way European Union states and other actors are affecting systemic violence towards people crossing borders.

This month, members of BVMN observed an increase in the number of evictions of places inhabited by people on the move by the authorities, including both informal settlements and state-provided accommodation, as it is the case in Thessaloniki. In Northern Serbia, these forced removals have become systematic in the past few weeks, and affected close to 1000 people, following a violent incident in the border town of Horgoš. A trend documented by teams operating in Serbia and Bosnia, and which has been explored in previous reports, has to do with the damaging of these living places by police officers during and after the evictions. This includes the theft and destruction of personal belongings, as well as of the infrastructure of the settlements, e.g. tarps used to cover the windows as protection from the cold.

The issue of lack access to shelter for people on the move is further explored in this report with a focus on Samos, where homelessness is expected to increase in the winter months due to deficient regulations at the CCAC, as well as on the Italian border with Slovenia, where tens of people wait to access accommodation in dropping temperatures.

Further updates address several deaths of people on the move at Turkish borders with Greece and Bulgaria, resulting from violent pushbacks happening in increasingly harsh weather. Inhumane migration policies also leave two people dead after a crash involving the bus that was transporting them to the Diyarbakir Removal Center, their hands in zip ties and without the protection of seatbelts. Medical care in Istanbul has been denied for survivors of the accident on the basis of their registration in the removal centre. In one of the final sections, the findings of a new report on human rights violations against people on the move in Turkey released by Human Rights Watch are discussed in the light of new funding packages agreed between the EU and Turkey.

▶ 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 and Turkey including No Name Kitchen, Rigardu, Are You Syrious, Mobile Info Team, PIC, InfoKolpa, Centre for Peace Studies, Mare Liberum, Collective Aid, Blindspots, Pushback Alarmphone Austria and I Have Rights

UPDATE ON THE SITUATION

➤ SERBIA

SHOOTING AT HORGOSŽ AND SUBSEQUENT POLICE ACTION



On November 24th, there was a shooting between people belonging to smuggling networks in Horgoš, a popular transit town for people on the move around 30 kilometres from Subotica. Six people on the move were hospitalised and several detained after the shooting. Unlike previous confrontations between groups who facilitate border crossings, this incident was highly visible as it took place in Horgoš town centre which caused immediate and intense backlash from Serbian locals and state authorities. By November 27th, the Serbian authorities had completely demolished and evicted two of the largest informal settlements in Horgoš. More than 600 people were forcefully taken to government camps located in the south of Serbia. On the same days, Serbian police officers also gathered most people on the move present in the parks around the bus station in Belgrade - a regular spot for people transiting through the city - and transported them to official camps.

While people on the move often return rather quickly to these sites of evictions, we have not seen the volume of returnees we expected in Horgoš because Serbian authorities seem to be restricting movement of those taken to the south.

Image description: Police raid in one of the Belgrade parks this month.

Image source: Collective Aid

Some people on the move report not being able to leave the camps or being stopped and taken back to camp while on route to Northern Serbia, a violation of their rights as Serbian reception camps are meant to be “open” facilities which allow individuals to freely exit.

Due to these evictions, two of the biggest informal settlements (i.e., hosting more than 900 people) are no longer occupied and are heavily monitored by Serbian authorities. Additionally, police action has increased overall across informal settlements in Northern Serbia. Settlements around Serbian towns of Sombor, Majdan, and Srpski Krstur have also either been evicted or received regular visits from police who continue to harass people to go to the camps. Moreover, some people who have made it back to these informal settlements have reported not being allowed by the authorities to visit stores or supermarkets in the towns, thus restricting their access to food and other essential items. At the moment, humanitarian efforts in the region are in a precarious state as police action and evictions intensify.

CAMP EVICTIONS

There has been a rising number of evictions within and near official camps in Serbia. It seems that these actions come not only as a measure to address overcrowding at camp facilities, but also as a way for authorities to demonstrate to the Serbian public and other international stakeholders (e.g., the EU member states) that the Serbian government is effectively managing the rapidly increasing number of people on the move at the Hungary and Romania borders. Despite the frequency of evictions, these state efforts often prove to be futile in managing migration, but instead exacerbate unnecessary suffering for people on the move. Most sites are re-inhabited within 48 hours of evictions as individuals have no other viable accommodation; however, most return in worse condition as police confiscate and destroy belongings that are essential for survival (e.g., warm clothes, shoes, phones).

Grassroot organisations have documented that Serbian authorities evicted the camp and its surroundings at Sombor at least five times this month and at Subotica at least three times this month. These evictions often involve police deploying violent tactics against people on the move, including the use of physical force to gather people onto buses and destruction of people’s personal belongings (e.g., tents). Most are forcefully reallocated to other camps in distant locations at least three or more hours away by car.

----- EVICTIONS IN VELIKA KLADUŠA

On November 11th, 2022, 3 informal settlements inhabited by people on the move in the region of Velika Kladuša were evicted. Approximately 20-30 people living there were forced into buses and taken to Lipa camp in Bihać, thus isolating them from support structures and restricting their access to commercial areas.

According to different testimonies collected by volunteers on the field, the police appeared early in the morning while people were sleeping, woke them up in an aggressive way and searched the rooms. At least three people on the move reported to have been beaten by the police during the raid. The officers reportedly took away personal belongings (e.g., power banks, phone chargers and other electronic devices) and destroyed different infrastructures that had been built to keep the spaces warmer (e.g. plastic windows and makeshift doors). Moreover, they uninstalled and confiscated stoves and threw blankets, mattresses, and clothes all over the rooms. While individuals quickly returned to the squat in the following days, the rooms were left uninhabitable and it took several days to clean and fix the damaged infrastructure.

This operation seems to have been motivated by the goal of making Lipa camp appear more full than it actually is, in order to justify the funding it receives from European countries. Furthermore, in a similar way as the evictions taking place in Northern Serbia, it can also be understood as a tactic of deterrence, aimed at discouraging people on the move from continuing their journey across these locations.



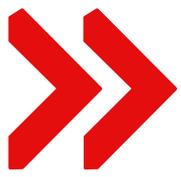
Image description: one of the rooms after the eviction. Image source: NNK

Image description: one of the windows from the informal settlement - the plastic covering it was slashed during the eviction.

Image source: NNK

"In the quarantine section, children, including unaccompanied minors, were detained together with adults in shared dormitories, thus violating multiple safeguards laid out in European and Greek law."





GREECE: SAMOS

QUARANTINE AND VIOLENCE AT THE CCAC

The mandatory quarantine in the Samos Closed Controlled Access Centre (CCAC) was suspended in the second half of November 2022. Before that, newly arrived asylum seekers were required to undergo a mandatory quarantine detention in the quarantine zones of the CCAC. While Greece dropped all entry rules for travellers, regardless of their country of origin from May 1st, 2022, mandatory quarantine for asylum seekers in Reception and Identification Centres like the CCAC remained.

In the quarantine section, children, including unaccompanied minors, were detained together with adults in shared dormitories, thus violating multiple safeguards laid out in European and Greek law.

Since October 2022, multiple actors on the island have received reports from people on the move that describe instances of police brutality in the quarantine zones including forced stripping and beating, beatings in the dark, kicks, punches, slaps, stampings. According to some of these reports, minors detained in the quarantine sections have also been subjected to these forms of violence.

HOMELESSNESS AND LACK OF ACCESS TO SERVICES

In September 2022 the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum was briefed by Samos actors about the real risk of homelessness for accepted refugees on the island. Under current regulations, asylum seekers with a positive asylum decision are forced to leave the CCAC within 30 days. In September, it took people an average of 2 months to receive their card, an essential pre-condition to be able to access accommodation, open a bank account or take up employment. Thus, accepted refugees were left at risk of homelessness for a month. The situation deteriorated further in November when people were informed of the need to wait until February and March 2023 for their first appointment, after which it could take another month to receive their residency cards. Being left without the necessary documents to access subsistence and basic services on the island, individuals are forced into precarious situations. We therefore expect to see an increase in the rate of homelessness in Samos this winter.

A second development in the operations of the CCAC that is likely to increase the vulnerability of the residents of the centre without the relevant asylum documents has to do with the access to internet connection. Actors on Samos have been informed that from January 2023, WiFi in the CCAC will only be accessible for residents with a valid asylum applicants card. The requirements to access WiFi in the centre will include: an email address, a temporary social security number (PAAYPA), an asylum applicant's card number, a tax identification number (AFM) and a file number created by the Greek asylum service (DIKA).

Making access to WiFi dependent on a valid asylum applicant's card will exclude newly arrived asylum seekers, as it may take up to 25 days until they receive their card, as well as asylum seekers with a negative asylum decision, as their cards are withdrawn. As newly arrived asylum seekers are not allowed to leave the CCAC until they receive their asylum applicants card, a practice that started in [April 2022](#), WiFi has been until now their only way to reach out to legal representatives and receive legal information. The new plans therefore pose a major threat to access to legal information for people in the CCAC.

GREECE: MAINLAND

DEATH ON THE EVROS/MERIÇ RIVER

The death of Akram Abdulkadir along the Evros/Meriç border was published in a [German article](#) this month. On July 7th, Hassan Abdulkadir's brother died during another lethal pushback carried out by Greek authorities. Fearing deportation from Turkey, the brothers were apprehended by Greek officials in Orestiada after calling for help when Akram fell ill. After hours of being detained, abused and denied urgently-needed medical attention, the brothers were transported to the river. During the drive, Akram died in the arms of his brother while Greek authorities refused to help. Hassan was threatened with a gun and forced to leave his brother's body in the river before being pushed back to Turkey. The Greek embassy in Berlin informed Hassan that an "official investigation had been initiated" but no further information was given.

In November, the body of at least one other lifeless male was [recovered](#) in Evros/Meriç. Turkish authorities stated that this was most likely a person who tried to cross the river.

FRONTEX DRONE GETS PERMISSION TO OPERATE IN GREECE

The Greek Civil Aviation Authority [has granted Frontex](#) permission to operate a drone in Greek airspace. While there was already a [drone stationed in Crete](#) to monitor the Ionian Sea as part of Frontex missions it was previously restricted to operating in specified airspace. This is the first permit of its kind in Greece; it is expected that drone usage and other technology will increase along the borders in coming years as previous months have brought announcements of policy changes and massive funds allocated to border security.

The role of Frontex in facilitating or being complicit in pushbacks in the Aegean was also explored by BVMN in [a report](#) published in October.

EVICIONS IN THESSALONIKI

In the midst of the [evictions of state-provided housing for asylum seekers and refugees](#), the police in Thessaloniki announced an operation targeting known areas of the city where people on the move reside, checking documents and leading to 4 official arrests. More of these sweeps are expected to continue across the city.

DEATHS AT THE BULGARIAN-TURKISH BORDER

Reports of violence against people on the move in the region continue to appear regularly. In November, Turkish and international media reported several pushback cases and covered several incidents in which people died at Europe's external southern borders due to the lack of safe passage. One of these cases is that of two brothers from Iraq who were reportedly pushed back from Bulgaria to Turkey, having been stripped of their clothes. The two men were found near the village of Vaysal in the Lalapaşa district. One person died while the other was brought to the hospital with severe symptoms of hypothermia. According to Novinite, a Bulgarian news outlet, 10 people were reported to have died along the Bulgarian-Turkish border since the beginning of this year.

The violence perpetrated against people on the move at this border was the centre of significant attention in the past weeks, after a Lighthouse report appeared on December 5th covering the incident of a male Syrian teenager who was shot on October 3rd by Bulgarian border guards after being pushed back to Turkey. The youth survived but has been left with "life-altering injuries." The incident was captured on video, making it reportedly "the first footage of a refugee being shot at a European border." Lighthouse also gathered several other witness testimonies from other people on the move by the Bulgaria-Turkey border who testified to having "witnessed other shootings of refugees by the Bulgarian authorities, indicating that this is not an isolated incident."

BUS CRASH EN ROUTE TO DIYARBAKIR REMOVAL CENTER

On November 7th, a bus crashed while transporting 38 people of Syrian origin, along with two drivers and Turkish Gendarme personnel, resulting in the death of two of the Syrian passengers. They had been detained in Istanbul and were being transported from Tuzla Removal Center in Istanbul to Diyarbakir Removal Center when the bus skidded and crashed in the Sivas province in central Turkey. The passengers had apparently been denied access to food, water or a toilet throughout the journey, and were travelling without the protection of a seatbelt, while their wrists were cuffed with plastic cable ties. Two of the passengers spoke alongside Syrian activist Taha El Gazi, a member of the Refugee Rights Platform, at a press conference at Istanbul's Human Rights Association.

The two survivors were both injured in the crash and were back in Istanbul at the time of their statement, but were denied access to medical treatment since they are both registered for Temporary Protection in other parts of Turkey. El Gazi stated, "the demands of those injured in the Sivas accident are simple; compensation and the right to be treated in

public hospitals in Istanbul.” He described the current situation in the environment of President Erdoğan’s promise of the “voluntary return of one million Syrians,” where those that even hold Temporary Protection status can be rounded up easily, denied the right to speak to a lawyer or family and deported. He cited a recent example of a missing person who then “emerged a week or two later” in Idlib, northwest

Syria. He also criticised the silence of NGOs in Turkey, amidst a rising perception that “you can beat a Syrian citizen, curse them, usurp their right, kill them,” a trend he stated was dangerous for all minorities. “NGOs are all about returns now. NGOs close to the government stay silent when rights are violated. They are just making statements against the opposition’s anti-Syrian statements.”

NEW REPORT ON HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN TURKEY

On November 18th, Human Rights Watch released a [report](#) on the dire situation of detention, deportation, and pushbacks in and from Turkey. An [Infomigrants article](#) from the same day, summarising key findings from the report, states that “[in] the first ten months of this year alone, more than 57,000 Afghans – mostly single men [...] – were returned from Turkey, according to [official data](#).” Many of those deported had been living and working in Turkey for years. These people described being subjected to beatings while in detention, denied any access to a lawyer, and being forced to sign or give fingerprints for “voluntary return.” Bill Frelick from HRW stated in an [interview](#) that “[people are] held in containers and dirty overcrowded conditions in removal centres”. He also reported that people are beaten and threatened while in detention. Many of these detention centres have been funded with EU money, most notably, the 2016 deal for €6 billion.

The same InfoMigrants article covers the issue of systematic pushbacks from Turkey, largely to Iran, stating that “[as] of early November, Turkish migration authorities said 248,727 “irregular migrants” had been “prevented” from entering Turkey since January 1, 2022. Multiple actors claim that this so-called “prevention” is made possible by policies allowing systematic and violent pushbacks. On top of the violence and discrimination Afghan people can face in Iran, they are also at risk of being [summarily deported](#) back to Afghanistan.

Moreover, on December 3rd, Turkey’s General Manager of Migration Management, Ramazan Seçilmez, held a press briefing where he [stated](#) that more than 110,000 people had been deported from Turkey in 2022. Furthermore, as stated by Seçilmez, Turkish authorities prevented the entry of 263,136 ‘irregularized’ people.

Despite the abundant evidence of rights violations against people on the move in Turkey, EU policy remains centred on ensuring that the money flow for further controls continues. On December 12th, the European Commission adopted a [€220 million package](#) for border control at Turkey’s Eastern border, part of continued “EU assistance to refugees in Türkiye

between 2021 and 2023,” according to the EC press release. This EU money will fund equipment (surveillance masts, cameras, lightning systems) at the border with Iran and Iraq, as well as training for officials in matters such as the use of border management technologies, migration law, humanitarian border management, fundamental rights, and responding to large-scale mixed migration movements. Given the current situation in Turkey and the widespread human rights violations as reported by HRW in November 2022, the adoption of this package means that the EU continues to have an active role in facilitating these illegal practices. These funds are part of the total €3 billion of total “assistance” from the EU to Turkey between 2021 and 2023.

25N and risk of deportation

Despite a ban on protests, on November 25th, masses of women took to the streets to commemorate the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women in Istanbul. The police detained and attacked hundreds. The Turkish authorities detained two women, one from Azerbaijan and the other from Italy, in Selimpaşa Removal centre pending deportation, though lawyers from the November 25 Platform managed to appeal the decision. The past year has seen many instances of online dissent or participation in physical demonstrations on the part of non-Turkish citizens swiftly prompting the risk of deportation.

In November 2022, collectives that operate in Piazza Libertà (Trieste) documented the arrival of 2.220 individuals, of which 1.864 were single males, 243 unaccompanied minors, 21 single women and 92 belonging to family groups. Many people transit through Piazza Libertà since reception centres are undeniably ill-equipped. However, once again, it is important to underline that these are incomplete numbers, and that the real figures could be significantly higher.

Sadly, people on the move sleeping on the streets has become a new norm in many cities. Thanks to the efforts of collectives and organisations, it is now possible for few particularly vulnerable people to find temporary accommodation for a night in Trieste. Nonetheless, the vast majority of people are currently forced to sleep on the streets, with falling temperatures amidst an environment of general hostility and indifference. As reported in October 2022, the municipality of Trieste had agreed and publicly announced plans to provide shelter for up to 90 people, in a building located in the surroundings of Piazza Libertà. As feared, in light of the recent general election results, that plan has already been neglected.

Mayor Dipiazza declared: "Why should we provide assistance to those [people]? I am not going to do anything for them." These racist and xenophobic statements contribute to further a climate of increasing hostility against people on the move. The words are especially dangerous as they come from the public representative of the city, who has obligations and responsibilities regarding public health by the Italian law. Thus, the association Linea d'Ombra has recently announced that they will bring the Major to court if the worst case - death by freezing - were to occur.

"The mayor gave in to pressure from the far-right and reneged on his promise to open a dormitory in the city. To his inadmissible question "why do we have to give assistance to those [people]?" we answer: because it is your duty to take care of the people present in the area, their health and safety; not doing so is a precise political choice, and you will be held accountable for it. The municipal administration not only ignores, but publicly denigrates human beings in need, knowingly running the risk that there may be deaths from cold".

Moreover, it is now confirmed that local police forces are enforcing a bilateral agreement with Slovenia that permits them to readmit people who supposedly did not ask for asylum in Italy. It is essential to note that, even if these practices have been reframed to be legally admissible under national law, they nonetheless are the direct cause of pain, suffering and trauma for many people, and are often used to deny the right to asylum of people on the move. We should do everything in our power to stop them from happening.

Gorizia

The number of people on the move and asylum seekers in the Gorizia area has started to grow again in recent weeks. Following several reports of people sleeping on the street, a group of supportive citizens has been reactivated to give material support to those forced to spend nights outside. Transits and arrivals are now a daily routine, singles and families, even of 5-10 people, who stay around the station for one or two nights. There is currently a dormitory available with a capacity of about 30 places. Moreover, it seems that people who want to apply for asylum at the Casa Rossa border police in Gorizia are encountering significant limitations of access restrictions, often divided into groups of only 5 people per day, thus forced to spend several nights without reception in the cold winter weather.

Gradisca

A new development has also taken place in Gradisca d'Isonzo: in the past weeks, five to seven tents have appeared a few metres away from the CARA (reception centre), on the roadside, where people are waiting to access the centre. Here, like in Gorizia, an emergency dormitory has been opened for 30-35 people, managed by the local associations.

Moreover, the current procedures of the police immigration office located inside of the reception centre is significantly slowing down the asylum application process of those arriving at the CARA. At the moment, everyone arriving at the reception centre has to wait an average of four months before they can formalise their asylum requests and obtain their first residence permit. Though this practice is recognised and accepted by the institutions in the province of Gorizia, it effectively denies freedom of movement for people on the move within the national territory.



GLOSSARY OF REPORTS

Link	Incident	Recorded	Demographic	Group Size
Hungary to Serbia				
<u>1.1</u>	6th November	7th November	Morocco, Tunisia	50
<u>1.2</u>	13th November	14th November	Afghanistan, Syria	22
<u>1.3</u>	15th November	17th November	Syria	4
<u>1.4</u>	22th November	27th November	Syria, Iran	8
Croatia to Bosnia-Herzegovina				
<u>2.1</u>	3rd November	4th November	Burundi	12
<u>2.2</u>	3rd November	5th November	Bolivia	5
<u>2.3</u>	4th November	5th November	Congo, Cameroon	25
<u>2.4</u>	9th November	15th November	Afghanistan, Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire	20
<u>2.5</u>	11th November	15th November	Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire	6
<u>2.6</u>	14th November	15th November	Burundi	6
<u>2.7</u>	18th November	18th November	Cuba	11
Italy to Greece				
<u>3.1</u>	27th November	28th November	Afghanistan	5

NETWORK STRUCTURE AND CONTACT

BVMN is a volunteer led endeavor, acting as an alliance of organisations in the Western Balkans and Greece. BVMN is based on the efforts of participant 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 for volunteers in the field and four paid positions.

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 please email us at mail@borderviolence.eu.

For press and media requests please contact:
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