



**Border Violence
Monitoring Network**



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ILLEGAL PUSH-BACKS AND BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS

**MARCH 2020
BALKAN REGION**



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Executive Overview

In March, pushbacks along the Balkan Route continued unabated, placing transit groups at physical risk and violating their fundamental rights to asylum and due process. Two simultaneous crises amplified and brought into sharp relief the breakdown of legal and humanitarian protections for people-on-the-move along the route. The movement of thousands of people in Turkey towards the Greek border drew the issue of collective expulsion across the Evros river into view. Meanwhile, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe was used as justification for new and concerning policy at multiple points along the route, such as the proposed militarization of Slovenian borders.

The Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) recorded the pushback of 165 people during March, a third of whom suffered cruel collective expulsions from Greek territory. These cases from the Evros region are presented against the backdrop of violence at the Kastanies border crossing and the challenging conditions found in Turkish detention centres upon return. Alongside events at the Greek land border, this report also considers several new cases of maritime pushbacks from Italian port cities, with respondents revealing the misapplication of readmissions agreements and extreme force to return them to Greece.

Movement via land through the central and western Balkans is analysed too. Especially, “chain pushback” phenomena initiated in Slovenia, detailed here with a case of a large family pushback (SLO-SRB), and the paper trail of other successive removals (SLO-BiH). The danger of collective expulsion from one country to another is coupled with increasingly violent displacement and attacks in major transit hubs like Belgrade, Sarajevo and Tuzla, and by the development of mass closed camps in the wake of the viral outbreak.

Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the ability of BVMN to collect individual testimonies has been severely limited. Yet, members of the Network are working hard to retain links with people on the ground and adopt new reporting strategies with the goal of minimizing the likelihood of infectious transmissions for people-on-the-move and volunteers alike.

General

Reporting Network

BVMN is a collaborative project between multiple grassroots organisations and NGOs working along the Balkan Route and Greece, documenting violations at borders directed towards people-on-the-move. The members have a common website database, used as a platform to collate testimonies of illegal pushbacks which are gathered through interviews. Testimony analysed in this March field report was recorded specifically by volunteers from No Name Kitchen and independent volunteers working in Thessaloniki. Field updates were also gathered from several network members, as well as locals in the region and independent activists.

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 and Greece. 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 50 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

USK - Una Sana Kanton

HR - Croatia

SRB - Serbia

SLO - Slovenia

ROM - Romania

HUN - Hungary

ITA - Italy

MNK - North Macedonia

GRK - Greece

TUR - Turkey

EU - European Union

Trends in Border Violence

Chain pushbacks on rail routes

A large collective expulsion of families into Serbia occurred last month from Slovenia, raising concern over the phenomena of “chain” pushbacks and intermediary role played by Croatia. The case, which occurred on 3rd March 2020 (see [3.1](#)), saw over 30 people from Iraq, Iran, Tunisia, Syria, Palestine, Afghanistan removed from a freight train in Slovenia and removed across multiple borders. Among the people affected, twelve were children and one a pregnant woman. This case paints a particularly interesting picture because of the documentation carried out by media and Slovenian authorities which overlaps and invites critical comparison with the report taken by BVMN.

The respondent was travelling with his wife and five year old daughter when the train carriages were searched by Slovenian authorities in Dobova. Officers described as “*Special Police*” climbed atop the train carriages with several dogs and located the group, who were hiding under a deposit of clay. The danger of being trapped under this mass is a reminder of the risks people are forced to take in order to reach safe sanctuary. The search carried out by the officers is also reminiscent of the controls used at train stations at Gevgelija (MNK) and Kelebia (HUN), showing the consistent controls people encounter along the route, and the dangers they must take to bypass them.



Photographs taken by Slovenian police on the scene ([InfoMigrants](#))

This incident received wider press coverage by news outlet [InfoMigrants](#), including photographic evidence taken by police on the scene. The article and photographic evidence, citing sources from the Novo Mesto police department, clearly show officers removing a family from a clay deposit on a date and location corresponding to the BVMN report. The article suggests that their condition was “*critical due to a lack of oxygen and the hardening of the clay*”. The press coverage focuses on the “rescue” carried out by Slovenian police, portraying the authorities as safeguarding protagonists, and masking much of the other

structural violence at play. According to testimony by people on the train, the group were searched, fingerprinted in a nearby station, and then delivered to the Croatian border. This suggests the act was more of a calculated collective expulsion rather than a rescue as told by sequence of photos in the InfoMigrants article.

After being transferred into Croatian territory, the transit group were detained overnight in Harmica (HR) where they were divided by gender, again searched by police and forced into a shared cell without beds or toilets. The cramped conditions are a reminder that while the general public are afforded the means to isolate and prevent the spread of Covid-19, people-on-the-move are not given such consideration. As one respondent described it:

“We spent all the night in that room without sleeping, we couldn’t breathe because of the large amount of people who were there and we were all lying on the floor.”

The following day, the group was divided into Croatian police vans and driven to the Serbian border close to Šid (SRB) where they were pushed back close to a section of the same railway line. This is notable because the final pushback - close to the rails - matches other reports from March (see [2.1](#)), and raises further questions about the dangers of leaving people near live train tracks, an act by the Croatian police which previously caused the [death of a young Afghan girl, Medina Husein, in 2017](#).

The chronology of this case gives insight into the divergence of narratives being projected by state authorities and the experience felt by people on the ground. It appears that the vulnerability of the families in question was only a noteworthy feature when it was viewed through the lens of the police camera. However, this vulnerability was of no concern as the transit group was pushed back across multiple borders, fulfilling repetitive patterns of negligence towards their safety.

Maritime cases from Italian ports

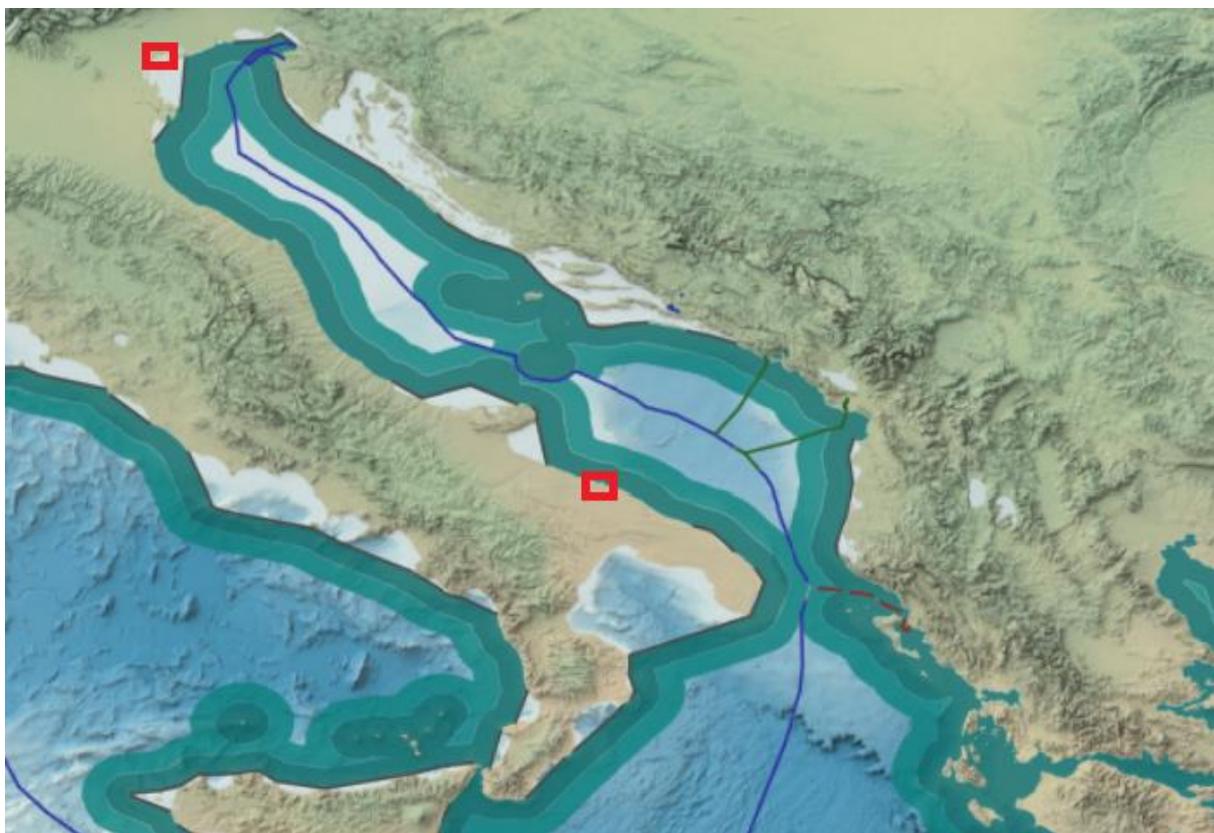
BVMN have traditionally covered land based pushbacks along the Balkan Route. However, March saw two reports gathered relating to illegal maritime removals from Italian ports to the Greek city of Patras. Expulsions via ferry routes have been occurring for some time and last month BVMN published a special report that touched on violations at the Greek sea border. Prompted by the latest findings from Patras, two new cases are analysed here, comparing land based pushback practices in the Western Balkans to implementation of removals from Italy across the Adriatic sea.

In an incident from the 26th February 2020 (see [6.2](#)), a young Afghan man was assaulted by four officers inside the port of Venice, after arriving by ship from Patras. Upon discovery in a

docked vessel he was first pushed to the ground and tasered by Italian police, then three of the perpetrators held him, while the fourth kicked him in the torso. Dragged across the floor and guarded by several police dogs, the respondent was then subject to theft as the officers stole his phone and threw it into the sea.

“They pushed my face on ground again and again”

The man was taken to a police station in the port, but was ignored when he made several clear verbal attempts to request asylum in Italy. The same day he was put back on a ferry and shipped to Greece where he was handed over to the authorities. Though this incident involved a removal across sea, several key elements are consistent with the illegal practices found at land borders along the Balkan Route. Denial of asylum rights, use of extreme force, theft and use of dogs are all common elements. Furthermore the misapplication of the readmissions agreement between ITA-GRK also bears resemblance to the dubious methods used by Slovenia in the initiation of chain pushbacks through Croatia.



Red squares: port cities where cases occurred. Dark green line: 12 nautical miles from the coast which forms “Territorial Waters”. Light green line: “Contiguous Zone” (Source: [MarineRegions](#)).

However there are some clear topographical differences, mainly in the fact that maritime borders represent a different territorial configuration to their land counterparts as per the [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea](#). States can claim up to twelve nautical miles of sea from their coast, measured from the “Baseline” (low-tide mark). Beyond territorial

waters is a further buffer area known as the “Contiguous Zone”, which adds a further twelve nautical miles for “*preventing or punishing violations of customs, fiscal, immigration or sanitary (and thus residual national security) legislation*”. This means a person’s right to asylum and due process begins, and is retained, while they are in the vessel approaching or leaving port. The respondent in this case had the right to claim asylum twelve miles out of port. However he was forced to conceal himself, presumably in the knowledge that should he present himself to authorities onboard the vessel he would likely be subject to violence and direct removal.

Alongside this, the use of commercial transport in the removal process also differentiates these cases from those occurring at land borders on the Balkan Route. In a report from March (see [6.1](#)) detailing an apprehension in the port of Bari (ITA), the two respondents describe being returned to Greece in a ferry where police “*sealed them in a cabin*”. This represents a break from the standard interaction between neighbouring states at borders, questioning whether private actors are also liable within unlawful proceedings. While cross border activity along this sea route has been significantly reduced due to Covid-19, BVMN intends to continue to monitor such cases and report on actions taken by Italian authorities.

Escalating violence in Evros

In March BVMN, working with a coalition of other actors, published a special report on violations at both sea and land borders in Greece. This publication, drawing on several pushback reports (see [5.1](#), [5.2](#) and [5.3](#)), confirmed longstanding practices of violence and fundamental rights breaches at the national and EU border.

Erdogan’s decision to “open the gates” to Europe at the end of February trapped tens of thousands of people-in-transit in an effective no-man’s-land between the Greek Evros region and Turkey. The Greek response saw a ramping up of targeted violence through the use of [water cannons](#), [tear gas](#) and [general militarisation](#). The EU acted swiftly, praising the Greek measures and [deploying a rapid border intervention team](#) (RABIT) to support the protection of the blocs external borders, despite the extensive rights violations reported by international media and groups like [Amnesty](#).



Large groups captured by GRK military in March (Source:[REUTERS](#))

For those who have been documenting border practices in the region, these events reflect a continuation of established trends. Testimonies collected by BVMN on the GRK-TUR border detailing [inhumane detention methods](#), [boat removals at night](#), and violence by masked perpetrators, while already commonplace in the previous eight months, have proliferated during the last month. A case shared in March (see [5.2](#)) described how at the Greek bank of the Evros river:

“People were forced to undress and then, eight by eight, were loaded into a boat”

The recent fortification of the land border matches with a range of weaponry, defence tactics and inhumane behavior such as stripping, that have been detailed in multiple previous pushback cases; specifically the presence of [masked officers](#) and [sustained violence](#). Whilst these practices are nothing new, their intensification in conjunction with marked violence at the official border crossings have further embedded an unacceptable level of physical abuse targeting people-on-the-move.

Detention and data collection in Turkey

In recent months, volunteers in Thessaloniki recorded three cases of pushbacks taking place along the Evros border into Turkey. Alongside the pushback accounts, these reports also help paint a picture of the transit groups’ reception by Turkish authorities. The incidents report varying levels of hostility and give some indication as to how transit groups are processed and detained in the region of Edirne (TUR).

In one account, the respondent recalls being taken to a facility in Bosna (TUR) close to the city of Erdine, where he witnessed violence towards other detainees and had his photograph and fingerprints taken, before release (see [5.3](#)). In another case from 3rd February 2020, a respondent recounts being confronted by aggressive authorities dressed in “*army uniforms with the Turkish flags*”. Preventing the group from crossing to Greece, the officers detained them for three days (see [5.2](#)). In this incident no details were taken from the group, but the respondent describes a previous interaction with Turkish authorities where his fingerprints and photograph were taken and, latterly, a paper was issued to him.

These reports stand in contrast to the reception of a transit group following a mass-expulsion between Likofos (GRK) and Subaşı (TUR) on 11th December 2019 (see [5.1](#)). Upon the groups arrival back to Turkey, the receiving officers supplied food, blankets, clothes and, where necessary, medical assistance. In this instance, those without documentation were given a paper and released, whilst those with documents were removed to unknown locations.

Mass identification is commonly used across [EU member states](#) and its neighbouring countries in order to track and [prevent](#) migration flows. Likewise, the Turkish government has built up its own [vast database](#), *Göç-Net*, containing biometric data in the form of photographs and fingerprints of all foreigners residing in the country. Before its dissolution, the informal settlement of Pazarkule - which sprang up during the stand-off between Turkey and Greece over migration - offered a recent example of how fingerprinting is not only being [forced upon individuals](#), but also implemented to restrict the movement. People stuck in the official border crossing were reportedly fingerprinted as they tried to leave the military perimeter, meaning the confinement by Turkish authorities also carried ulterior motives connected to identification, dispersal and potentially deportation. It is important to bear in mind that at this point the restriction of movement was not yet framed under the pretext of COVID-19 protections, and only laterly did the Turkish government depict the removal of people to closed facilities as an act of [quarantine](#).

Update on the Situation

Bosnia-Herzegovina

Lipa tent settlement constructed

The potential for a rerun of the chaotic scenes witnessed last year outside the Temporary Reception Centres in western BiH was furthered in March by the announcement of a new camp in Lipa. BVMN raised its concerns over the construction of another large tent site,

especially in light of the public health ramifications and previous observations of the Trnovi and Vučjak settlements.



Photos of the first tents erected in Lipa (Source:[FUCZ](#))

In March, the Federation government declared a state of disaster, and framed the building of a new centre in Lipa as a measure *“to prevent the onset of the disease caused by Covid-19”*. The capacity - set to start with over 2000 people - has caused great concern that the transit populations outside the Temporary Reception Centres will be forcibly moved to the tent settlement, as was carried out last summer with [Vučjak](#).

Already, a total restriction on movement has been put in place outside the official camps, which alongside the police deployment and securitisation of the centres, means the majority of people-on-the-move in USK are involuntarily confined in ever more unsanitary and cramped conditions. In statements shared by the [Guardian](#), BVMN noted that the half-developed Lipa camp would further these risks were it go ahead, and would place *“vulnerable groups into a mass site with inadequate sanitation, no recourse to self-isolation, and a lack of access to institutional medical support”*, sentiments echoed by coverage from [Balkan Insight](#). At time of publication the site is not yet open, but the implications are set to be dire for transit groups stuck in BiH during this worrying convergence of public health and migratory restrictions.

Dispersals from Tuzla and Sarajevo

During the last month, violent displacements have occurred in BiH cities, disrupting the daily life and subsistence activities of the people-on-the-move, and marking concerted efforts to shift populations towards large camps. BVMN spoke with Murad* who is living in Tuzla with his friend. Both from Morocco, they have asked for asylum in BiH and are hosted in settled accommodation. Murad* shared what happened on the 12th March 2020;

“We were sleeping when the police came to our house, and started knocking on the door and windows. They were shouting: ‘Five minutes. Grab your stuff!’ We did not even have time to wash our faces. In this situation, you feel the disrespect. And we have papers you know. (...) They brought us to the bus station. The police woman told me we had to go to the camp in Sarajevo, show our papers and then we would be able to buy a bus ticket and come back.”

Both Murad and his friend were finally allowed to go back to their house after showing their asylum seekers card to one of the police officers, but many other people-on-the-move without documents, or with the 14 day white paper, were forcibly removed to Sarajevo.

“There was a guy who was seriously beaten. I think he was taken to a police station in Sarajevo. He came back a few days later with his face really injured.”

This involuntary removal of people, even asylum seekers from their registered homes, illustrates the stripping of autonomy that transit communities and refugees in BiH face. In contrast, the [International Organisation for Migration](#), who managed the resettlement of people to the Blazuj camp in Sarajevo, labeled the venture a success. Regional representative Peter Van der Auweret shared on Twitter that there had been a *“successful relocation of migrants sleeping outside in Tuzla”*.

Seen in comparison with Murad*’s experience, this account from the EU’s main implementing partner in BiH misrepresents what was rough and indiscriminate attempt to move independent populations to centralised accomodation sites away from public spaces. Labeling the relocation as a targeted ploy. Murad* shared that many of those removed from the [streets of Tuzla](#) were trying to earn some money by selling items like tissues at traffic lights or supermarkets, and were often detained by the police or driven to locations out of the city. The events on 12th March were arguably also part of a systematic approach to stem development of these informal communities, rather than resolve their accomodation status.



Left: Person selling tissues in Tuzla (Source:[TuzlaInfo](#)). Right: A minor beaten by police, 25th February 2020 (Source:[\[Re:\]portsSarajevo](#))

Similar transgressions have occurred in Sarajevo against transient homeless populations. One case reported by [\[RE:\]ports Sarajevo](#) saw a minor aged only 15 years old attacked by five police officers as he tried to sell sanitary items at an intersection in the city. These attacks are in line with trends seen in previous reports of internal violence covered by BVMN. [Volunteers in Sarajevo](#) have described the violence as “*connected to an increase in racist policies and statements made by the government against people in transit*”. Since Fahrudin Radončić, the Minister of Security took office in late December 2019, an intensified anti-migrant agenda has developed, epitomised by statements made in a meeting with the Mayor of Tuzla during March. Referring to policy later implemented, the [Minister declared](#): “*My job is to eliminate and return the migrants to their countries of origin and not encourage them from disrupting the lives of the local population*”.

Serbia

Anti-migrant rallies and border patrols

Across the last 30 days, far-right Serbian anti-migrant Facebook groups have seen a membership increase of 22,000 people. These groups routinely publish anti-migrant propaganda, post the locations of NGO humanitarian distribution points and encourage and propagate a variety of direct actions.

The online presence of far-right activity in Serbia facilitated several large anti-migrant protests in February and March ([Subotica](#) and [Belgrade](#)). Rather than one-off events, these gatherings have forged the base for daily action, seen in the establishment of racist ‘night-patrols’ in which large groups of men harass and threaten refugees and migrants. Dressed in all black with dogs at their side, these ‘night-patrols’ targeted refugees and migrants in Belgrade giving them leaflets stating;

“Because of the frequent sick attacks on Serbian women and girls, you are prohibited from moving outside the migrant centres from 10 pm to 6 am and moving more than three people in a group during the day. Attacks on our citizens will not go unpunished.”

[InfoPark](#), a member of the Network based in Belgrade, lambasted the decision of the government to permit the demonstrations, having “*publicly denounced such initiatives as “fascist” in the past*”. Videos published online indicate that similar patrols have also taken place along the Serbian- Bosnian border. In the cities of Loznica and Banja Koviljaca the night-patrols drove in convoys to informal refugee settlements and presented themselves to the people inside. In a [video recording shared by the group](#), a member of the patrol indicates that the police are also present with them and thus they would not hurt anyone. If true, this is

another example of Serbian police working together with far-right and fascist groups to threaten and intimidate transit populations as previously seen in Šid. Whilst none of the videos uploaded online by the group include violence, in every video of the so-called “night-patrol”, members of the group indicate their intention to cause harm and trouble if the people-on-the-move do not comply with the group's requests.

Military seal of camps in light of Covid-19

In the last month the situation in Šid (SRB) has worsened, in particular with the advent of Covid-19 which forced [No Name Kitchen](#) volunteers to leave. Before the virus, a systematic practice of street based violence had become entrenched by the deployment of Special Police divisions, who consistently robbed and beat transit groups in the city limits. Internal violence was also marked by an incident in front of Šid's Family Camp where two Serbian locals approached the centre pretending to ask for help. As reported to volunteers, one of the men proceeded to point a gun at a man in the camp, and the other perpetrator punched a 14-year-old boy who was present on the scene.

Alongside this extreme level of violence, camps in the Šid area are reported by people inside to function as detention centers. Measures taken by the Serbian government in March have cemented this fact. The two largest centres, Principovac and Asascevcı, are now garrisoned by the army. Similar conditions are reported across Serbia, where the shift towards isolated camp facilities - a preexisting tactic - has been almost completely achieved during March.

Until a month ago, Principovac camp housed 500 people, today it stands at 1000. Residents inside report that new people continue to arrive and are crammed into overspill accommodation in poorly serviced and overcrowded tents. Many sleep in corridors, or share beds, meaning that preventing the spread of COVID-19 is virtually impossible. Alongside this the food and general amenities in the camps are inadequate. As one resident in Asascevcı stated;

“I'm afraid to eat here, today I did not eat anything. We got poisoned last night because of spoiled food”

Unsure when the pandemic or these draconian measures will end, people inside camps shared a growing frustration at their treatment. Sealing people under military guard marks a fundamental neglect for basic rights, and has furthered the health risk to the communities inside who do not have the freedom to pursue recommended health guidelines and remain cramped in indefinite detention.

Croatia

Porin asylum centre fenced



Construction of the fence around the asylum centre in Porin (Source: [Komunal](#))

On [March 17th](#) the Porin Centre for asylum seekers in Zagreb (HR) was fenced off to restrict those inside from moving freely. This decision was framed as a measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19, however, the population was not informed of the construction of the fence and had no time to prepare with relevant health supplies and protective equipment such as masks, gloves and sanitiser.

The fence is to enforce self-isolation for the approximately 600 people inside, but there are no precautions to limit close contact in shared living spaces or ensure proper hygiene conditions. This, combined with restricted access to health care, will accelerate the spread of the virus. This imbalance in restrictions and protections is likely to induce fear and indicate that people-on-the-move are more likely to carry the virus, a fact patently dispelled by the current spread of the virus. Without status those who are at a higher risk of infection and fatality, have been further exposed by the physical lockdown.

Slovenia

The paper trail of pushbacks

The Bosnian news outlet [Zurnal](#) offered up further evidence of “chain” pushbacks from SLO to BiH during March. Correspondents spoke to a group of Pakistani people who had arrived during the night at Miral Temporary Reception Centre in USK, notably still carrying the readmissions notice issued to them by Slovenian police prior to their collective expulsion from

Croatia. The physical documents are evidence that Slovenian authorities are willfully readmitting transit groups to Croatia where it is known collective expulsions to either BiH or SRB are common. As the article states;

“Croatian security agencies did not transfer the migrant through readmission to the jurisdiction of police agencies in BiH, which means that Croatian police officers only transferred him illegally to the territory of BiH”

The case can be compared to the train pushback noted earlier in this report. In that case (see [3.1](#)), Croatian authorities received over 30 people from Slovenia, detained them overnight in a shared cell and pushed them into Serbia. The photographs from the Novo Mesto police department (SLO) and readmissions paperwork shared in the Zurnal article clearly implicate Slovenian border controls in the initiation of “chain” pushbacks to BiH.

The prevalence of illegal collective expulsions from Croatia is well known, and Slovenia’s role in feeding people-in-transit into this domino system is exposed again in this case. Moreover, it can be argued that the Slovenian state is an accessory to the violence and illegality carried out by their Croatian counterparts. BVMN reported on violence by Croatian authorities again in March. In one case the respondent had a gun held to his head by police, while in a [video](#) shared on facebook an injured transit group is shown fleeing a small river, with Croatian officers standing on the opposing bank. The institutional markers, such as the readmissions notice from Slovenia, must not be lost within this system of violence, and represent an institutional foundation for practices at the EU external border.

Failed motion to militarize the border

Late March saw a proposal to further empower the army in the management of Slovenia’s borders allegedly in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. However, many have denounced the claims suggesting the outbreak is being used as a tool to introduce harder immigration controls. In an [open letter](#) signed by BVMN, [InfoKolpa](#), [Are You Syrious?](#), [Radio Študent](#) and [Doctors for Asylees](#), the signatories decried the move by the newly elected government in Ljubljana to invoke article Article 37.a of the Defence Act to grant the army more power in border operations. Addressing the concerns directly to the EU Commission, the letter stated;

“there is substantial concern that such indefinite military power would expand into martial law across the country”.

BVMN has been collecting data on illegal chain pushbacks from Slovenia, which as the letter notes have been actively supported by the Slovenian army through detection and apprehension. The scope of military actors is symbolic of the strategy applied against people-

on-the-move across the EU's external border, where defence policy has become interlocked with migration control. Network members such as InfoKolpa have witnessed the [expanding powers granted to the Slovenian police](#) in the execution of illegal border enforcement, and the proposal of the Slovenian government now looks to integrate the military even further into this web of unlawful border protection.

At a time when COVID-19 has placed keen demands on society for medical personnel, this militarised response seeks to use the pandemic to instal more draconian measures against transit groups. After domestic and international pressure, the [Defence Committee voted](#) on the proposal, but did not reach the two thirds majority for the motion to be put forward to the Slovenian parliament. This result is a reprieve, halting what would have been a step towards further rights violations against people-on-the-move. However, BVMN views blatant attempts to re-centre migration controls through the prism of military control as a cause for concern.

Greece

Criminalisation of transit

Since Greece [suspended the right to asylum](#) last month, the humanitarian and legal fallout has slowly emerged. Beyond engaging in the violent and a regularised pushback regime, which [BVMN's recent report](#) has documented extensively, substantive due process concerns within the Greek judiciary system need to be addressed.

As [Panorama](#), a German investigative news show reported, there is strong evidence for expedited summary trials against people-on-the-move in the closed and heavily guarded camp of Kastanies in Northern Thrace. UNHCR estimates that more than 50 people-on-the-move have already been tried without legal council and convicted of up to four years in prison. According to the Panorama report, such trials were carried out even against minors – the youngest defendant being a 12-year old Afghan girl. Not only is there no legal basis for such trials, border crossings are not illegal if a person has the intention to claim asylum, but the ease with which the Greek judiciary has abandoned even the pretense of due process is remarkable. As [Bill Frelick of Human Rights Watch](#) put it succinctly: *“Anyone facing criminal penalties has a right to a fair trial.”*

Due process concerns in the Greek asylum system are nothing new. One only needs to recall the charges brought forward against the [“Moria35”](#), a group of people-on-the-move detained for many months until they were ultimately released, and those lodged at humanitarian workers including [Sara Mardini](#). But in the context of the recent suspension of asylum rights, termed “illegal” by a [report of German human rights experts](#), it appears that the Greek

judiciary has fundamentally reinterpreted its role. It has begun to focus on a vague mission of “border defense”, rather than upholding the law of the land.

Fines and arrest of homeless transit groups

Greece has been under a national lockdown for the month of March as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. There is an SMS text system in place to grant confirmation for people to leave the house; encompassing six possible necessary excursions e.g. shopping or essential work. This system is particularly difficult for people-on-the-move to navigate due to a lack of phones, information, or familiarity with the Greek language. [Mobile Info Team](#) identified at least 13 members of the migrant homeless community in Thessaloniki (GRK) have received fines up to 150EUR for not following the text system; one individual has already been fined five times. An NGO in Greece, ARSIS - Association for the Social Support of Youth - have been in talks with the police director regarding this situation. The police formally informed ARSIS that they did not support the fining of homeless individuals, however there is not a clear answer to what will be the result of the fines already given and whether non payment may lead to custodial sentences.

This is another area in which the vulnerability of an already at-risk group has sharply increased under state responses to the pandemic. The transit population living homeless in Thessaloniki have no access to food, water, and basic amenities without leaving the squats and going out to seek supplies in the city. Caught in this dilemma, the institutional response, has effectively criminalised hunger for marginalised groups, who face a further suspension of their basic human rights as the lockdown continues into April.

Italy

Update on arrivals in Trieste

BVMN share with concern the updates from volunteers working in Trieste (ITA) during March, especially in light of COVID-19. One of the main arrival points on the Balkan Route, Trieste is the primary destination for those forced to circumvent Croatian and Slovenian authorities on long foot journeys from BiH and SRB. But reception in the city has worsened since the countrywide lockdown came into force and the asylum office closed.

In a city where the vice-mayor previously boasted about “stealing blankets from homeless people”, the support of grassroots organisations and especially medical volunteers has been essential in meeting the needs of arriving transit groups who are shunned by the state. Within the context of COVID-19, the access of these teams to transient groups in the train station

and other locations has been hampered, despite being the only comprehensive healthcare provision available. Volunteers describe the indiscriminate acts of Italian authorities in removing people from the streets without carrying out health screening, and cite other cases where arrivals centres in Trieste received transfers of residents from Lombardia (the epicentre of the pandemic) who later tested positive for the virus.

Over crowded conditions in a nearby centre in Gradisca lead to a [hunger strike](#) from residents who reported up to 40 new arrivals from the Balkan Route being crammed inside every day. Meanwhile acts on the street marry up to the repression against homeless people noted in Greece, with [spot fines and penalties](#) in force across Italy. While the border with Slovenia is shut, transit groups continue to reach Trieste, forced into an ever more precarious situation in the camps and on the streets. Thus the people who finish their long journey through the Western Balkans do not receive a reprieve from the violence and rights suspensions, but continue in the uncertain conditions found in Italy.

Glossary of Reports, March 2020

The Network covered the pushback of 165 people across 11 separate incidents in March. The reports account for a wide demographic of people including men, women and minors, those in official camp accommodation and others in informal settlements. The respondents also originate from a broad set of countries, including: Syria, Egypt, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, Iran, Iraq and Palestine. The cases involved:

- Three direct pushbacks from Croatia to Bosnia-Herzegovina.
- Three pushbacks to Serbia (Two direct pushbacks, one from Croatia, one from Romania, and a chain pushback from Slovenia via Croatia).
- Three direct pushbacks from Greece to Turkey.
- Two pushbacks from Italy to Greece.

Link	Incident	Recorded	Group	Demographic
<i>Croatia to BiH</i>				
1.1	24th February	1st March	30	Morocco, Algeria, Egypt
1.2	7th March	10th March	6	Morocco
1.3	13th March	15th March	6	Egypt

<i>Croatia to Serbia</i>				
2.1	29th February	6th February	6	Morocco
<i>Slovenia to Serbia</i>				
3.1	3rd March	6th March	32	Afghanistan, Palestine, Iran, Syria, Iraq, Tunisia
<i>Romania to Serbia</i>				
4.1	25th February	5th March	6	Morocco, Algeria, Sudan
<i>Greece to Turkey</i>				
5.1	11th December 2019	23rd February	20	Syria, Morocco
5.2	8th February	11th March	16	Morocco, Algeria
5.3	20th February	9th March	40	Pakistan, Morocco
<i>Italy to Greece</i>				
6.1	22nd February	7th March	2	Egypt
6.2	26th February	2nd March	1	Afghanistan
<i>Find all reports on the database here.</i>				

Network Structure and Contact

BVMN is a volunteer led endeavour, acting as an alliance of organisations in the 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: press@borderviolence.eu