

**BORDER
VIOLENCE
AND
PUSH-BACK
REPORTS**

**BALKAN
REGION
JANUARY
2020**



Border Violence
Monitoring Network



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Contents

Executive Summary.....	2
General.....	3
Reporting Network.....	3
Methodology.....	3
Terminology.....	3
Abbreviations.....	3
Trends in Border Violence.....	4
Impact injuries: Mapping pushback violence around USK.....	4
Open asylum breaches in Croatia.....	6
Landmark findings on the use of torture during pushbacks.....	7
Update on the Situation.....	8
Croatia.....	8
EU Presidency challenged by MEPs.....	8
Bosnia-Herzegovina.....	9
Challenges to internal violence.....	9
“Temporary” shelter: Inside and outside of BiH camps.....	10
Serbia.....	12
Fascist attacks in Šid target volunteers.....	12
Shots fired at groups on the Hungarian border.....	13
Greece.....	14
Update from Thessaloniki.....	14
Planned fencing on Greek sea border.....	15
Frontex.....	16
Review of 2019 operations and entry statistics.....	16
Glossary of Reports, January 2020.....	17
Network Structure and Contact.....	18

Executive Summary

The Border Violence Monitoring Network recorded the pushback of 263 people during January, across fourteen different incidents. Work by volunteers in the field shone a light on the continued use of blunt physical force to damage, impair and brutalise people-on-the-move. Reports involved a range of perpetrators, with Croatia carrying out the majority of recorded pushbacks, alongside three chain removals from Slovenia and two mass pushbacks from North Macedonia to Greece.

This report looks in particular at the use of beatings during violent collective expulsion from Croatia and maps pushback location data to the physical violence occurring in these sites. These violations are presented alongside BVMN's wider findings from 2019 on the use of torture or cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment, a publication summarised in this report. Specific analysis is also offered on asylum breaches made by Croatian officials, which add further weight to recent allegations made by MEPs that Croatia is not upholding the rule of law, despite recently assuming the Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Reception conditions in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia are also analysed. Events in January show a systemic lack of humane accommodation, repression against informal transit communities, and in the case of Serbia, a worrying rise in right wing attacks against volunteers and people-on-the-move. This publication also looks at the use of warning shots against transit groups on the Hungarian border and updates from Greece's borders with N. Macedonia and Turkey.

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, Escuela con Alma, local groups and independent activists.



**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 107 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

USK - Una Sana Kanton

HUN - Hungary

MNK - North Macedonia

GRK - Greece

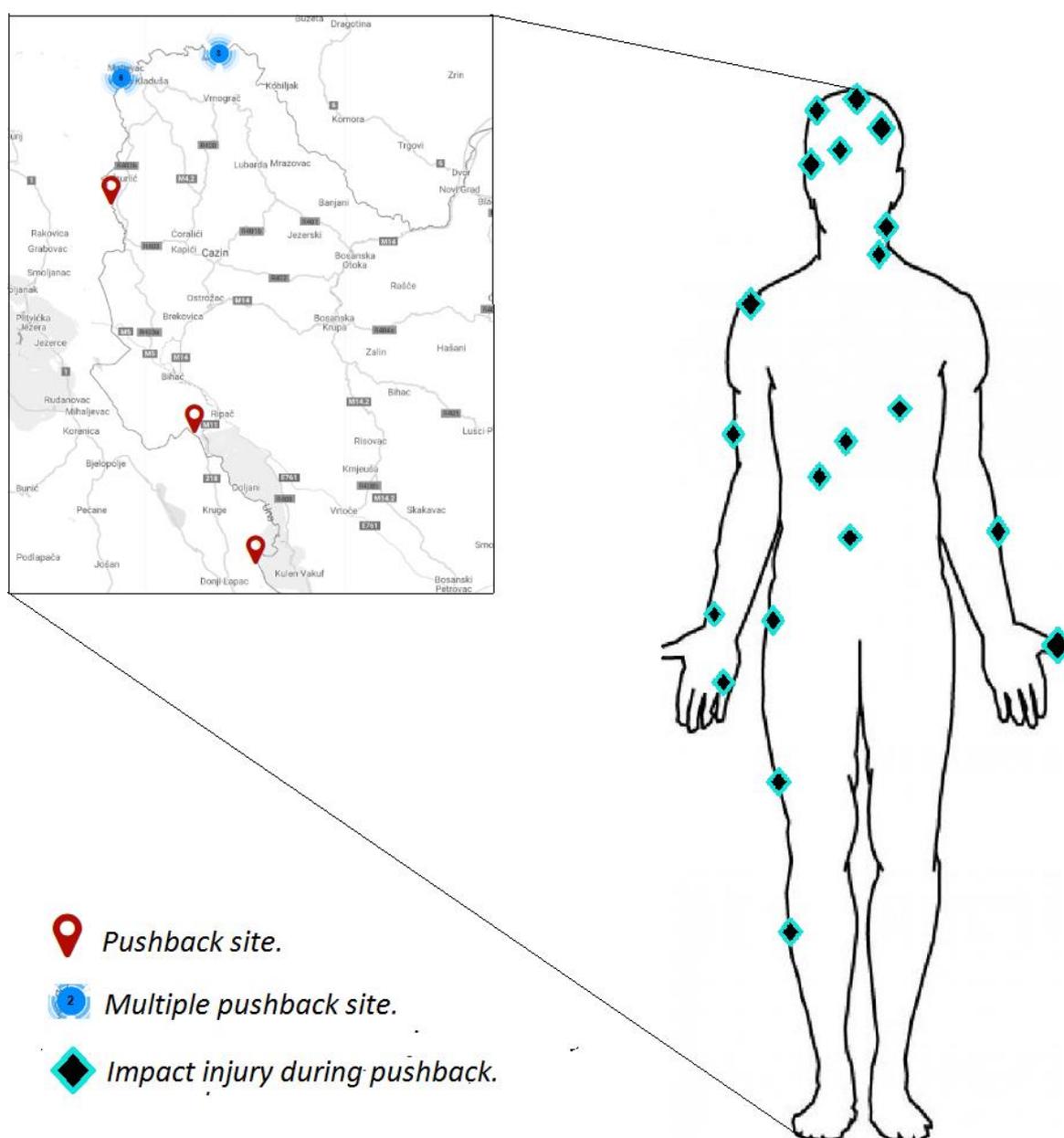
TUR - Turkey

EU - European Union

Trends in Border Violence

Impact injuries: Mapping pushback violence around USK

The Network has been using geolocation data as a tool to map collective expulsions from Croatia to Bosnia-Herzegovina since spring 2018. The pushback sites show a diverse set of secluded rural locations used to eject people illegally from Croatian territory and are at their highest density around the north and western border area of the Una-Sana Canton. In January, volunteers completed a mapping project, investigating how location data correlates with the impact injuries sustained in 12 incidents across the month.



Location data and injury map based on January reports (Source: BVMN – see glossary).

The results show the persistent use of “disproportionate force” in the removal of transit groups, as explored in a recent [yearly report by BVMN on abuses of people-on-the-move](#). As seen by the target points, a dangerous level of blows were landed on respondents heads, and joints: producing high risks of unconsciousness and ligament/bone damage.

Over 80% of recorded pushback cases during January involved beating with hands, batons or kicking by Croatian police. These actions have been framed by two opposing narratives, while we often see pushbacks being denied by the Croatian authorities, at times these actions are also legitimised, such as, when former head [Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic](#) suggested a “*little bit of force is needed*” in removing people from Croatia.



Left and Centre: Baton injuries from violent assault (Source: [1.3](#)) Right: Bone fracture (Source: [1.2](#))

Under domestic and international law such practice has no legal footing. [Directive 2008/115](#) of the EU places coercive methods “as a last resort” and that they “shall not exceed reasonable force”. Yet several cases from January showed the systematic use of corridor or tunnel methods, where police officers made lines at the back of vans in order to attack transit groups as they exit: purely to inflict physical harm (see [1.4](#)). In January, the severity of one attack (see [1.2](#)) led to a double bone break (as pictured above), field paramedics found the beating victim with:

“a radius and scaphoid fracture in the left hand, and a fissure in the right hand”

The operative use of extreme blunt force has stood out as a regular method of Croatian authorities to brutalise people-on-the-move since spring 2018. Attacks from January serve as clear examples of police brutality, even when considering them outside of their context as illegal collective expulsions.

Open asylum breaches in Croatia

Several cases of asylum gate-keeping were recorded in January: respondents recounted that police officers flatly denied their right to request international protection in Croatia. Despite being an official entry point for such requests, officers in the pushback regime demonstrated clear internal mandates to block or deny transit groups the right to lodge asylum claims.

In previous cases recorded by BVMN, excessive violence has been used to target people making vocal claims for asylum. Alongside this violent rejection of people's asylum rights, institutional narratives also support the closure of access. The pushback of an Afghan transit group (see [1.5](#)) in January offered an intimate account of the structural barriers upheld by Croatian authorities to deny persons in transit access to the asylum system. The respondent described a discussion with officers at the site of apprehension.

"[They] asked the Croatian authorities for asylum, but the officers reportedly replied: 'It's not our job, it's government job.'"

Meanwhile in another case, the officers declared that the group could only make a claim in the capital (see [1.4](#)):

'I am sorry, no asylum here. If you want asylum go to Zagreb, no asylum here in Karlovac.'



*Left: Croatia's green border
(Source: [CMS](#)).*

*Right: Apprehension point, UNHCR offices
Zagreb (Source: [BVMN](#))*

A person's right to claim for international protection is not bound to a specific body or geographic area, and they bear such rights even when crossing the green border between states. To confuse the location of Croatia's main asylum centre in Zagreb with the fundamental rights that must be afforded a Third Country National can be read in two different ways: either a lack of understanding, or a willful ignorance of asylum law. Analysing previous pushback data, BVMN has observed multiple pushbacks from Zagreb, even from

areas close to the Porin asylum centre, or the street in front of UNHCR's office. This evidence suggests that a spatial misconception by officers does not exist.

The actions are perhaps better understood within the hierarchical structures of the Ministry of Interior, illustrated by [whistleblower accounts from 2019](#) where officers explained the falsification of official procedure. Explaining the process, the whistleblower said that when capturing potential asylum seekers inside Croatian territory, the *“shift leader then files an official but falsified account of a deterrent”*, meaning the group is not registered as entering Croatia territory at all, but turned back from the border. This evidence of pushback “administration”, shows how misapplication of the law is mediated by institutional hierarchy, rather than adherence to codified acts.

Landmark findings on the use of torture during pushbacks

In January BVMN published a [comprehensive study on Croatian pushbacks](#), analysing twelve months of data on extreme violence towards transit groups in the territory. The findings show serious violations of domestic and international law: over 80% of cases *“contained one or, in most cases, multiple features of violence indicating either torture or cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment”*. The report shifts analysis of pushbacks from simply a legal critique of collective expulsion, and instead situates the practice within a wider analysis of unlawful police brutality on a par with torture.

The report investigates six categories of violation:

- Excessive and Disproportionate Force
- Electric Discharge Weapons (EDWs)
- Forcing to undress
- Threats or Excessive Force With Firearms
- Inhumane Treatment Inside Police Vehicles
- Detention With No Basic Facilities

The analysis of firearms abuse is particularly pertinent given that 25% of cases recorded by BVMN in 2019 involved threats or use of guns, and two people were shot with live rounds in Croatia during November. The latest [torture report \(pg. 17\)](#) looks at a catalogue of firearms use which account for clear breaches of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, seen overtly in one case where a mock execution was carried out which officers imitating the process of shooting a kneeling detainee through the temple. These methods appear regularly in BVMN reports, and similarities were seen in the apprehension of a group

in January where, despite the compliance of the transit group, a “policeman pointed a gun to one respondent’s forehead” (see [1.4](#)).

The publication was presented both in the European parliament and parallel to Croatian Prime Minister Plenkovic’s meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Media coverage is also up on the severe infringements during capture, detention, transport and violent expulsion of transit groups from Croatia (into the territories of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia). [Neues Deutschland](#) stated that “Elementary human and refugee rights are overridden in the event of illegal rejections and push-backs at the EU’s external borders”. Seen in conjunction with January’s findings, the report exhibits violations that continue into 2020 and represent an ongoing affront to rule of law at Europe’s outer boundary.

Update on the Situation

Croatia

EU Presidency challenged by MEPs

On the occasion of Croatia’s Presidency in the Council of the European Union, MEPs have lambasted the country’s track record with regards to people-on-the-move. German MEP [Ska Keller called out Croatia](#) for destroying the peoples belongings and as well as using undue violence. Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic responded by claiming that Croatia was upholding its obligations under European and International Law and that the reports of violence were unsubstantiated. He said that:

“Croatia won’t become a hotspot for migrants.”

Two weeks later in the Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) Committee, [MEPs held up photos captured by BVMN](#) of Croatia’s abusive policing methods. MEPs showed evidence of extreme beatings, dog attacks and the use of electric discharge weapons. Whilst showing an image of a young three-year-old child who sustained injuries during an attack on her mother, Dutch MEP Tineke Strik urged the Croatian presidency to:

“Make sure that Croatia’s external border controls goes hand in hand with the respect for fundamental rights and access to an asylum procedure”.



MEP's hold aloft pictures of injuries from Croatian pushbacks (Source: [GUENGL](#))

Striking a similar tone, German MEP Dietmar Köster said,

“We all know Croatian law enforcement to be regularly performing beatings, forced undressing, using tasers, pushing people into rivers, and stealing and breaking peoples’ phones to erase evidence.”

In response to these statements, as well as a visit by MEPs to Croatia, Croatian interior minister Davor Bozinovic stuck to the line of his government, arguing that claims of violence were unfounded and that all accusations had emanated from the left-wing of the European Parliament. It is certainly true that leftwing politicians have been at the forefront of drawing attention to Croatia’s outrageous violations of European and international law. In fact, as the volume of BVMN’s reports clearly show, these politicians have acted in a commendable fashion to put the spotlight on Croatia’s outrageous violation of human rights at its border.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

Challenges to internal violence

The Network has shared multiple accounts of internal violence cases from the West Bosnian cities of Velika Kladuša and Bihać. However, continued reports from across BiH suggest that local police repression against transit communities is occurring in various transit hubs, and not confined only to the Una-Sana Kanton. A recent [complaint made to the police in Sarajevo](#) challenges the growing use of dispersion, physical violence and theft by police forces to target

transit communities in urban areas. Testifying in the Stari Grad Police Department Sarajevo, one local recounts an incident from January where people were beaten in an unprovoked attack by BiH police.

“On January 10, at about 11:45 am, a police car stopped at the main road on Kulina Ban Street. Three police officers ran out, ran to four young men (migrants) who were walking along the street, violently dragged them off the sidewalk to Zelena Beretki Street and beat them. I note that the street where the young migrants were dragged is not part of the road, but a courtyard where vehicles are parked and cannot be escaped”

Practices like this have been increasing since November 2019, when serious cases of violence from BiH officials were reported in [an article from Are You Syrious](#) and regular forced removals to the [settlement of Vučjak](#) were taking place. The violence comes in parallel with the lack of asylum access, housing options and criminalisation of informal settlement. Local law enforcement must be held accountable, but it is clear this precarious situation is a product of EU border externalisation and must be read alongside Brussels’ regional strategy for non-member states.



Transit groups sleeping rough in Sarajevo (Source: [Žurnal](#)).

“Temporary” shelter: Inside and outside of BiH camps

The winter months continue to bring harsh living conditions for people-in-transit in BiH. The institutional provision of winter housing comes via the “Temporary Reception Centres” established by IOM. In these formal camps there is some escape from the coldest months of the year, but these centres were not built as long term solutions and even after 14 months of

being open, many people are still sleeping on cement floors or crowded into containers where they are crammed two to one bed and where skin diseases and viruses spread easily.

Camps offer some approximation to accommodation, and for the fortunate they are a pathway to the minimal services available for minors and adults. But the support is not enough. Of the 124 unaccompanied minors in [Ušivak camp](#) in Sarajevo only 40 have their legally entitled social worker or temporary guardian. Meanwhile adults are regularly turned away by camps, denied access on the basis of capacity or because some nationalities are considered low priority. This fact is devastating for those who face the freezing winter months outside in a climate which does not discriminate. The story inside the camps is often no better, with those who do find space sleeping crowded into tents or in containers, typically with persons who they have no social or familial relationships with.



Light summer tents in Temporary Reception Centre Bira (Source: Anon).



Factory close to Velika Kladusa where people are staying in tents (Source: [NNK](#))

In comparison to the formal camps, there are [over 2,000 migrants and refugees](#) living in informal structures in USK where living standards are also far below adequate. There is a great discrepancy in the quality of life that can be found in squats or abandoned houses. Typically, people are forced to find refuge in buildings where sections of the roof or walls are missing and windows are shattered or no longer exist. The ground is a cold, wet cement littered with a few sleeping bags and some old mattresses. The few tents sag with water and anything that is nonessential, even clothing occasionally, is burnt in the fire to stay warm. This results in overexposure to the elements and hinders safety. For everyone, there is limited access to facilities, food or protection against the weather.

But looking at the poor quality of camp accommodation in USK, it is unsurprising that many groups still remain outside the Temporary Reception Centres where they are unmolested by security, do not face such overcrowding and are able to move around with more freedom. Considering that people inside the official camps are sleeping in substandard conditions - many in the same tents found in the squats - it is worth noting IOM's failure to provide even a minimum standard of living for transit populations. People inside and outside of BiH's camps display a remarkable endurance given the repressive humanitarian framework being applied by EU implementing partners: unfortunately it is an endurance now necessary on the Western Balkan Route, where pushbacks are not the only institutional hazards faced.

Serbia

Fascist attacks in Šid target transit groups and volunteers

Several shocking incidents occurred during January in the Serbian border town of Šid, culminating in attempts to burn a tent with a person inside. Volunteers of the solidarity group No Name Kitchen, who work with the informal transit settlements in the area, reported on an escalation of violence carried out by representatives of a Serbian nationalist movement known as the Chetniks. Distributions of humanitarian aid at the squatted *Grafosrem* site were targeted by the fascist group, who emerged in the period of occupation during WW2 and became resurgent after the breakup of Yugoslavia.

The altercations were instigated by men with vehicles, one bearing a flag with Chetnik insignia, who arrived at the squat to carry out further clearance of the site. The men physically harassed people-on-the-move, volunteers and punctured the tire of a van carrying supplies for the squat.



Perpetrating group and Chetnik flag (Source:[NNK](#)) Abandoned Gasrofrem site (Source:[N1](#))

These acts were followed up with further physical violence just days later, with one volunteer being struck with a flag pole. In an interview with [Balkan Insight](#), NNK volunteers described the scene. “The [Sokoli] workers approached and started to put petrol on the plastic sheet,” which was part of a tent with another volunteer still inside. Burning of tents and possessions by the police and municipality has been a regular occurrence since autumn 2019 and members of the offending group were open about their collaboration with local government, stating,

“[They were] engaged by the Sid municipality to completely clean up the former Grafosrem company’s field.”

Regional media [N1](#) spoke to volunteers in the field who had been targeted by the attack and shared the court rulings that demanded two members of NNK leave Serbia by the 7th of February 2020, alongside a payment of a 170 euro fine each. The repression of solidarity work and closure of informal settlements sits within wider efforts to confine transit groups to formal camps. It is worth noting that these violent and precarious conditions are intimately connected to the bottleneck migration politics that Croatia and the EU’s external border have induced in Serbia.

Shots fired at groups on the Hungarian border

In the last eight weeks, volunteers in Subotica (SRB) have noticed an increased number of people-on-the-move transiting the area, especially in the localities of Kelebija, Sombor, Kanjiža and Horgoš. This flux was highlighted in the international press on 27th January 2020 when a group of approximately 50 people were filmed trying to cross the border fence via the Horgoš (SRB) and Röszke (HUN) road. Breaching the fence, the group were reportedly met with [warning shots](#) by the Hungarian police, a timely reminder of the common set of practices which inform border security across the region such as [firearms misuse](#).

An average of 30 - 50 people continue to live in the vicinity of Horgoš and report receiving regular checks from the Commissariat for Refugees who make adhoc head counts. Nearby Kanjiža remains a hot spot for transit and pushed back families. The situation with local police repression remains dire, with continued harassment, theft of belongings and evictions. The abandoned train station in Kanjiža has been evicted permanently and metal bars were fixed at the windows and doors, an action that follows on from previous efforts to block access to squatted buildings in the area in 2018.



Left: Metal bars blocking access to Kanjiža Train Station. Right: Hayloft in entrance in Horgoš bricked up by local authorities in 2018 (Source: Collective Aid).

The accompanying situation in Subotica has seen a similar trend of movement. Volunteers support a basis of groups living in old buildings and abandoned rail carriages near the centre. Private security guards often check these locations and the Serbian police make periodic efforts to move people to formal camps. One squat resident with limited mobility due to a foot injury reported being taken to the police station and ordered to go to a camp. These actions can be seen in conjunction with the raids in Šid and wider strategies in the territory to end informal settlement.

Greece

Update from Thessaloniki

Philoxenia, part of the Border Violence Monitoring Network, have been working in Thessaloniki to distribute both food and non-food items, and collaborating with doctors and lawyers in order to support people-in-transit. Throughout January, the team has observed a steady influx of new arrivals (around 15 per day) with total numbers in the centre varying from 260-350 per day. This reflects the continued movement of transit groups who manage to pass through the heightened security measures along the Evros river (Greek-Turkish

border) and the [violent push-backs as highlighted in a recent DW article](#). But it also accounts for the cyclical movement (exit and return) of transit groups attempting to continue their journey across the neighbouring borders of Albania and North Macedonia, where they face the possibility of further border violations (see [3.1](#) and [3.2](#)).

The majority of people Philoxenia support are undocumented, young adult males with no access to camps, meaning they are forced to find shelter on the streets, in abandoned train carriages or disused buildings: often without adequate clothing or sleeping bags. This population is highly susceptible to illness and disease as a result of these harsh living conditions. Together with Medical Volunteer International, Philoxenia regularly encounters people-in-transit who experience gastrointestinal illnesses from inadequate nutrition and access to clean water. New arrivals continue to be treated for injuries that stem from the precarious journeys they have taken, such as cuts and abrasions from barbed wire fences, or abscesses and blisters from walking for several days.

Reception conditions in Greece present a further obstacle, and Philoxenia has witnessed people-in-transit being regularly turned away from emergency services because they do not have correct documentation. Although the Greek government cut access to public healthcare with the dissolution of the [AMKA system](#) in July 2019, access to emergency services was allegedly ringfenced. Yet volunteers on the ground can assert that pressing medical needs, and emergency cover, are not being met in a large number of cases.

Sea fencing: border infrastructure to guard Greek islands

Major developments at Greece's maritime border with Turkey were announced in January, contributing further to the analysis that ["Greek opinion leaders have increasingly tied migration to a rhetoric of threat and security"](#). In line with these moves to stem entrance to the EU the Greek Defense Ministry announced plans to build a netted barrier that would be 2.7 kilometres long and standing 50 meters above water to prevent further transit into the country.

According to coverage by the [Guardian](#) the fence will be *"equipped with flashing lights to demarcate Greece's sea borders"*. The article went on to quote Greece's former migration minister, Dimitris Vitsas, who said the floating border would be *"ineffective,"* as it will not *"stop anybody making the journey"*. On the contrary, and as underlined by [Amnesty International's Massimo Moratti](#), this barrier will only put people-in-transit at further risk:

“This proposal marks an alarming escalation in the Greek government’s ongoing efforts to make it as difficult as possible for asylum-seekers and refugees to arrive on its shores and will lead to more danger for those desperately seeking safety.”

At a cost of €500,000, questions will now be raised about the colossal amount of funding going into border security at a time when conditions of asylum seekers in Greece is at its most dire. Just in Lesbos’s Moria camp the population held is [seven times over capacity](#), at 20,000 people. The impetus for this floating wall can be compared with the wire fence erected at the land border with Turkey in 2012 to prevent crossing, and fits within a wider strategy of inhumane border security. At this time, there was even criticism from the [European Commission](#) to suggest that physical barriers would not solve the transit issue through Greece. However, as the blocs program of border externalisation has emerged in the central and western Balkans, the region has witnessed the building of further fences, namely on the borders of Hungary, N. Macedonia and Slovenia.

Frontex

Review of 2019 operations and entry statistics

In January, Frontex produced a [summary of operations](#) covering the previous calendar year and marking out several new developments in the Western Balkans. In the report the EU agency presented the core tenets of its ongoing plans to strengthen border security in the region. During 2019, Frontex strategy took shape in two specific forms:

- The call for recruiting a standing core of 10,000 Frontex officers
- Status agreements with EU non-member states for Frontex missions

Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania have all signed agreements allowing Frontex missions to be deployed on their territories in conjunction with national authorities. The first began in Albania in May and has already generated further enquiries over the agencies involvement in initiating pushbacks as seen in this [report by Arte](#).

Statistics from 2019 may act as a pretext for the further expansion of these activities, as figures showed the Balkan Route to be reanimated in comparison to a lull in crossings via the central mediteranean. [Info Migrants](#) analyzed Frontex statistics concerning the Balkan Route: alleged, *“Illegal entries more than doubled to 14,000 in 2019 compared to the previous year.”* BVMN has watched, with concern, the consistent appearance of alleged Frontex involvement during pushbacks in multiple locations across the region and activation of these external

missions which bring into direct question the role of EU agencies in facilitating collective expulsion.

Glossary of Reports, January 2020

The Network covered the pushback of 263 people across 14 separate incidents in January. 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, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Iran and Palestine. The cases involved:

- Twelve pushbacks to the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina (nine direct pushbacks from Croatia/three chain pushbacks from Slovenia).
- Two direct pushback from N.Macedonia to Greece

Link	Incident	Recorded	Group	Demographic
<i>Croatia to BiH</i>				
1.1	31st December '19	1st January	4	Morocco
1.2	5th January	5th January	10	Morocco, Algeria
1.3	8th January	9th January	5	Morocco, Tunisia
1.4	9th January	23rd January	7	Morocco, Algeria
1.5	19th January	21st January	7	Afghanistan
1.6	20th January	23rd January	2	Algeria
1.7	20th January	24th January	9	Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia
1.8	25th January	31st January	5	Afghanistan, Pakistan
1.9	28th January	29th January	12	Iran, Algeria

<i>Slovenia to BiH</i>				
2.1	5th January	9th January	5	Morocco
2.2	9th January	29th January	22	Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan
2.3	23rd January	29th January	4	Morocco
<i>North Macedonia to Greece</i>				
3.1	10th January	13th January	107	Afghanistan, Algeria, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Syria
3.2	11th January	13th January	64	Afghanistan, Algeria, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Syria
<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.

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