



Border Violence Monitoring Network

ILLEGAL PUSH-BACKS AND BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS



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SARAJEVO



BALKAN REGION

AUGUST 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) published 34 cases of illegal pushbacks during August, documenting the experience of 692 people whose rights were violated at the European Union's external border. Volunteers in the field recorded a variety of cruel and abusive acts by officers, representing at least ten different national authorities. This report summarises the data and narrative testimonies shared by people-on-the-move, highlighting the depth of violence being carried out in the service of European borders.

Special focus is given to the Greek context where testimonies in the Evros allude to the trend of Greek authorities using third country nationals to facilitate pushbacks across the Evros/Meric River in the last two months. Reports collected by members of the Border Violence Monitoring Network allude to this practice and anecdotal evidence from the field reinforces these accounts.

Further analysis covers the way in which Czech forces have been referenced in testimonies collected from push-backs from North Macedonia to Greece in the last month. Returns from Italy to Bosnia also continue to be legitimized by the Italian state and an analysis of recent reports from these returns is included, as well as an update written by volunteers on the ground in Trieste.

In this report, BVMN also discusses several cases of pushbacks across the Aegean sea where the Greek authorities continue to use worrying methods to force transit ships back into Turkish waters via life rafts. New developments in both Bosnia's Una-Sana Canton and Serbia's Vojvodina region are also noted, showing the situation on the ground and in the legal realm respectively, as it relates to pushbacks.

**BVMN is a network of watchdog organisations active in Greece and the Western Balkans including No Name Kitchen, Rigardu, Are You Syrious, Mobile Info Team, Josoor, [re:]ports Sarajevo, InfoKolpa, Escuela con Alma, Centre for Peace Studies, Mare Liberum, Collective Aid and Fresh Response.*

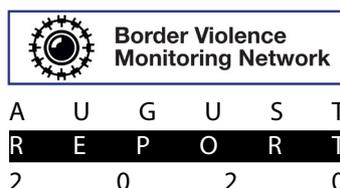


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GENERAL

REPORTING NETWORK

BVMN 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 members 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 be as large as 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

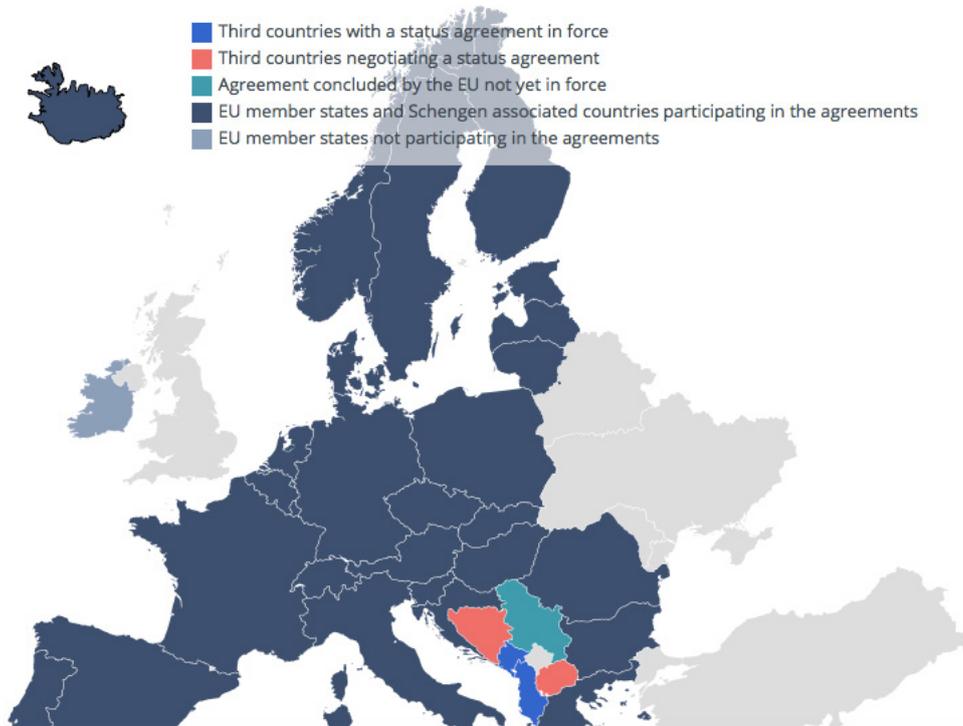
The term *pushback* is a key component of the situation that unfolded along the EU borders (Hungary and Croatia) with Serbia in 2016, after the closure of the Balkan route. Push-back describes the informal expulsion (without due process) of an individual or group to another country. This lies in contrast 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
ROM - Romania
HUN - Hungary
ITA - Italy
MNK - North Macedonia
ALB - Albania
GRK - Greece
TUR - Turkey
EU - European Union

TRENDS IN BORDER VIOLENCE

REPORTS INDICATING CZECH PRESENCE IN NORTH MACEDONIAN PUSH-BACKS



EU BORDER MANAGEMENT AGREEMENTS, 07/07/2020.

SOURCE: [CONSILIUM.EUROPA.EU](https://consilium.europa.eu)

North Macedonia and Czechia have engaged in extensive collaboration 'guarding the southern border' with Greece, funded by the EU. In December 2019, the Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš visited Macedonia and vowed to help the country 'cope with the onslaught' of migrants by sending Czech police officers to protect its borders. This coincided with a recruitment drive for Frontex officers in Czechia, offering [training, apprenticeships and lucrative salaries of 4,500 euros per month](#).

In 2019, 460 Czech police officers and 8 police dogs were dispatched to North Macedonia, while a further 246 officers and 6 police dogs followed in 2020. This was reportedly the [32nd contingent of Czech officers sent to Macedonia](#) as part of bilateral cooperation between the two countries. As per a Czech report, [11,395 'illegal migrants'](#) were captured in Macedonia and Serbia in 2019, predominantly around Gevgelija, near the Greek border. Of the 18 reports of violent push backs in North Macedonia collected by the BVMN in 2020, 7 involve Czech officers

- equating to 40%. According to the testimonies, these officers have been involved in gratuitous acts of violence, [often before the eyes of Frontex officers](#), and grave human rights violations. In one incident, a respondent was [attacked by a Czech police dog while officers laughed](#).

It is ever more common that foreign men from various European countries, wearing either plain clothes or army uniforms and balaclavas, participate in beating, torture, and humiliation of people-on-the-move along the Greek borders. Their frequent [lack of insignia](#) and attempts to conceal their identity [by pushing people's faces to the ground](#) alludes to the illegality of such conduct. The behavior of these European officers and unknown armed foreign forces on the Greek-Macedonian border is concerning. The irregularity, arbitrariness and systematic use of excessive violence, alongside the wholesale theft and destruction of personal belongings, signals a para-militarization of European border zones.

GREEK BORDER AUTHORITIES USING THIRD-COUNTRY NATIONALS TO FACILITATE PUSH-BACKS

In recent months, BVMN-members have identified a new trend in illegal pushbacks from Greece to Turkey across the Evros/Meriç river. In recently recorded testimonies of pushbacks from Greece to Turkey, respondents stated that third country nationals of unknown status were working with the Greek and other European officers as drivers of the dinghy boats, which are used to forcefully transport people-on-the-move across the river to Turkey. (According to earlier testimonies, Greek officers used to operate the dinghies.) Our respondents' reported that the persons operating these dinghies were from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, or Iraq.

For instance, in the case of a pushback on May 7th, 80-90 persons from Syria, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, and other countries were pushed-back across the Evros river near Uzunköprü, Turkey [9.6]. After being detained at a police station near Kavala, the people were loaded into a large police bus by Greek officers masked with balaclavas, who told them that they would be taken to the Drama detention center, but instead they were taken to the border. They were split into smaller groups and spread out over different locations. According to the respondent's testimony:



STILL FROM FORENSIC ARCHITECTURE'S [INVESTIGATION](#) ON PUSHBACKS ALONG THE EVROS/MERIC RIVER. WHILE THIS FOOTAGE SHOWS ALLEGED GREEK AUTHORITIES DRIVING THE PUSHBACK BOATS, RECENT TESTIMONY FROM BVMN-MEMBERS ALLUDES TO THIS TASK BEING CARRIED OUT BY THIRD-COUNTRY NATIONALS FROM PAKISTAN AND SYRIA

"THE GREEK OFFICERS PUT PEOPLE ON A BOAT, OPERATED BY 3 PERSONS, POSSIBLY FROM AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN, WHO BROUGHT THEM ACROSS THE [EVROS] RIVER IN GROUPS OF 5, DRIVING BACK AND FORTH." [9.6]

They were transporting the people across the river to Turkey in groups of 5, driving back and forth across the river. Similarly, on July 2nd, a group of 50 people, including women and minors, was brought to the border river of Evros by officers covered with balaclavas and speaking foreign languages, after confiscating people's belongings, beating them with metal batons and humiliating them [9.5]. The respondent in this case described that:

“THE GREEK OFFICERS THEN PUT THE GROUP IN BOATS OF ABOUT 17-18 PERSONS, OPERATED BY 2 PERSONS FROM AFGHANISTAN AND AN IRAQI, WHO TOOK THE PEOPLE ACROSS THE [EVROS] RIVER. THE PEOPLE IN DISTRESS, SCARED AND BEATEN, WERE LEFT WANDERING THROUGH A FOREST IN COLD AND RAIN WITH VERY FEW CLOTHES” [9.5]

Another mass river pushback took place on July 22nd, when approximately 140 persons from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Morocco were brought to the Evros river in police buses at night by Greek policemen wearing balaclavas [9.7]. The respondent in this case described that:

THE PERSONS DRIVING THE BOATS WERE FOREIGNERS THEMSELVES, BASED ON THEIR ACCENT THEY MUST HAVE BEEN SYRIANS. THE BOATS WERE PROVIDED BY THE POLICE. THEY WERE CROSSED OVER THAT SAME NIGHT. [9.7]

Besides the fact that these migrant dinghy operators are taking orders from Greek and other European officers during the pushbacks, the nature of their relationship with the officials is unknown. We are not sure whether these people are coerced into this collaboration, or if they receive a payment or any other kind of compensation, or work under unreliable promises such as legalization of residence or dropping of preexisting legal charges against them, etc. However, given the context of the illegal systematic practice of push-backs and the fact that the dinghy operators belong to vulnerable groups, we are led to believe that we are faced with a new trend of exploitation with the possible intent of outsourcing of blame for the illegal procedure.

MARITIME PUSH-BACKS CONTINUE IN THE AEGEAN

This month we released a [visual investigation](#) - led by BVMN-members Josoor and No Name Kitchen - analyzing evidence proving the involvement of balaclava-clad Hellenic Coast Guard officers on board the Hellenic Coastguard (HCG) vessel ΑΣ-618 - a boat which was 75% funded by the European Commission via the External Borders Fund. The vessel has been observed participating in other dangerous activities in the Aegean since March.

This investigation was led by BVMN-members Josoor International Solidarity and No Name Kitchen. We focused on a series of four videos filmed on July 11th and obtained on the same day, showing masked men on a medium-sized vessel approaching a dinghy filled with women and children [9.1]. The man who filmed this video sent the materials over to Josoor while still on the dinghy, after this he reported being returned to Turkey and held in detention for a period of two weeks. The purpose of this video analysis is to better identify the individuals and the vessel involved in the operation which resulted in the pushback of the group.

When put together, this analysis clearly links the materials shown in the videos to the well documented trend of maritime push-backs by the HCG in the last months.



COMPILATION OF IMAGES USED IN BVMN'S AUGUST [INVESTIGATION](#) ON MARITIME PUSHBACKS IN THE AEGEAN

BVMN-member Josoor additionally collected a testimony of an HCG maritime push-backs off the islands of Rhodes this month [9.2]. Elsewhere in the media, the topic of maritime push-backs was kept in the spotlight by a New York Times article, a [statement released by UNHCR](#) condemning the behavior, and futile, public [denials](#) of this behavior by the highest levels of the Greek government.

CONTINUED REPORTS OF PUSHBACKS FROM TRIESTE

In the month of August, different members of the Border Violence Monitoring Network recorded more chain pushbacks from Bosnia-Herzegovina from the Trieste area of Italy [see reports [4.1](#), [4.2](#), [4.3](#), [4.4](#), [4.5](#) & [4.6](#)]. This is a well-documented trend which has persisted throughout the summer, facilitated by the Operazione Strade Sicure deployment to the border area.

One of these testimonies, [\[4.6\]](#), shared a video that a group-member had taken upon their arrival to the mountainous area outside of Trieste on the Italian side of the border on July 13th. This was easily geolocated using the utility infrastructure in the background to these approximate coordinates: 45.613871, 13.867416



IMAGE OF THE INJURIES SUSTAINED BY ONE OF THE GROUP-MEMBERS FROM CROATIAN AUTHORITIES ON 13 JULY [\[4.6\]](#)

While the respondents describing these chain-pushbacks spoke of little physical violence by Italian authorities, many of them described inhuman treatment from authorities later on in the chain. One respondent described seeing Croatian authorities hit his fellow group-members with:

...BLACK POLICE BATONS WRAPPED WITH BARBED WIRE WRAPPED AROUND [THEM] [\[4.6\]](#)

Another group described being detained in Croatia during their chain pushback for:

...BETWEEN 18 AND 20 HOURS WITHOUT FOOD [\[4.5\]](#)



UPDATE ON THE SITUATION

SERBIA

FIELD UPDATE FROM SUBOTICA

Violence in different parts of Vojvodina has been increasing in the last weeks. While the practice of police apprehending people-on-the-move in Sombor and driving them roughly 30 km away from their living arrangements has been common practice in the last years already, members of Collective Aid report that this tactic has lately spread been used by police authorities in Subotica as well. This practice oftentimes is connected with the theft and destruction of belongings such as mobile phones or money.

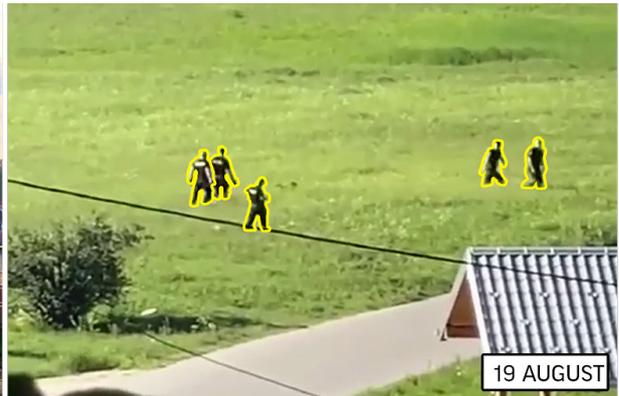
Another new inhumane measure police authorities are taking in Severna Backa municipalities is evicting people on the move from the abandoned buildings they are staying at and

closing them down with bricks, leaving them with no shelter having to camp in the bushes or abandoned train wagons. With winter fast approaching, this practice is especially worrying.

With the Serbian-Hungarian border being highly securitized and extremely hard to cross, people on the move are forced to take dangerous routes. It was reported to the team on the ground that in mid-August 3 people, 2 from Egypt and 1 from Morocco drowned in River Tisa trying to reach Hungary. The danger and difficulty of this crossing in the last year can explain, in part, the increased movement along the Romanian border with Serbia.

BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

AGGRESSION WITH THE UNA-SANA CANTON IN BOSNIA



This month BVMN identified the trend of returns across cantonal lines and generalised violence by certain local community members and authorities within the Una Sana Canton. At the beginning of August, an informal camp near Velika Kladusa along the Kladušnica river was cleared through the use law enforcement and bulldozers, without providing for the relocation of the people on the move within the Temporary Reception Centres in the Una Sana Canton, meaning that about a thousand people poured into the street.

As a result of the evictions, protests by the local population of Velika Kladusa took hold, resulting in real episodes of indiscriminate violence in which, for several consecutive night, residents of the town gathered to repel the people on the move

arriving, attacking the public transport on which they travelled with stones and batons. On the 17th of August, following the protest in Velika Kladusa, the Ministry of the Interior of the Una Sana Canton took the decision to evict all people on the move from the streets, abandoned buildings and informal camps, forbidding them access to public transport and establishing the lockdown of formal camps in the Canton, not allowing them to enter or leave. Around this time, reports of violence from the [Una-Sana Canton's Special Support Unit](#) began to surface. On the 19th of August a decision was taken prohibiting people on the move from entering the Canton and restricting the freedom of movement of migrants and asylum seekers without any international protection. This decision has been enforced to varying degrees within the last month.

Among the [testimonies](#) collected by BVMN-member No Name Kitchen, it can be seen that the local police cleared out the old abandoned factories, burning all the personal belongings of the people on the move and then deporting them to the so-called no man's land, in a wheat field in Bosanska Otoka where they are trapped between Republika Srpska and the Una-Sana Canton. In this "buffer zone", without shelter, sanitary facilities and no food, people on the move (including families and children) are deprived of any assistance from the competent organisations. They cannot go to Bihac because they are stopped by the police of the Federation, and they cannot return to Sarajevo because they are blocked by the police of Republika Srpska.

In the wake of the protests, on 29th August in Bihac's main square, the movement "STOP Invazija Migranata" organized a [demonstration](#) to demand the removal of people on the move from the Una - Sana Canton and attacked the European Union and the relevant organisations for their lack of management of the situation and for "not respecting the rights of the local population".

In the days leading up to the protest, there were several incidents of violence. An Algerian man reported several bruises on his body and stated how, one day before the protest, he was beaten with bars by a group of four local people covered with balaclavas.

UPDATE FROM ITALY

Number of persons in documented pushbacks from Italy

How many persons were pushed back from Italy in documented pushback testimonies from the Border Violence Monitoring Network?

■ 2018 ■ 2019 ■ 2020

Persons pushed back (accumulated)



Source: BVMN Database • Created with Datawrapper

In the North-Eastern region of FVG in Italy the situation is getting worse day by day. There are still many arrivals, mostly people from Afghanistan and Pakistan, some from North Africa. In the last month volunteers on the ground have witnessed the arrival of many families who had been previously living in Serbia or BiH for years - with children and babies as well. Most of the PoM do not want to stay in Trieste, and they try to find a way to travel forward.

At this moment there are no open shelters or accommodation for people who do not ask for asylum, so the families are forced to sleep in the [street](#) until they find a train or a bus to proceed. Autumn is coming, and temperatures are making this even tougher.

The system of pushbacks (defined as informal readmissions) is now well organized and structured, however there is not publicly accessible information to the numbers of people who are returned. Although certain contacts in the Prevention Department have assured us that there would be no pushback from Gorizia, this seems to be a phenomenon across the entire Italian border with Slovenia, not only in Trieste province.

The Minister of Interior [Lamorgese was in Trieste 8th September](#) and said the following:

"TO BETTER CONTROL THE SITUATION, WE WILL SEND MORE MILITARIES. RIGHT NOW 375 PERSONNEL OF OPERAZIONE STRADE SICURE, BUT WE WILL SEND SOME MORE ON THE UDINE SIDE."

On this occasion, she replied to a journalist's questions saying that the "informal readmission" is illegal for those who are asking for asylum ... while in July the Minister was saying publicly that these "informal readmissions" were perfectly legal even for the asylum seekers. This is a self-[contradiction](#) that affirmed that what is happening in the last months in the Trieste area is totally against the international law (note [ASGI](#)).

There is still a lack of clarity on the criteria with which people are returned to Slovenia. Unaccompanied minors are largely allowed to enter and stay in quarantine structures (although they do not have access to phones), as are families. This is an illegal practice that is being carried on by the governmental structures and with [the support](#) of the Prevention Department that demands some doctors to check for scabies, lice and signs of Covid to facilitate a possible readmission.

GLOSSARY OF REPORTS, AUGUST 2020

The Network covered the pushback of 692 people across 34 separate incidents in August, 2020. The reports account for a wide demographic of people including men, women and minors, those in official camp accommodation and others in informal settlements; they also include pushbacks across various types of borders including land, river and sea. The respondents originate from a broad set of countries, including: Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, Iran, DR Congo, Somalia, Eritrea, Pakistan, Palestine, and Syria. It is important to remember that these numbers are only the pushbacks which our alliance was able to record; due to COVID restrictions and evolving government tactics, there are less international observers on the ground to report on these events.

The cases involved are outline below:

- // 13 pushbacks to Serbia - seven from Croatia, four from Romania, one from Bosnia-Herzegovina and one from Hungary.
- // 17 pushbacks to Bosnia-Herzegovina
- // 7 pushbacks from Greece to Turkey - all involving large numbers of people.
- // 7 pushbacks to Greece from North Macedonia
- // 2 pushbacks to Serbia - from Bosnia, Hungary, and Croatia respectively
- // 1 pushback to Greece from Albania

| LINK | INCIDENT | RECORDED | GROUP | DEMOGRAPHIC |
|------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------|---|
| BOSNIA-HERZ. TO SERBIA | | | | |
| 1.1 | 29th July | 30th July | 3 | Afghanistan |
| CROATIA TO SERBIA | | | | |
| 2.1 | 25th August | 29th August | 4 | Afghanistan |
| SLOVENIA TO BOSNIA | | | | |
| 3.1 | 24th August | 27th August | 8 | Pakistan |
| ITALY TO BOSNIA | | | | |
| 4.1 | 20th July | 24th July | 26 | Pakistan |
| 4.2 | 6th July | 12th August | 10 | Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh |
| 4.3 | 6th July | 22nd August | 3 | Pakistan |
| 4.4 | 18th July | 5th August | 15 | Afghanistan |
| 4.5 | 21st July | 28th August | 23 | Pakistan |
| 4.6 | 15th July | 20th August | 5 | Pakistan |
| NORTH MAC. TO GREECE | | | | |
| 5.1 | 16th August | 17th August | 7 | Morocco, Algeria |
| 5.2 | 14th August | 18th August | 40-50 | Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran |
| 5.3 | 17th August | 18th August | 4 | Syria, Morocco |
| 5.4 | 20th August | 24th August | 4 | Morocco, Algeria |
| | 3rd August | 18th August | 16 | Pakistan, Bangladesh |
| | 21st August | 13th August | 4 | Morocco, Algeria |
| | 17th August | 24th August | 4 | Syria, Algeria |
| NORTH. MAC. TO GREECE | | | | |
| 6.1 | 25th July | 25th July | 29 | Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan |
| GREECE TO TURKEY | | | | |
| 7.1 | 26th May | 14th July | 36 | Morocco, Palestine, Syria |
| 7.2 | 7th June | 8th July | 31 | Morocco, Algeria, Pakistan |
| 7.3 | 18th July | 18th July | 68 | Afghanistan, Iran, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Pakistan, Syria |

FIND ALL REPORTS ON THE
DATABASE [HERE](#).

NETWORK STRUCTURE AND CONTACT

B O R D E R
V I O L E N C E
M O N I T O R I N G
N E T W O R K

BVMN is a volunteer led endeavour, 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: press@borderviolence.eu

AUGUST — R — E — P — O — R — T — 2020

