

General

Reporting Network

BVMN is a collaborative project between multiple grassroots organizations and NGOs working along the Western Balkan Route and Greece, documenting violations at borders directed towards people-on-the-move. The partners have a common [website database](#), used as a platform to collate testimonies of illegal pushbacks which are gathered through interviews.

Methodology

The methodological process for these interviews leverages the close social contact that we have as independent volunteers with refugees and migrants to monitor pushbacks at multiple borders. When individuals return with significant injuries or stories of abuse, one of our violence reporting volunteers will sit down with them to collect their testimony. Although the testimony collection itself is typically with a group no larger than five persons, the pushback groups which they represent can exceed 50 persons. We have a standardised framework for our interview structure which blends the collection of hard data (dates, geo-locations, officer descriptions, photos of injuries/medical reports, etc.) with open narratives of the abuse.

Terminology

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

Abbreviations

BiH - Bosnia and Herzegovina

HRV - Croatia

SRB - Serbia

SLO - Slovenia

ROM - Romania

HUN - Hungary

AUT - Austria

MNK - North Macedonia

GRC - Greece

BGR - Bulgaria

TUR - Turkey

EU - European Union

Executive Summary

In May, the Border Violence Monitoring Network¹ (BVMN) shared 32 testimonies of pushbacks impacting 680 people-on-the-move (POM) across the Balkans and Greece. This report brings together first-hand testimonies from a range of countries in the region to look at the way European Union states and other actors are affecting systemic violence towards people crossing borders.

In trends in pushbacks observed in the last month, this report analyses “Triangle-push backs” in the tri-border area between Romania, Serbia and Hungary, Croatian police entering Bosnian Territory while conducting pushbacks, and ongoing high levels of violence in pushbacks in the Evros region of the Greek-Turkish border.

In updates from BVMN reporting bases throughout the region, the report highlights the work of BVMN member project Infokolpa in condemning the announced candidacy of Tatjana Bobnar for the post of Minister of the Interior the objection to her candidacy relating to her actions when directing the actions of police officers at the border and the implementation of deportations to Croatia in 2018, 2019 and 2020.

Analysis of a recent pushback of 94 Syrians from an islet in the Evros River, and recent statements by the Greek Minister of Civil Protection are shared in providing an overview of developments in Greece. A final section covers updates from Trieste, Italy.

¹ *BVMN is a network of watchdog organisations active in the Balkans, Greece and Turkey including No Name Kitchen, Rigardu, Are You Syrious, Mobile Info Team, Josoor, InfoKolpa, Centre for Peace Studies, Mare Liberum, Collective Aid, Blindspots and Pushback Alarmphone Austria.*

Trends in Border Violence

“Triangle-push backs” in the tri-border area between Romania, Serbia and Hungary

“We call this ‘the Triangle’, you go Serbia to Romania, Romania to Hungary and the police catch you in Hungary and push you back in Serbia”.

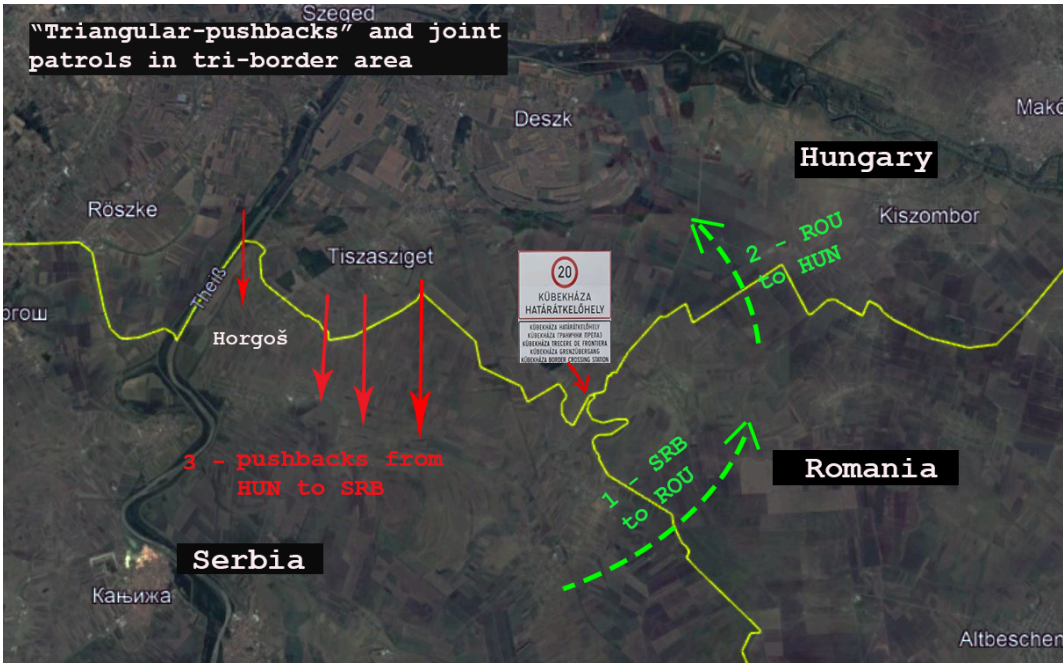
One hour driving North East from Subotica in Serbia, at the official [Rabe - Kübekháza](#) border-crossing, one reaches the tri-border of Serbia, Hungary and Romania. This stretch of the Serbian-Hungarian border was part of the “Humanitarian Corridor” established through the Balkans prior to its formal closure in 2015-2016 and the construction of border fences. In contrast to the Serbian-Hungarian border, there is still no border fence between the Hungarian and Romanian territory, or between Serbia and Romania. It is for that reason that an increasing number of people-on-the-move (POM) stranded in Northern Serbia try to enter Hungary through the fields in Romania, circumventing the 4 meter fences separating Serbia and Hungary.

Although between Romania and Hungary there are no fences to deter people from crossing, the border, which is an internal EU border, is highly controlled by Hungarian and Romanian police officers. The officers also collaborate [with the Serbian police](#) and are supported by [Frontex agents](#) who are present in Romania. Due to these factors, the chances of successfully entering Hungary, let alone avoiding a pushback back to Serbia, remain small. The majority of people, it seems to NNK volunteers collecting testimonies on the ground, will return to where they started after their transit attempts.

This is the reason why the word “triangle” as it is being used by POM in Northern Serbia does not refer to the geographical constitution of the area per se, but more to the pushbacks during which people will be sent back to a third country by the Hungarian police and not the one through which they entered the country first.

For people-on-the-move in the Balkans “triangle” is just another word like “game”, “deportation”, “camp”, “jungle”, “jail”, “detention center”, that describes the condition they find themselves stuck in. A word to describe the systematic physical and psychological violence enacted by state authorities against POM, a method of deterrence of Fortress Europe.

On a political level, this practice reveals again how non-EU states are being used as the “backyard of Europe”. An issue that is well known from the Bosnian-Croatian border as well. But not only this, the situation at the border triangle once more confronts us with the hypocrisy of European empathy and solidarity with displaced people: While there are currently humanitarian corridors for Ukrainian refugees in Romania and Hungary, in the same countries, national and supranational police officers collaborate to forcibly and violently push people back - out of the European Union.



Croatian Police officers entered in Bosnian territory

"The police released all the people, but not together. They started with the first van, they said 'now run', people came out and the police beat them with their sticks. Inside the jungle, while we were running, there were other policemen hiding in the bushes, who were also beating them'.

In the area of Vrnograč, in Bosnian territory, testimonies from the field report that Croatian police again entered Bosnian territory during a pushback of a group of people-on-the-move.

"At the deportation site there were about 20 policemen (IJP), in black uniforms, with 5-6 normal cars. There were no Bosnian police at all'.

This is not the first time that Croatian police officers have entered Bosnia, in the past the Minister of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dragan Mektic and the mayor of Bihac, Šuhret Fazlić had accused Croatian police officers of forcibly pushing back people-on-the-move to the territory of BiH and violating the territorial sovereignty of BiH, claiming to have proof of this.

Evros border: no accountability, indiscriminate violence

In all testimonies collected in May of pushbacks in the Evros region of the Greek-Turkish border, respondents recount experiencing heavy physical violence at the hands of perpetrators. Heavy beating with batons, kicking, sexual assault, forcing to undress, destruction of personal belongings, and theft of personal belongings is mentioned in every testimony (see glossary). In one instance, a respondent recalled uniformed men in the detention site taking photos of POM after making them undress down to their underwear (5.2). In two testimonies (5.1, 5.2), respondents expressed being unable to ask for asylum out of fear of harsher beating and treatment from the authorities. He recalls: *“No I couldn’t [ask for asylum]. I couldn’t ask or they would have killed me by beating”* (5.2). Such testimonies speak to ongoing, indiscriminate violence perpetrated by Greek authorities against POM, and those seeking to reach Greek territory to apply for international protection—and the impunity with which perpetrators continue to carry out such violent acts.

Update on the Situation

Slovenia

The civil initiative Infokolpa, the Border Violence Monitoring Network and the undersigned organisations condemn the announced candidacy of Tatjana Bobnar for the post of Minister of the Interior. Our primary objections relate to her actions when directing the actions of police officers at the border and the implementation of deportations to Croatia in 2018, 2019 and 2020. We recall that in June 2018, Slovenia started the practice of mass deportations of persons and denying them the application for international protection in Slovenia.

From the beginning of 2018 until the end of March 2022, Slovenia has carried out 29,865 extraditions to Croatia under the informal procedure, according to official data. Bobnar, as Deputy Director General of the Slovenian Police and later as Director of the Police, participated in one of the worst cases of mass violations of fundamental rights in the modern history of the Slovenian state by co-signing internal directives on police action at the border. During her time at the highest levels, police officers began the practice of systematically rejecting asylum applications and carrying out deportations. In 2018 and 2019 alone, Slovenia carried out almost 16,000 deportations to Croatia, despite the proven serious risk of torture and inhuman treatment of migrants by the Croatian police. Many of these cases have been documented in the two volumes of Black Book of Pushbacks that will be sent to all the presumed coalition parties together with this statement.

The full statement can be read [here](#).

Greece

In late May a group of 94 Syrians were [left stranded on an Evros river islet for several days by Greek authorities](#) in life-threatening conditions without access to food, water, shelter, or medical assistance. The group included 30 minor children, including unaccompanied minors, as well as several elderly, a person with a disability and a person with a severe facial allergy. The group appealed to human rights and legal institutions for support, who contacted the relevant authorities, and later filed an urgent request for interim measures with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) to ensure that the people would have immediate humanitarian and medical assistance and access to reception and identification procedures provided by law. Despite a [positive decision from the ECHR](#) ordering the Greek state to conduct a search and rescue operation to find the people and bring them to safety, the 94 [were pushed back, reportedly by Greek authorities](#).

Throughout the whole ordeal calls for assistance by those trapped on the islet, [videos of the group trapped on the islet](#)—in which you can see men in black on the Greek shore, in an area restricted for civilians, yelling at the people to go back to Turkey. Yet even with all of this attention and evidence, the [Greek state still pushed them back into Turkey in violation of domestic and international law](#), with no consideration for the rights or well being of those impacted.

GREECE: “no illegal entries will be tolerated”

In Greece, the state’s rhetoric and approaches to issues of migration and borders grew more hard-line in the last weeks, with connections also to an escalation of tensions geopolitically between Greece and Turkey. In late May, Civil Protection Minister Takis Theodorikakos [stated](#): “We won’t allow anyone to enter Greece illegally either from Evros or through the islands. Let everyone realise this”. This statement came only a day after Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan accused the Greek prime minister of trying to block sales of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey during a visit to the United States, and heightened tensions over the military presence within the Greek-Turkish border region. The statement that ‘no illegal entries will be allowed’ misses the point, somehow, in that for those fleeing repression in Turkey as well as for

asylum seekers from other countries transiting through Turkey, the lack of options in terms of safe passage for those seeking asylum in Europe has forced many people-on-the-move to take dangerous routes into Greece before arriving in the territory and lodging claims for international protection.

Also at the end of May, [Theodorikakos shared](#) with Skai News that “In the first four months of 2022, about 40,000 illegal immigrants have tried to enter the country illegally,” specifying they had been stopped at Evros. This comes at the same time as ongoing reports of systemic pushbacks, and accounts of brutal tactics of physical violence, arbitrary detention, and torture perpetrated by Greek authorities at the border in preventing people-on-the-move from accessing the territory and applying for asylum. These practices have been heavily criticized by the UNHCR, IOM, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, the Council of Europe Commissioner, the Greek Ombudsperson and civil society organisations, while the Greek Government remains opposed to the development of a truly independent border monitoring mechanism. [No effective investigation](#) has been conducted up until today on repeated push backs allegations. Access to asylum more generally speaking on the mainland continued to be a serious matter of concern, [reiterated by the Greek Ombudsman](#) in January 2021, and by civil society actors in the field. Since the closure of the Skype online pre-registration system in November 2021, there has [functionally been no no access to asylum](#) for the majority of people on mainland Greece since 24 November 2021.

These developments, and the broader direction the Greek state seems to be moving in regarding policies on the criminalization of migration, lack of access to asylum procedures and border enforcement are a serious cause for concern regarding access to fundamental human rights in Greece.

Trieste - Italy

TOT	416	%
AFGHANISTAN	153	37
PAKISTAN	170	41
INDIA	34	8
BANGLA	27	6
NEPAL	8	2
UAC	62	15
Asylum	80	19
Families	31	7
FRANCE	90	22
GERMANY	56	13
PORTUGAL	22	5
BELGIUM	15	4
ENGLAND	2	0
SWITZERLAND	6	1
AUSTRIA	1	0
SPAIN	2	0
ABROAD	194	47
ITALY	65	16
MILAN	35	8
Asylum in Trieste	80	19
Unknown destination	42	10
Female	18	4
Male	398	96

In May 2022, 416 people reached piazza Liberta' (Trieste), representing a significant increase relative to the prior month, when 287 people had arrived. Afghanistan and Pakistan are still the most common countries of origin and

make up for almost 80% of all arrivals, with India, Bangladesh and Nepal accounting for roughly 16%. For the first time, final destinations were also recorded. While routes and goals are always under scrutiny and discussion within the community, this metric can still be helpful in evaluating connections, life projects, even mental well-being of those who are just about to leave the Balkan Route behind. Many aimed at pursuing asylum in Trieste (80 people), or in Italy (65 people), while 194 individuals stated that they wanted to go on and relocate abroad (France: 90, Germany: 56, Portugal: 22, Switzerland: 6, UK and Spain: 2).

In other news, the facilities Campo Sacro will no longer serve as a quarantine center, as it had been put to that use during the past 2 years of Covid-19 pandemic. While used in the last months to segregate people-on-the-move on the basis of nationality (see [March 2022](#) issue) and generally ill-equipped to grant decent living conditions, there is mounting concern about the future of the place. At the moment, 101 people live in shanty and precarious conditions, however there is reason to fear that even this insufficient option will no longer be available in the near future. People who work in Campo Sacro also do not know what will or can happen to the place when it will officially stop being used as a quarantine center, potentially leaving dozens of people-on-the-move without accommodation.

Pushback testimonies May 2022 recorded by BVMN

Romania to Serbia				
1.1	23rd May	24th May	Syria	5
1.2	23rd May	26th May	Pakistan, India	18
1.3	28th May	29th May	Syria	
1.4	29th May	29th May	Syria	9
1.5	31st May	31st May	Syria	4
Hungary to Serbia				
2.1	16th May	18th May	Pakistan	9
2.2	19th May	24th May	Syria	5
2.3	24th May	27th May	Afghanistan	12
2.4	25th May	27th May	Morocco, Algeria	3
2.5	27th May	27th May	Afghanistan, Syria, Morocco, Algeria	25
2.6	27th May	27th May	Afghanistan	33
2.7	29th May	31st May	Syria	5
Croatia to Serbia				
3.1	1st May	2nd May	Afghanistan, Pakistan	6
3.2	12th May	14th May	Afghanistan	4
3.3	14th May	16th May	Syria	1
3.4	21st May	24th May	Afghanistan	5
Croatia to Bosnia-Herzegovina				
4.1	28th April	29th April	Afghanistan	12
4.2	6th May	10th May	Afghanistan, Pakistan	50
4.3	8th May	9th May	Pakistan	18
4.4	12th May	14th May	Mali, RDC, Cameroon, Guinea, Gambia, Togo, and Ivory Coast	30

4.5	15th May	16th May	Bangladesh, Pakistan	19
4.6	15th May	18th May	Afghanistan, Pakistan	50
4.7	17th May	17th May	Afghanistan, Pakistan	6
4.8	17th May	21st May	Pakistan	9
Greece to Turkey				
5.1	5th May	7th May	Afghanistan, Palestine, Syria, Central Africa	63
5.2	10th May	11th May	Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Morocco, Somalia, Algeria	100
5.3	17th May	19th May	Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Syria, Morocco, Iraq, Libya	100
Bulgaria to Turkey				
6.1	4th May	5th May	Syria, Morocco	3
6.2	5th May	6th May	Iraq, Libya	2
6.3	9th May	10th May	Iraq, Tunisia	14
6.4	12th May	13th May	Morocco	4
6.5	24th May	26th May	Tunisia	1