

A black and white topographic map of a region, likely the border area between the United States and Mexico, showing intricate contour lines and geographical features. The map is rendered in white lines on a black background.

AUGUST 2023

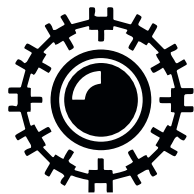
**ILLEGAL PUSHBACKS AND
BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS**



**Border Violence
Monitoring Network**

AUGUST 2023

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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. It also includes general updates and insights from advocacy actions taken by members of the network.

This month, we have witnessed an increase in the number of people transiting through Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, a continuation of a trend that has been apparent in the past several months. In Croatia, this has been followed by a new wave of anti-migrant rhetoric and government's plans to open a new registration centre within an abandoned military barracks located in the municipality of Krnjak, which has sparked protests by local residents.

Despite the Greek's government's efforts to prevent it, a similar increase in the number of people registered has been reported this summer at the Fylakio Reception and Identification Centre, in Northern Greece, with 2,045 people in June and July alone. As in many other contexts, however, this number likely represents just a fraction of the arrivals, for it does not include the significant number of people reported to have been violently pushed back to Turkey in the last months – a practice that once again was proudly referred to as “prevented entry” by the Greek government.

This August, Greece has also been stricken by hundreds of wildfires, a situation that has often been instrumentalised by political leaders to fuel anti-migrant rhetoric and obscure the lack of preventive measures in place. This narrative has contributed to the rise of hostility against people on the move, even leading to cases of arrest and abduction by far-right groups and individuals. This report also looks at the situation of Afghan asylum-seekers in Greece in the context of the second anniversary of the Taliban takeover, who, in many cases remain unable to seek asylum and are subject to severe rights violation and ill-treatment in the country.

Updates from Samos look at the inhumane conditions of the unlawful de facto detention at the Closed Controlled Access Centre (CCAC), affecting 1447 people who arrived in the island in July and August, including unaccompanied minors. Moreover, this month, partner organisation I Have Rights published a report analysing the complete lack of protection faced by survivors of human trafficking at the CCAC. The report demonstrates that at each stage of the asylum and trafficking recognition procedures, Greek and EU authorities consistently fail to identify, provide first level protection to and recognise victims of human trafficking on Samos.

The last part of this report re-examines the unsuitability of Turkey's designation as a “safe third-country”, in light of recent reports of ill-treatment from inside of Removal Centers, the rise of xenophobia, widespread police raids and a legal framework that leaves many individuals undocumented and unable to regularise their stay in the country. Furthermore, we look at the increase in reporting around violent pushbacks from Bulgaria to Turkey this August, a trend first reported in 2016. The deteriorating situation for people on the move and human rights defenders in the country contrast with the increase of EU support packages for “border control” technologies in Bulgaria, a new piece of evidence of the EU's disregard for human rights and international obligations when it comes to so-called “migration management” at its borders.



GENERAL

REPORTING NETWORK

BVMN [1] is a collaborative project between multiple grassroots organisations and NGOs working along the Western Balkan Route and Greece, documenting violations at borders directed towards people-on-the-move. The partners have a common [website database](#), used as a platform to collate testimonies of illegal pushbacks which are gathered through interviews.

METHODOLOGY

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

TERMINOLOGY

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

REPORTING NETWORK

BiH - Bosnia and Herzegovina
HRV - Croatia
SRB - Serbia
SLO - Slovenia
ROM - Romania
HUN - Hungary

AUT - Austria
MNK - North Macedonia
GRC - Greece
BGR - Bulgaria
TUR - Turkey
EU - European Union

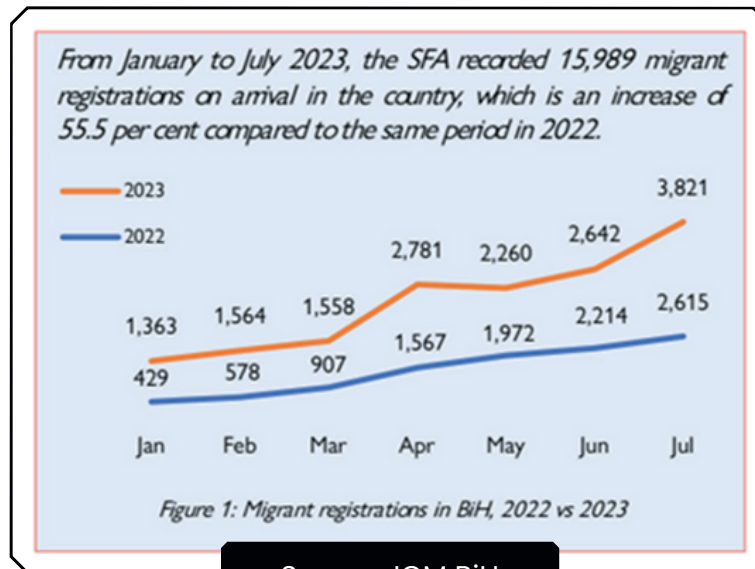
1 BVMN is a network of watchdog organisations active in the Balkans, Greece and Turkey including Rigardu, Are You Syrious, Mobile Info Team, PIC, InfoKolpa, Collective Aid, Blindspots, Pushback Alarmphone Austria and I Have Rights



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**UPDATE
ON THE
SITUATION**

In the last few months, we witnessed an increase in the number of people arriving in Bosnia-Herzegovina, compared to the same period of 2022. Many people are now arriving from Montenegro, at the southern border of the country, a trend more commonly reported in 2021.



Source: IOM BiH

After arriving in the country, many people stay in camps in the area around Sarajevo, such as Blažuj and Ušivak. There, many stay in the two Transit Reception Centres (TRCs) in Una Sana Canton, Borići and Lipa in the municipality of Bihać, while a smaller percentage pay for accommodation in private houses or stays in abandoned houses near the border in the area.

During the month of August, there have been an average of around 300-200 people in TRC Lipa, which can host up to 1,500 persons. The most common nationalities were Afghanistan and Morocco, with some people from Algeria and Iran also staying in the camp.

As it often happens during the summer, people have been moving more quickly through the country, in their attempt to reach Croatia. While not many people have reported pushbacks over the past month, there were still some groups of two to ten people which described having been pushed back by Croatian authorities, mainly in the area around Rakovica (HR) and Šturlić (BiH). Some of those people reported physical violence was used and nearly all said that the police had stolen their phones and money.

Moreover, during an interview at the beginning of September, Croatian Minister of Interior, Davor Božinović, declared that “600 migrants had been prevented from entering Croatia” in the previous night only, a public statement that can only speak, once again, of illegal pushbacks carried by Croatian authorities to BiH.

The Croatian Ministry of the Interior, led by Davor Božinović recently stated that the number of people on the move arriving in the country has increased by %170 compared to last year. Moreover, according to this Ministry, 24,367 people applied for international protection in Croatia in the first six months of this year, almost double the 12,872 that did in all of 2022. Following this increase, the government has recently initiated a project to establish a reception centre within an abandoned military barracks located in the Dugi dol area situated in the municipality of Krnjak.

This reception centre is designed to accommodate up to 1,500 individuals and involves the construction of 50 containers for temporary housing. Local newspapers report that it is an open-type centre intended to provide registration services for people on the move from third countries expressing an intention to seek asylum or international protection. The Minister of Interior has announced their plan to seek EU funding for this new centre.

The decision comes after a rise in the number of people on the move transiting through the area of Slunj, on their way to Zagreb, in the past few months. An increase that has been followed by a new growth in anti-migrant rhetoric in the media, with publications portraying people on the move as the enemy and a threat to the local community. Similarly, the plan to establish a centre in this area has sparked a wave of protests from local residents and municipal authorities. The primary concern revolves around the size of the centre and potential consequences for the local community and the surrounding environment.

The issue has become so contentious that the Mayor of Krnjak, Pera Matijević, and the Deputy Prefect of Karlovac, Dejan Mihajlović, have scheduled a meeting with the Minister of the Interior, Davor Božinović, to discuss the situation and explore solutions that can address the concerns of the local community. Moreover, a councillor from Barilović, Jasna Lasić, has initiated a petition against the construction of the centre and gathered around two hundred signatures on the first day. Her goal is to present this petition to the Minister to highlight the concerns of local residents and attempt to influence the government's decision regarding the project.

Meanwhile, it is very unclear what will happen to people after they register in this new planned centre, and what the criteria will be for accommodating them in a different facility. At the beginning of September, hundreds of people arrived at Porin, the Asylum Centre in Zagreb, with a registration paper from the authorities stating that they could request accommodation there, only to find out there were no more spaces in the facilities. Thus, according to local media, 500 people ended up sleeping on the streets and parks around the centre.



Greek government claims of “averted” arrivals at the Evros border

The Greek government recently announced that it prevented the entry of 2720 “undocumented migrants” into Greece over 3 days between 17-14 August 2023. These figures cover a period just prior to the first fires in the Evros region. Last year, the Minister for Migration and Asylum, Notis Mitarachi, stated that 50,000 people on the move were prevented from entering Greece in August 2022 and that Greece averted the entry of 154,102 people on its land and sea borders between January–August 2022. At that time, the Minister denied that pushbacks were a factor in averting or preventing people entering Greece, claiming that the arrivals of transit groups was an “invasion” facilitated by Turkish “violent push-forwards”. A year on, the Greek government continuously adopts securitised narratives that propagate fear of “mass arrivals” by presenting concerning statistics that would indicate the systematic denial of access to asylum procedures in Greece.

Furthermore, the Greek Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, claimed that the Evros border fence had played a key role in preventing entry to Greece by people on the move. In April this year, he announced that the country had contracted to extend the 37.5 km fence by a further 35 km, at a cost to the Greek government of 99.2 million euros. The fence extension would also include additional surveillance equipment, watchtowers and border patrols, contributing to the fortification of the EU’s external border and attempts to deny safe access to international protection.

Despite such measures and efforts by the Greek state to deter arrivals, 2,045 people were registered in Fylakio Reception and Identification Centre in June and July (the figures for August have not yet been published), a combined total of double the same months in 2022. This is likely to represent a fraction of the numbers of arrivals as it does not include the significant number of people reporting being stranded in the Evros border region and violently pushed back to Turkey in the last month.

Wildfires Lead to Hostility Against People on the Move

This summer, Greece has been stricken by hundreds of wildfires, with dozens breaking out each day across the country – from the Southern islands to the Northern land border with Turkey. In the second half of August things continued to spiral out of control; a fire on the slopes of Mount Parnitha came dangerously close to the Amygdaleza PRDC, leading authorities to order the evacuation of approximately 700 people to be transferred to Malakasa RIC and the structure in Petrou Ralli. At the same time, between the 19th and 21st of August, the Evros region was hit by violent wildfires, which were officially extinguished on September 8th after 20 days of devastation.

These fires were not unexpected, especially in Evros where authorities raised the alarm of a “very high risk of fire” on the 18th of August. Yet they continued to spiral out of control to the extent that they are now considered the largest fires registered on European soil since 2000, with a total burnt area of 93,880 hectares. The Greek state was patently unprepared to prevent and manage such an environmental emergency in spite of previous summers of wildfires and prior warnings. Instead of admitting to these faults, political leaders have sought to instrumentalise the situation and rally local populations in the Evros region against transit groups, displacing blame for the devastation onto people on the move. Despite the fire department confirming on 23rd August that the fire began near the border and was caused by lightning, politicians and far-right affiliated groups spread racially abusive posts across social media, placing the blame on people on the move. As a result, far-right affiliated groups and individual actors mobilised against transit groups, “arresting” and locking them in trailers, as in the case of a transit group of 25 people who were abducted and imprisoned by three self-proclaimed “civil guards”. The group, who were accused of attempted arson in Evros by the Alexandroupoli First Instance Prosecutor’s Office, have since been released without charges, while the three self-proclaimed “civil guards” were charged with temporary detention.

In a severely restricted militarised zone like the Evros region, instances of violence and hostility against the people on the move are occurring on a daily basis. While Alarm Phone has extensively reported episodes of pushbacks and violence throughout August, the wildfires only exacerbated this context of constant risk, causing the death of at least 19 people on the move, including two minors, who remained fatally trapped in the forest during the fires. This is yet another instance of tragic events that have been used by the Greek state to scapegoat people on the move, blaming them for their own deaths and fueling racist rhetoric that has led to the proliferation of mobilised right-wing groups in the region.

Online platform for asylum registration up and running again

On 21st August, after three and a half months of being inactive, the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum announced that the online platform for registering first instance asylum applications was live again. People wishing to register claims have faced continuous issues with the platform since it was launched in July 2022, as highlighted in a statement released by Mobile Info Team, I Have Rights and four other organisations in June this year. Due to the persistent dysfunction of the platform, people seeking international protection in Greece have been left in limbo, unable to progress their asylum claims and access reception conditions, while left at risk of arbitrary apprehension by the police, detention and pushbacks



Two Years since Taliban takeover in Afghanistan

It has been two years since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. The Taliban government, which is not formally recognized by any country, governs the territory under an Islamic system built on their interpretation of Islamic law. The human rights situation is dire, especially for women and girls whose rights to access to education and work, freedom of movement, and participation in public life have eroded. Additionally, the protection of civilians in armed conflict and rights of detainees are ignored, the health care system is crumbling, malnutrition rates have rapidly increased reaching a staggering 41% in 2023, and economic opportunities are fading, leading many to continue to flee the country. Syrians and Afghans account for nearly a quarter of asylum applications received in 2023 in Europe but continue to lack a safe pathway to the EU. In 2021, EU member states announced their commitment to supporting Afghans at risk through expanding pledges for family reunification, humanitarian admissions, and other protection pathways, yet these schemes have not materialised at the needed scale.

For Afghans trying to reach Greece, a persistent obstacle hindering access to international protection is the 'safe third country' concept. In June 2021, Greece declared Turkey a safe third country for asylum seekers originating from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Somalia, in addition to Syria. As such, people on the move from these countries, who pass through Turkey, must apply for asylum there as they will be deemed inadmissible when applying for asylum in Greece and thus rejected. However, Turkey has declined to take back asylum seekers from Greece since March 2020, justifying the refusal with the COVID19- pandemic. The dynamic between Greece and Turkey seeking loopholes to dismiss asylum applications is leaving many asylum seekers, including Afghans, stuck in a legal limbo with no access to asylum or documents specifying legal status, and thus no, or limited, right to housing, cash assistance, employment, or catering services in camps they reside.

The situation has led to many Afghan nationals being arbitrarily detained with devastating impacts on their mental and physical health. As reported by our member organisation Mobile Info Team (MIT) in Greece, respondents who have been detained in Greece described the carceral environment wherein basic sanitary facilities are dysfunctional, unhygienic, and shared among disproportional numbers of people. Respondents also shared that meals are extremely low quality, with several people describing the food as spoiled and mouldy, leading many to not eating it. There are also significant barriers to medical care including a critical lack of doctors and translators resulting in limited capacity for care. MIT's findings are confirmed with other international publications similarly critiquing the conditions of detention centres and the human rights violations people on the move in Greece face. These violations and ill-treatment extend beyond detention centers with numerous allegations on police violence, including verbal and physical, sexual harassment and racist abuse.



Unlawful detention and inhuman conditions in the Samos CCAC

During July and August, 2023, 1447 people were brought to the Samos CCAC. Upon arrival they are automatically *de facto* detained for around 3 weeks in the Temporary Accommodation Zones, previously used for Covid19- quarantine, until their asylum request is registered. For weeks people remain detained without an individualised written decision or justification for their detention, although this is required by EU law, under Article 9(2) of the [Directive 2013/33/EU](#). When people are eventually provided with a decision, it is a “restriction of freedom” order, not an order for detention, and the decision is not individually assessed, as required by Article 8(2) of the [Directive 2013/33/EU](#).

The conditions of detention are inhumane and do not meet the adequate standards. People are under constant police surveillance, their mobile phones are taken by the police for around 7 to 10 days, they do not have access to any services including medical and psychological support. NGOs have also heard reports of people being without appropriate clothing, resulting in people being forced to use UNHCR blankets to cover their bodies. Moreover, no vulnerability or age assessments were carried out and children are detained along with adults. Finally, due a lack of space in the Temporary Accommodation Zones, the authorities started placing people in other parts of the CCAC, including placing men in the section of the CCAC for female single headed households.

This situation is highly concerning and similar problems are impacting the Lesvos CCAC. Consequently, NGOs published a [joint statement](#) in order to denounce these inhumane practices.

Detention of children

For over a year unaccompanied children (UACs) were sub-detained for 22 hours a day in the so-called “safe zone” of the CCAC, a fenced off zone that has been described as a “[prison within a prison](#)”. From the beginning of the month, UACs are now permitted to have more “free time” (where they can enter Section A of the CCAC only) from 1pm to 8pm. Despite this, UACs still remain *de facto* detained to the general structures of the CCAC for 24 hours a day.

Ongoing water issues in the CCAC

Since opening, the Samos CCAC has faced various structural challenges including serious water cuts. August was no exception to the rule: throughout the month, while water shortages sporadically hit the whole island, residents of the CCAC faced water shortages every day. For most days in August CCAC residents could only access water a few hours a day.



I Have Rights report demonstrating Greek and EU-authorities' violation of the rights of survivors of human trafficking on Samos

In their report "Unidentified, unrecognised and denied support: survivors of human trafficking in the Samos Closed Controlled Access Centre", I Have Rights (IHR) analysed the cases of 53 survivors of human trafficking and presented evidence that every stage of the asylum and reception procedures on Samos is a missed opportunity to identify and protect survivors, thus violating their rights.

In its findings, IHR identified common indicators among survivors that should have alerted the authorities for identification. For instance, all 53 survivors arrived as single adults, are of African-descent and displayed clear indicators of their human trafficking experiences. Despite this, 0% of the 53 survivors were officially recognised as victims of human trafficking during the police and full registration interviews, 13% only were identified during the vulnerability assessments and 29% during the asylum interview. Moreover, among those very few survivors officially identified, 0% were provided with first level protection, nor officially recognised as survivors, as is their right.

The report demonstrates that at each stage of the asylum and trafficking recognition procedures, Greek and EU authorities consistently fail to identify, provide first level protection to and recognise victims of human trafficking on Samos.

This August saw an increase in reporting around violent pushbacks from Bulgaria to Turkey. Bulgaria has been a transit country along the so-called Balkan route since its inception, with reports of violent incidents going back to 2016, yet there has been little attention to border violence in the context of the wider EU pushback regime until recently. Bulgaria technically has an established border monitoring mechanism, like the one being called for in the Asylum Procedures Directive as part of the EU's New Pact on Migration. The mechanism is established through a Tripartite Memorandum of Understanding between the Bulgarian General Directorate of Border Police, the UNHCR and the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC). The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee are the implementing partners who have access to border regions and detention centres in order to record rights violations, and to report on the number of pushbacks. In 2020, they reported the pushback of 15,173 individuals; a number which more than doubled in 2021 when the BHC reported 2,513 pushbacks impacting 44,988 individuals.

In 2022 and 2023, with the situation at the Greece/Turkey land border quickly deteriorating, transit increased through Bulgaria drastically. This was mirrored by an increase in violent practices at the border, namely pushbacks and other related rights violations. In 2021, BVMN also established a presence in Turkey and began recording pushback testimonies from Bulgaria. Since then, BVMN recorded a total of 73 pushback incidents from Bulgaria impacting 1,661 people. In 63 incidents, people were pushed back directly from Bulgaria to Turkey, often through unofficial "doors" in the border fence; and 10 incidents of so-called "chain pushbacks" from Bulgaria to Greece and, subsequently, to Turkey were documented. The use of the tri-border area between Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey to conduct chain pushbacks was first documented by BVMN in 2020, and continued throughout the following years. In the majority of testimonies, respondents recount being apprehended, detained, and subject to extreme levels of violence before being pushed back. Pushback perpetrators are described to be Bulgarian officers (through corresponding uniform descriptions), military personnel, and people in civilian clothes wearing balaclavas. Frontex presence has also been reported during pushback operations. These operations are accompanied by high levels of violence including dog attacks, threatening with firearms, shootings, forced undressings, and prolonged beatings - tactics that are applied indiscriminately to women and minors.

In August, Infomigrants and the Italian Collective, Collettive Rotte Balcaniche Alto Vicentino, released new reports on the situation in Bulgaria which attest to the fact that the conditions have only continued to decline. Infomigrants released a four part series on the situation of pushbacks and border violence in Bulgaria in which they also reported on the violent practices documented in BVMN testimonies and discussed with local organisations the issues they face in reporting on such issues. A number of organisations are now under surveillance and investigation for supporting people on the move to register asylum claims and avoid pushbacks - a move reminiscent of tactics used against NGOs in other Member States with restrictive migration regimes, like Greece and Croatia. The report from Collettive Rotte Balcaniche provides further evidence of these claims from their field assessments in the country. This reportage takes place in the context of a pilot project by the EU that is granting Bulgaria 45 million € for fast-tracked asylum procedures and to fund new technologies in support of 'border control'. In fact, in Von der Leyen's State of the Union speech she congratulated Bulgaria on its work to protect European borders, and again dangled the promise of Schengen accession over them. Yet again it is made patently clear that the European Commission is happy to totally disregard credible, evidence-based reporting coming out of Member States that attest to rights violations and the systematisation of illegal practices - all in the name of 'greater border control'.

In August, Medico released their expert legal opinion: “What safety are they talking about? Why Turkey cannot be considered a ‘safe third country’”. The paper takes the EU-Turkey deal, and Turkey’s designation as a ‘safe third country’ as its basis and uses an extensive array of data from informal and formal interviews with ‘exilees’, organisations and activists in Turkey to dispute such a categorisation. The report discusses the legal frameworks through which protection can be sought and how, in essence, there are very few viable options for those seeking safety. It goes on to examine conditions in detention centres where people are usually held prior to removal; finally, it touches on developments that have occurred since the Turkey 2023 earthquake. The report conclusively evidences all the ways in which Turkey does not comply with the ‘safe third country’ criteria: neither under Article 38 of the Asylum Procedures Directive nor under the intended reform of the Common European Asylum System, as there are currently no ‘effective protection’ mechanisms to non-European foreigners in the country. Furthermore, rising hate speech and xenophobia, fuelled by both the ruling AKP and opposition party in the run up to the May 2023 elections, have actively placed anybody who is perceived as ‘foreign’ at greater risk of violent attacks across the country.

The legal framework leaves many individuals undocumented and unable to regularise their stay in the country; this, coupled with highly publicised widespread police raids, have led to large swathes of people on the move being detained in Removal Centres (GGM - Gümrükler Genel Müdürlüğü) across the country. Reports from inside GGMs attest to very poor hygienic conditions, a lack of access to medical and psychosocial support, and forms of physical and psychological torture enacted against detainees. A number of organisations recently co-signed an open letter calling for the closure of these centres in light of such reports. In line with this, in August, members of the BVMN, along with the support of other activists in Turkey, wrote a blog on the situation in GGMs - particularly pertaining to the cases of detainees who were arrested after attempting to join Istanbul Pride demonstrations. As always, it is important to highlight the intersections of vulnerable identities that lead to intersecting and compounding rights violations - such as individuals from the LGBTQIA+ community who are also third country nationals in Turkey and therefore exposed to a double-violence by the State’s anti-LGBTQIA+ and migration sentiments



Border Violence Monitoring Network

NETWORK STRUCTURE AND CONTACT

BVMN is a volunteer led endeavor, acting as an alliance of organisations in the Western Balkans and Greece. BVMN is based on the efforts of partner 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, several part-time paid coordination positions and some costs incurred by partner organisations for their contributions to our shared work.

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



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