



**Border Violence  
Monitoring Network**

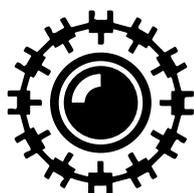
**SEPTEMBER  
2023  
REGIONAL  
REPORT**

# **ILLEGAL PUSHBACKS AND BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS**



September 2023

# ILLEGAL PUSHBACKS AND BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS



## Border Violence Monitoring Network





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>General</b>	<b>4</b>
Reporting network	
Methodology	
Terminology	
Abbreviations	
<b>Updates on the situation:</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Greece</b>	<b>6</b>
Fires and floods	6
ECHR case on conditions in police stations	7
Increased police action in Thessaloniki	8
Detention of people with appointment to register asylum claims	8
Overcapacity at Samos CCAC	9
Ongoing water shortages	10
<b>Serbia</b>	<b>11</b>
Evictions, raids and increased numbers of people	11
<b>Italy</b>	<b>12</b>
Increased arrivals to Lampedusa	12
New legal framework for detention	12
Franco-Italian border	13
<b>Turkey</b>	<b>14</b>
Potential revamp of EU-Turkey deal	14
<b>Deaths along the “Balkan route”</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Advocacy:</b>	<b>16</b>
Von Der Leyen’s State of the Union (SOTEU) Speech	16
<b>Network structure and contact</b>	



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September, the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) shared 2 testimonies of pushbacks impacting 9 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. It also includes general updates and insights from advocacy actions taken by members of the network.

With European elections coming up in June of next year, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen gave her last State of the Union address of her term. As an annual speech to the European Parliament plenary session, it is meant to outline the Commission's view on the current situation of the European Union. This time, using the phrase "Team Europe approach" - criticised by many for its lack of transparency - von der Leyen praised the Commission's actions in the management of migration, especially those furthering the externalisation of migration controls, such as the so-called "partnerships" with Tunisia or Western Balkan countries. This same push for externalisation can be seen in recent conversations between Greece and Turkey, which point towards a potential revamp of the EU-Turkey deal between the two countries.

In the meantime, different organisations and teams on the field have continued documenting the widespread and often arbitrary use of detention of POM by Greek authorities, and the numerous abuses and violations that this detention entails. This month, a new case has been lodged before the European Court of Human Rights highlighting the pattern of violations and abuses regarding the conditions and length of detention in police stations in mainland Greece. This widespread practice, which sees a last resort measure turned into a default policy, is also being widely deployed against asylum-seekers with asylum appointments in the country, something that has been deemed illegal by at least eight court decisions in 2023.

On Samos, the increase in arrivals registered in previous months has continued in September. Despite the predictability of this, the authorities' incapacity to respond to the increase has led to hundreds being stuck in a 200% overcapacity CCAC, in overcrowded and inhumane conditions, with some having to sleep on the floor, in the corridors and even outside. These conditions have also been followed by a 2-day strike by the employees of the Reception and Identification Service, demonstrating that the current system is also extremely challenging for workers at the facility.

The increase in the number of arrivals and the authorities' inability to provide adequate conditions has been apparent in many other regions. In Northern Serbia, some of the state-run camps are also overcrowded, despite numbers of arrivals following an analogous trend to that of last year at this time. Thus, in Subotica One Stop Centre, several people, including women and young children, live outside due to the camp's policy of not accepting families. Similarly, Lampedusa has seen the largest increase in arrivals in several years, with 19,009 people reaching Italy by sea this month. While more than 6,000 people were then stuck in a facility with capacity for 400 people, in degrading conditions, the response of the government has focused on expanding the use of detention of people arriving to the country irregularly. According to the new detention framework, POM can only avoid detention by presenting their passports or by providing a financial guarantee of 4,938€, a measure challenged by several court rulings on the basis of the lack of a case-by-case assessment, non-compliance with the principles of proportionality of detention and discrimination related to the resources needed for the financial guarantee.

The violent migration policies of the European Union and neighbouring states have become deadly once again this month at several of its borders. In September, we report on the drownings of at least 4 POM in the Una River, at the border between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as on the death from electrocution of a Moroccan person in a rail station in North Macedonia. As POM are increasingly forced into ever-dangerous clandestine routes due to a lack of safe and legal pathways, the risk of serious injury or death increases.



# GENERAL

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## REPORTING NETWORK AND PARTNERS

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 partners have a common website database, used as a platform to collate testimonies of illegal pushbacks which are gathered through interviews. This report also gathers updates from ASGI, Association for Juridical Studies on Immigration, in Italy.

## 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

\* 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 Alarm Austria and I Have Rights

#### Fires and floods

Following the wildfires in August that consumed much of northeastern Greece and took the lives of 21 people including 18 thought to be asylum seekers, September was met with additional weather related damages. Firstly, storm Daniel, affected Greece, Bulgaria, and Turkey with extensive flooding. It was the worst storm to hit Greece since taking record in 1930, pummeling the country for three days. Homes were swept, bridges collapsed, roads became impassable, power lines cut, crucial agricultural fields in Thessaly ruined, and 15 lives lost.

To accommodate the homeless flood victims in Greece, asylum seekers who initially resided in the camp Koutsochero in Thessaly were imminently evacuated. Around 900 asylum seekers were transferred to other camps in Volos and Thermopylae, which were originally closed. There are concerns that the rapid relocation of asylum seekers is done without adequate preparation on how to manage the situation given that facilities are already overcrowded and in a miserable condition.

Flash floods created by storm Daniel also occurred at a campsite in northwestern Turkey near the border with Bulgaria taking the lives of three people. In Istanbul, the storm hit hundreds of homes and workplaces, two people were found dead. Libya, however, took the biggest hit. An estimated 20,000 people may have died. Moreover, the country is dealing with a lack of preparedness for a disaster of this magnitude, in part due to the presence of two rival governments. The political turmoil places strain on national coordination efforts and other emergency responses. Meanwhile, UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) figures indicate that the country was already hosting over 46,000 internally displaced people prior to the floods. Storm Daniel added to this number worsening the humanitarian crisis.

The storm is said to play a role in recent surges of arrivals in Europe, particularly Lampedusa, Italy. Migration experts claimed that due to storm Daniel smugglers had to pause their operations, creating a bottleneck. As a result, local authorities and aid organisations are overwhelmed by the influx.

Mid-September, Greece was hit by another storm – “Elias”, which affected the Volos region where asylum seekers were initially re-located too following storm Daniel. Many local residents share that authorities are still dealing with the aftermath of Daniel and are thus not adequately prepared for another storm. In this context, people on the move are becoming increasingly vulnerable as they keep slipping down the list of priorities in the country.

**ECHR case on conditions in police stations: recent trends in Thessaloniki area**

A recent case lodged before the European Court of Human Rights highlights once again a pattern of violations and abuses regarding the conditions and length of detention in police stations, which are becoming particularly frequent in the area of Thessaloniki. In this case, the applicant was an Albanian national who was arrested and administratively detained on 8 January 2023 for illegal entry and stay in Greek territory. The applicant was reported to be detained at the Migration Management Department of Agios Athanasios, before being transferred to the Metagogon Transfer Department for a total of 59 days of detention. He described the conditions of the two police stations near Thessaloniki as “unsuitable for detention exceeding the period of a few days, particularly in view of the complete lack of possibilities for outdoor time and physical exercise, which caused him feelings of isolation from the outside world with adverse effects on his mental health and morale”.

In previous cases of prolonged detention in police stations, the European Court of Human Rights recalled that “police stations per se ... are places designed to accommodate people for a short time only”, constituting a breach of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights. However, recent testimonies collected by BVMN's field partners suggest that inhumane conditions of detention in police stations seem to be a consolidated practice, especially in the Thessaloniki city area. Testimonies documented by BVMN's field partners revealed that the conditions of detention in police stations are often described as inadequate, as people are forced to sleep on mattresses on the floor infested with bed bugs and use toilets and showers placed inside the cell providing access to the water only during the evenings. The length of the detention can range from a few hours to three months and often occurs before being transferred to a Pre-Removal Detention Centre. Moreover, some people reported being pressured into signing documents in a language they did not understand, without being provided with a translator or access to legal counsel. In the Metagogon Transfer Department, people reported being detained in overcrowded rooms with other 20 to 30 people without the possibility to go out at any point during their period of detention. One respondent reported instances of violence perpetrated by the police. Meanwhile, while detained in Agios Athanasios for 16 days, a respondent was not provided with any information about his detention, which reportedly caused adverse effects on his mental health. Another respondent stated that in Agios Athanasios the police confiscated his asylum paper, without the possibility to have it back.

This recent ECHR case is yet another instance that demonstrates how detention practices on the Greek mainland amount to the deprivation of liberty for the people on the move, who are often detained for arbitrary periods of time in inhumane conditions.

**Increased police action in Thessaloniki**

A significant police presence during the annual Thessaloniki International Trade Fair created a sense of insecurity for individuals on the move throughout the two-week-long event. Police statistics indicate that a total of 686 people were stopped in the city centre, with a notable disproportionate impact on people on the move within the city.

These actions within Thessaloniki city reflect an ongoing pattern of intensified police operations targeting undocumented individuals on the move. This pattern has been under the monitoring of BVMN since 2020 and was previously reported on earlier this year. These systematic sweeps and raids are executed using unmarked cars, vans, and motorcycles.

**Greek Authorities continue to detain people who have an appointment to register their asylum claim**

Greek authorities persist in detaining individuals who have applied for asylum through the Greek government's online platform. This platform was reinstated at the end of August after being inactive for three and a half months. Currently, the platform is assigning appointments at the registration facility in Malakasa, but these appointments are often scheduled weeks into the future. Consequently, individuals are left without legal protection against arbitrary arrest and detention. The police, in defiance of the appointment receipt generated by the platform as proof of asylum seeker status and the right to remain on Greek territory, continue to detain these individuals.

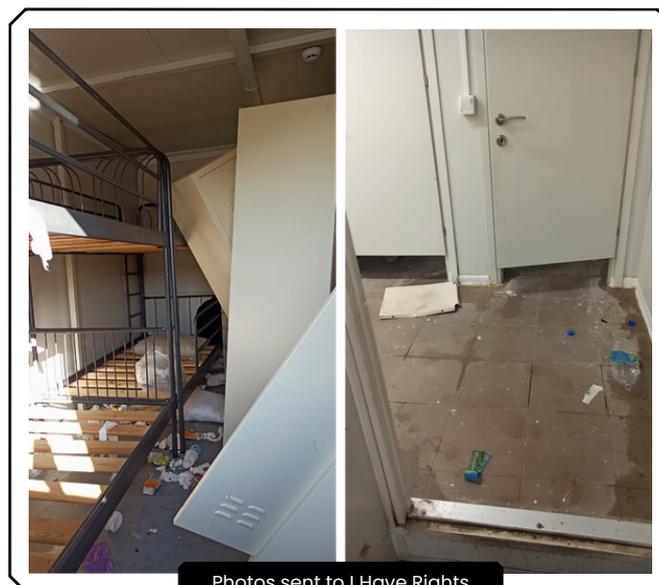
This practice has been well-documented since the implementation of the new asylum system in September 2022, resulting in at least eight court decisions in 2023 that declared this practice illegal. According to the Greek Refugee Council, some individuals with appointments are arrested, issued with return decisions, and detained for extended periods within pre-removal detention facilities. In May 2023, the Greek authorities filed a request to overturn the initial court decision regarding this practice, but the request was rejected as inadmissible.

#### **The Samos CCAC population reached 200% of the facility's capacity**

September continued to demonstrate the incapacity of the Greek government and the European Union to respond to a sharp, albeit predictable, increase in arrivals to the Aegean islands. This stands in stark contrast to the claims by the Greek authorities and the Commission alike that Closed Controlled Access Centres are an improvement in the conditions for a dignified reception of migrants, without overcrowding, and enabling a fair and efficient treatment of asylum requests. This September on Samos should act as a stark warning against similar structures being established at Europe's borders, as envisioned in the EU's New Pact.

The number of people on the move arriving to Samos continued to increase, with transfers to mainland camps being slower than entrance pace in the Closed Controlled Access Centre (CCAC). In September, the CCAC population exceeded 200% of the facility's capacity. Thousands of people have been unlawfully de facto detained in inhuman and overcrowded conditions, both in the Temporary Accommodation Zones and in the general population of the CCAC. Containers that were previously used for administrative and education purposes have been "transformed" with mattresses on the floor into accommodation containers. Some have to sleep in the corridors of the containers, or even outside.

At the end of September the Hellenic Ministry of Migration and Asylum suddenly declared, without any explanation, that the CCAC capacity had increased by 74% from 2,040 to 3,659. However, no new section was built in the CCAC, and hosting people in overcrowded containers and hallways is overcrowding, not a way for the authorities to overnight increase official capacity.



Photos sent to I Have Rights  
by someone held in the CCAC

On the 13th of September, the employees of the Reception and Identification Service, the state body responsible for the CCAC, started a -2day strike because of the overwhelming situation inside the facility, demonstrating that conditions are not only inhuman for those held there but also extremely challenging for employees of the structure.

To reduce the population on the islands, the authorities are automatically providing asylum seekers with open cards, meaning that they are not geographically restricted to the island as imagined by the hotspot approach. Instead, after being unlawfully detained for over a month in the CCAC, people are transferred days later to mainland camps. In response, the authorities have reopened three camps on the mainland: Volos, Thermopyles, Sintiki-Kleidi.

### Ongoing water shortages

Severe shortages of running water in the CCAC persist. The authorities sporadically open the water supply throughout the day. Clients of "I Have Rights" report that sometimes the water is available three times a day for half an hour each time, while on other days, it runs only once for an hour. The shortages and irregular provision point to a severe water scarcity issue in the CCAC.

Due to the water shortages, there are currently no laundry services available in the CCAC. This not only raises concerns about personal hygiene but also poses significant public health risks. For instance, in September, there was a significant outbreak of scabies and reports of skin conditions in the CCAC. The primary treatment for scabies involves using a cream and washing clothes and bedding at °60C. Without access to laundry facilities, this scabies outbreak will likely continue to spread in the overcrowded Samos CCAC.



Photos sent to I Have Rights by someone held in the CCAC

### **Evictions, raids and increased numbers of people**

Since August, the influx of people travelling through Northern Serbia, particularly in Subotica, has seen a dramatic increase. As we transition into October, we've observed nearly double the number of individuals at each visited living site. The official capacity of the Subotica camp is 220 persons, but last year at this time, we witnessed a significant overcapacity issue, with over 400 individuals residing in the camp. This year, once again, we find the camp overflowing, with several people, including women and young children, living outside due to the camp's policy of not accepting families.

While the beginning of September showed a decline in the overall number of Frontex officers, there have been new sightings of officers and vehicles along the border with Croatia. Additionally, we've noticed a substantial increase in the presence of the Serbian Gendarmerie, a specialised police force in Serbia deployed for high-risk law enforcement operations. Tensions have remained elevated, leading to a number of violent armed evictions and detentions, primarily occurring late at night. During daylight hours, we've continued to witness frequent pick-ups and checks at gas stations and supermarkets, with a particularly alarming incident on September 5th when over 350 individuals were detained in a single day.

### Increased arrivals to Lampedusa:

In September 19,009,2023 people reached Italy by sea: most of them arrived between September 10th and 12th and disembarked in Lampedusa. The increase in arrivals was the largest in several years and led to overcrowding at the hotspot. More than 6,000 people were stuck in the facility, which has a capacity of 400 people, and had to endure inhumane and degrading reception conditions. On the 12th, a 5-year-old baby drowned in the sea as a result of a botched boat rescue. Vulnerable people were left in the dock for several hours without food or water. By the 14th of September, people had fled the hotspot and local solidarity was partly taking over from the authorities, who weren't able to provide enough food and shelter.

On September 17th, the Italian Prime Minister and the President of the European Commission visited the island as many people were transferred to the mainland. While the latter outlined a 10-point plan for Lampedusa and secured additional support from Frontex and the EUA, the Italian government's response to the crisis was to adopt a new decree law on immigration. The reform extended the maximum period of pre-removal detention to 18 months, introduced new circumstances allowing for the extension of detention after the initial three months, and changed the rules for judicial review of detention, which is now set every 90 days instead of 30 days. The decree also made the Ministry of Defence responsible for identifying and building new detention centres, and allocated 20 million euros for such a plan.

### New legal framework for detention:

Meanwhile, people on the move transferred from Lampedusa to the mainland were at risk of being detained. Under the new legal framework (D.L. 2023/20, converted into L. 2023/50 and detailed by Ministerial Decree of 14.9.2023), asylum-seekers apprehended in connection with an irregular border crossing or coming from a safe country of origin can be subjected to a border procedure and, in the context of such a procedure, detained in order to decide on their right to (formal) entry into the territory. They can only avoid detention by presenting their passports or by providing a financial guarantee of 4,938€.

The initial application of the law was challenged by the rulings of the Court of Catania, which was asked to validate the detention measure imposed on asylum-seekers coming from Tunisia who could not hand over their passports and could not provide the financial guarantee. Recalling the Italian Constitution and EU law (Articles 9-8 of Directive 33/2013, as interpreted in the FMS case), the Court stated that the detention was not based on a case-by-case assessment and did not comply with the principles of proportionality of detention. Furthermore, it argued that the requirement of a financial guarantee, as provided for in the Decree in question, was incompatible with EU law insofar as it imposed detention measures solely on the basis of the asylum seekers' lack of resources. Finally, the Court contested the automatic application of border procedures (and the prohibition on "entering the territory") to all asylum seekers coming from a safe country of origin, pointing out that it is for the authority responsible for examining the asylum application to declare which procedure is to be followed (a procedural step that was not followed in the specific case examined by the Court). For all these reasons, the Court decided not to validate the detention measure (see decisions of 29.9.2023 - in Italian)."

**The Franco-Italian border:**

The significantly increased arrivals of people in southern Italy, the chaos characterising the identification procedures, and the complete absence of legal information have led to a strong influx of people moving towards the internal borders of Italy. The situation is particularly critical in Ventimiglia, where people who disembarked only ten days before are arriving with hopes of continuing their migratory journey to other EU countries. The French response has been particularly determined, with Interior Minister Darmanin adopting a series of measures aimed at countering attempts to enter France. France continues its policy of reinstating border controls at its internal borders and continues to issue entry bans to a significant number of people intercepted after crossing the border, without conducting any individual assessments (including regarding minors) and without considering any international protection applications.

Recently, the Court of Justice of the EU, following a preliminary question posed by the French Conseil d'État, has ruled on the compatibility of the use of entry bans (*refus d'entrée*) with European regulations (in particular, Regulation 2016/399 and Directive 2008/115) in decision C22/143-. The Court has essentially affirmed that the procedure implemented by the French authorities to use entry bans (Article 14 of the Schengen Border Code) without granting the guarantees provided for in the return directive (Directive 2008/115) - namely the formality of a removal decision (paragraph 41), a deadline for voluntary departure (paragraph 42), and detention only in specific cases (paragraph 43) - is illegitimate. French associations are waiting to see how the Conseil d'État will implement the principles contained in the decision, but at the moment, some operational countermeasures adopted by the French administration can be observed. Firstly, there is a massive presence of police at border areas (both in Menton and Briançon), increased police checks and ethnic profiling in French territory, and an increase in the use of drones in border areas. Secondly, there is an increase in the use of administrative detention and detention measures in both border areas and more internal areas of the country. Furthermore, there have been reports of people receiving removal orders from French authorities in addition to entry refusal measures, including orders to leave the national territory (*obligation de quitter le territoire - OQT*) and a ban on re-entry into France (*interdiction de retour sur le territoire français - IRTF*).

On the Italian side, there is a substantial lack of response to the basic needs of people on the move (both in terms of reception and essential needs), and the political rhetoric in recent weeks has instead focused on the opportunity to open a detention centre (CPR) in the territory of Ventimiglia to facilitate possible repatriations to the home countries of foreign citizens."

### **Potential revamp of EU-Turkey deal:**

Between 1 September and 27 September, the Turkish Coast Guard documented 67 pushback cases in the Aegean, affecting 1,988 people. Exact data of pushbacks and border violence are difficult to obtain, especially in the Evros/Edirne/Kirklareli region. However, media articles and videos shared by POM themselves show that, despite the fact that there is no independent monitoring mechanism in place to gather statistics, evidence of violent pushbacks continues to surface. For example, on 14 September, a video surfaced that stated that a group of border crossers was caught in cross fire at the Evros/Meric River. In another case, a Turkish news outlet reported that a group of POM crossed the Evros/Meriç and were violently pushed back from Greece to Turkey.

These illegal actions are continuing in a context where the 2016 EU-Turkey deal continues to be the subject of praise by leaders of EU Member States, and Greece even talks about potential expansion and fortification of the agreement. On 28th September, Greece's Interior Minister, Kairidis, met with Commissioner Johansson and German Interior Minister Nancy Faesser met in Brussels amid discussions on the EU's New Pact on Migration. Following elections in Greece and Turkey which resulted in narrow wins for both of the ruling parties - New Democracy and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) - and Greece's support after Turkey's large scale earthquake earlier this year, historical tensions between the two countries have begun to thaw. In fact, the BBC reported that the countries had agreed to a groundbreaking new migration pact in which the Interior Ministers, Kairidis and Yerlikaya, committed to halt people on the move attempting to cross into Europe through apprehensions at Turkey's frontiers and the establishment of a 'hotline' between the two. Yerlikaya is also reported to be in talks with the Bulgarian Interior Minister to strengthen agreements across the tri-border area in curtailing irregular movement.

### DEATHS ALONG THE “BALKAN ROUTE”

#### North Macedonian Railway Accidents

In July 2023, a Moroccan person on the move was reported to have been electrocuted close to Gevgelija rail station, a town on the North Macedonian side of the border with Greece. After spending time in the hospital in Skopje he eventually succumbed to his injuries and sadly passed away in mid July. This September, another such case has occurred with it being reported that a second Moroccan person on the move was electrocuted whilst transiting through North Macedonia close to the town of Gradsko; he also passed away shortly afterwards.

Both these accidents would have been easily avoided if people on the move were not continuously forced into increasingly unsafe routes to avoid apprehension and violent pushbacks. Whilst people on the move used to travel between train carriages to transit through North Macedonia, which also resulted in rail accidents leading to loss of limbs, the risk of being detected whilst the train slows down at stations resulted in a shift in practice. Now people opt to lay down on top of train carriages, however there are cables that connect to the carriages near to stations which send electric signals. This has therefore led to the electrocutions and subsequent deaths of two people on the move so far. The train lines have historically been a dangerous yet vital resource for people on the move to navigate their way through the country. Indeed in 2015, 14 people on the move from Somalia and Afghanistan died after being struck by a train whilst following the tracks to guide their transit. As people on the move are increasingly forced away from cities and highways due to their fears of being pushed back, they are forced into ever-dangerous clandestine routes which often lead to serious injury or death.

#### Drownings in the Una River

Since the beginning of August 2023, four bodies believed to belong to people on the move have washed up on the shores of the Una river that separates Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina; near Mali Zvornik, Loznica, Osamsko, and Karakaj. As elaborated on in our August Monthly Report, an increasing number of people have been transiting through Bosnia-Herzegovina and a number of these seem to be crossing over from Serbia. As violent pushbacks along the Serbian/Hungarian border persist, some people opt to go through Bosnia Herzegovina into Croatia. Again, we are able to see how fear of pushbacks forces people on the move to take riskier routes, in this case – crossing rivers. As has been well documented in the Evros region where a total of 63 bodies were recovered in 2022, rivers are particularly dangerous modes of transit for people seeking safety and drownings often occur. The increased deaths in the Una border river are no different. Both of these stories from across the route reiterate once again why safe and legal pathways are so vital in the struggle to save lives, and why pushbacks both directly and indirectly result in the deaths of people seeking safety.



# ADVOCACY

## Von Der Leyen's State of the Union (SOTEU) Speech

On 13 September in Strasbourg, von der Leyen gave her last State of the Union speech prior to 2024's elections. Although she remained vague on the potential of running for a second mandate, the speech was full of praise for the successes of her team on digital and green transitions, and their management of two major challenges: the COVID pandemic and the war in Ukraine. A large part of her speech was dedicated to lauding the Commission's management of migration with a Team Europe approach, mentioning partnership with Western Balkan states, Tunisia, and hinting at similar deals planned for the future.

The phrase 'Team Europe' first cropped up in Commission press releases covering the fight against COVID19- in 2020 and has since become a signature catchphrase. Most notably, the new Tunisia-EU agreement brokered by von der Leyen, Italian Prime Minister Meloni and Dutch Prime Minister Rutte was said to be done through a 'Team Europe' approach. This led to questions from MEPs, particularly Sophie In 't Veld who asked "Can somebody please show me in the European treaties where this new EU body is? What the hell is Team Europe?" Indeed, there are pertinent questions to be asked concerning what the mandate and legal basis of 'Team Europe' is considering there is no formalised body, and decisions on things like the deal with Tunisia have bypassed the European Parliament. Nevertheless, von der Leyen continued to refer to the 'Team Europe' approach in SOTEU when discussing the 'hybrid threat' that the Commission faced from Belarus in 2021, and the Union's fight against smugglers.

von der Leyen particularly praised the role of Bulgaria and Romania in their management of irregular movement, saying they have proven themselves to be part of the Schengen area. Much like in the past with Croatia, Schengen accession has been used to blackmail both countries into tightening their borders and accepting further Frontex officers operating on their territories. In March 2023, the Commission announced two pilot projects and pledged 45 million EUR for Bulgaria and 10.8 million EUR for Romania under the Border Management and Visa Instrument (BMVI). The projects are set to see new border technologies operating in the countries, increased Frontex deployment, and revamped centres for pre-screening procedures as visualised in the New Pact. All this in spite of continuous evidence of rights violations emerging from the region, as elaborated on in our August Monthly Report. von der Leyen's State of the Union Speech reflected her leadership across the last four years, ignoring evidence of pushbacks, violence, and arbitrary detention across Europe and instead normalising, and even rewarding, rights violations across Member States.



# 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](mailto:mail@borderviolence.eu).

For press and media requests please contact: [press@borderviolence.eu](mailto:press@borderviolence.eu)



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