

MONTHLY REPORT | FEBRUARY 2025

# ILLEGAL PUSHBACKS AND BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS

BVMN is a network of watchdog organisations active in the Balkans, Greece, Turkey and Poland including Rigardu, Mobile Info Team, Collective Aid, Blindspots, Pushback Alarm Austria, I Have Rights, Center for Legal Aid, Mission Wings, InfoPark, Legal Centre Lesvos and We Are Monitoring.

Cover image: Eviction in Northern France  
Source: @elio\_j\_



Border Violence  
Monitoring Network

MONTHLY REPORT | FEBRUARY 2025

# ILLEGAL PUSHBACKS AND BORDER VIOLENCE REPORTS



**BLIND  
SPOTS**



**Rigardu**



**Border Violence  
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# Methodology and Terminology

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## 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.

## 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

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[1] BVMN is a network of watchdog organisations active in the Balkans, Greece, Turkey and Poland including Rigardu, Mobile Info Team, Collective Aid, Blindspots, Pushback Alarmphone Austria, I Have Rights, Center for Legal Aid, Mission Wings. Legal Centre Lesvos, We Are Monitoring and InfoPark



# Executive summary

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In February, the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) shared 6 testimonies of pushbacks impacting at least 78 people on the move across the Balkans and Greece. This report gathers updates from the month of February and brings together first-hand testimonies from a range of countries in the Balkans, Turkey, and France to look at the way European Union states and other actors are affecting systemic violence towards people crossing borders. Updates come from the different Member Organisations of BVMN, as well as Glocal Roots (Kos, Greece). We also welcome a section from our new BVMN Member, Human Rights Observers (France).

This month, we have witnessed an escalation of what is likely the biggest civil society movement in Serbia's recent history. The collapse of the train station in the country's second biggest city – which resulted in the death of 16 people – sparked a series of mass protests led by students who call for an end to systemic corruption and the need for accountability. While the government works on tightening the grip on journalists and activists – in a further attack against an already extremely devalued freedom of press –, the EU's support for Serbia's ability to control its borders and restrict the right to seek asylum doesn't falter, all in the framework of aligning with EU policies for accession. Thus, the arrival of the so-called "Schengen bus" – following another significant donation of surveillance vehicles and equipment in December –, and the enhanced collaboration with Frontex is likely to increase the violence and control over people on the move trying to transit through the country, with no safe passage for an alternative. On the other side of the northern border, Hungary continues to build up defenses against asylum-seekers, pushing back those apprehended on a daily basis and publicly – and proudly – sharing these violations on a government website. Similarly, despite the lack of coverage due to their complete normalisation over the past several years, pushbacks from Croatia to Bosnia remain an essential – while illegal – piece of the border infrastructure in the region. Beatings, intimidation with dogs, theft of phones, clothes and other belongings, forced river crossings in freezing temperatures and detention in unsanitary conditions are some of the extremely violent practices reported by people on the move at that border this month, as most months since 2017.

In Poland, the government's quest to suspend the right to seek asylum continues, in a move that reminds us of Hungary's decision to eliminate this right within its border region first, the wider territory later, several years ago. The legislative change is pushed at the same time as the violence against people on the move at the border with Belarus continues to endanger the lives of hundreds of people – solidarity organisations operating in the region have recorded 68 pushbacks reports this month. Meanwhile, a pushback case from 2021 is being heard at the European Court for Human Rights, together with two more cases from Latvia and Lithuania, the authorities' systematic attempt to destroy evidence and protect their impunity under scrutiny.



## Executive summary

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Moreover, in Greece, a significant decrease in the number of people arriving in the islands has been recorded, partly as a result of the fall of Assad's regime in December. Despite the lowering numbers, a broader trend that has been going on since the beginning of the year, conditions at the Closed-Controlled Access Centres (CCAC) in Lesbos, Kos and Samos have far from improved. In fact, the dire conditions in the "Safe Zone" of the Samos CCAC - used to host unaccompanied minors - have led the European Court for Human Rights to grant interim measures for four minors to be released and given suitable accommodation. In the general area, residents have self-organised to collect the trash in the facility due to the complete lack of adequate services leading to increasingly - and dangerously - unsanitary conditions. Furthermore, with winter temperatures still reaching negative numbers at night, the absence of proper heating, shelter and access to hot water remains a concern in many of the centres.

Similar issues - and some others - have also been long reported from EU-funded Removal Centres in Turkey, many of which remain completely unmonitored and unscrutinised regardless of the widespread complaints of violations. This month, we also report further on the reality of detention in Turkey drawing from the information shared by local organization Mülteci Der describing the conditions in Izmir Harmandalı and Aydın Removal Centers, by the Turkish Aegean coast. Testimonies collected by the organization paint an extremely dire picture of the living conditions at the facilities, marked by overcrowding, acutely poor hygiene conditions, inadequate or nonexistent health care - they also describe a widespread deterioration of mental health - and disregard for specific vulnerabilities and needs. This situation, which seems systematic across Removal Centres, is being made worse by the continuous raids and apprehensions resulting from widespread police operation in several regions, such as Kırklareli province near the border with Bulgaria, which increase the number of detainees.

Lastly, we provide a new update on the eviction operations in Northern France, where at least 60 evictions of informal living sites have been recorded by Human Rights Observers this month - in a cycle that is repeated nearly every 48 hours -, despite continuous obstructions by the authorities to monitor the violations. Moreover, at the French-Italian border, a so-called "anti-terror task force" has arrived at the French side, contributing to illegitimate long detentions suffered by people on the move at the police station, which also include increasingly hostile interrogations. This situation, coupled with the growing surveillance infrastructure deployed around the mountain paths crossing the border - with drones, helicopters and jeeps patrols - continue to make transit harder and more dangerous for people on the move, in a place where their asylum claims are systematically ignored.

# **UPDATE ON THE SITUATION**



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## Syrians in the EU: Forced 'voluntary' return and suspended asylum claims

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Despite the ongoing hostilities in Syria, such as the recent violent clashes in north-west Syria or the Israeli incursion in the south, the EU and certain member states are reluctant to provide Syrians with international protection. Instead, they resort to coercing Syrians into signing voluntary return agreements. The Cypriot government faces accusations of employing deceit to pressure Syrians into return agreements under duress. Allegations include denial of asylum access, unfounded criminal accusations, and unlawful detention under poor conditions, leading asylum-seekers to sign agreements under threat of forced deportation. The EU-funded 'Assisted Voluntary Return Programme' provides Cyprus with the resources to conduct these operations. The high number of Syrian asylum seekers agreeing to return - over 1300 in December and January - suggests that Cypriot authorities have been successful in employing violence, threats, and misinformation to force Syrians to leave Cyprus.

Following the collapse of the Assad regime, Syrians in Bulgaria have also been pressured into accepting voluntary returns to their home country. Testimonies from people on the move reveal that Bulgarian authorities subjected them to coercion and intimidation to secure consent for their return. Solidarity organisations documented the severe harassment of Syrians, including women and children, by Bulgarian authorities. Many reported to be subjected to extensive interrogation and coerced into signing return documents under threats of violence, often without proper translation services and with misleading and inaccurate advice about their legal rights. Residents of the Harmanli camp in southern Bulgaria near the Greek and Turkish borders reported threats of reprisals from authorities after holding a protest against these instances of harassment and the mass rejection of their asylum claims in late January, which lasted for several days.

In Greece, the suspension of asylum applications for Syrian nationals has led to a significant backlog, with thousands of applicants awaiting decisions. In Lesbos, Syrian nationals have also been peacefully protesting against the suspension for weeks, demanding equal treatment to asylum seekers of other nationalities. For three months, Greek authorities have issued neither negative nor positive decisions, leaving Syrians in a limbo of uncertainty. Among the numerous issues arising from this suspension is the risk of Syrian unaccompanied minors being separated from their guardians, who are also of Syrian nationality. In Lesbos, one minor whose case was suspended was recently left behind on the island after their guardians, who had already been granted protection status, departed. There are several similar cases in Lesbos, raising concerns about further separations in Greece and elsewhere due to the suspension.



### Escalation of protests

Widespread protests across Serbia have continued to escalate, developing into the largest protest movement the country has ever seen. The demonstrations, triggered by the Novi Sad *tragedy* in November, call for an end to systemic corruption and for accountability from the government. Established by students, the movement has expanded to include all walks of society, uniting students, teachers, farmers, and other groups with the collective demand for change. With the scale of the protests reaching unprecedented heights, the government has implemented various suppression tactics but this has only encouraged the movement further.



Serbian Protests Red Hand Motif reads You Have Blood on Your Hands! Source: Anonymous

Government actions have had serious implications for civil society as authorities have retaliated through harassment of the media and activists, attempting to perpetuate the narrative of their leading role in organising protests to justify the crackdown. This reflects the tightening grip Serbian authorities are trying to exercise as the protests intensify. Serbia is ranked among the worst in Europe for violating freedom of the press



and the harassment of journalists and, internationally, the Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom [Index](#) ranks Serbia 98 out of 180. The international community has reiterated the importance of the fundamental rights of freedom of expression and assembly in Serbia, with the UN [urging](#) authorities to ensure that civic space is protected amidst reports of growing pressure on civil society in the country.

### **Arrival of the “Schengen bus” and other border surveillance updates**

On February 28th, the first ever ‘Schengen bus’ arrived in Serbia. This specialised vehicle, donated to IOM Serbia by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Denmark, will be used to implement enhanced border checks, primarily through border surveillance. It is also meant to facilitate the registration of people on the move outside of traditional border crossings. This comes after an expansion of surveillance infrastructure in [December 2024](#) through a donation of vehicles and specialised equipment worth 1.7 million euros to go towards “efficient border management”.

The ‘Schengen bus’ comes as part of the country’s obligations under Chapter 24 of the Schengen Action Plan, as Serbia implements procedures to try and fortify its case on EU accession. The EU has encouraged Serbia to align policies in migration and asylum, especially given Serbia’s position as an external border of the EU. This aspiration to accede to the European Union has been used as a bargaining chip to incentivise the limitation of migration flows. In this sense, Serbia has implemented strict policies and increased surveillance with the objective of scoring points amongst the Commission. Previously, the Commission had stated that conversations surrounding accession could commence in 2025 and Serbia has been working on full harmonisation, with February seeing more [talks](#) concerning the ongoing efforts to align the country with the acquis of the EU.

In light of this, the Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Marko Djuric, underlined Serbia’s use of cyber security and prevention of “illegal migrants”, [claiming](#) that the country is responsible for preventing more than 70% of crossings on the Balkan route. Djuric thanked the collective efforts of police, security forces and the collaboration with Frontex, bolstering this as support for Serbia’s bid for EU membership. This alliance with Frontex has been recently solidified through the EU-Serbia [agreement](#) on the broader cooperation of operational activities which was finalised on February 21st and will come into force on April 1st. The deal facilitates joint operations from Frontex and Serbia to be conducted and allows Frontex to carry out border checks and registration of people.



## Strengthened defences and continued pushbacks at border with Hungary

Hungary has promised to continue to prioritise strong border protection over human rights, strengthening defences and remaining vocal about the need for stricter policies. This has come after the country's chief security advisor, György Bakondi, claimed that migration pressure at the Serbian border has increased tenfold since last year. At the beginning of February, György Bakondi stated that 1,841 so-called "illegal migrants" had allegedly been apprehended so far this year, compared to 191 during the same period last year. Hungarian President Tamás Sulyok also visited the border with Serbia, offering his compliments for the advanced equipment.

The very real and violent effects of these policies are evidenced by the continued daily illegal pushbacks from the country to Serbia. Many of those who have been pushed back have faced multiple illegal expulsions, with a group of those who spoke to Collective Aid this month having been pushed back three times each. The group detailed that every time they had been taken back to Preševo camp, in southern Serbia, by the border with North Macedonia, meaning they were transported to the other side of the country. These pushback testimonies have consistently mentioned the use of force and violence, theft of clothes and possessions, and attacks from police dogs. While the number of pushbacks seems to have been steady, Serbian organisation Asylum Protection Centre (APC) reported that recent pushback testimonies are increasingly mentioning heightened physical violence. Up to 50 people are pushed back to the Serbian territory every day, where they are often met with Serbian authorities and Frontex agents.

## Detention conditions

Those who have been apprehended by police in Serbia have described the inhumane conditions of detention. Last month, a group recounted to BVMN their time detained in a police station in Subotica for two days with no food or water, 50 people crammed into one room. One man Collective Aid spoke to said he and his group were detained in the police station, and Serbian police continued to bring more people until they totalled more than 30 people, including minors, in one overcrowded room. The only facilities available were a toilet inside the same confined room. They had no access to food or water, apart from the one coming from the sink:



*"The toilet was inside the room, there was a sink flooded with water, we could only drink that water. It was very bad."*

They were asked to pay if they wanted any food. Those with money paid for some basic food while those who had no money went without food for up to 2 days. This story echoes reports from APC regarding the detention of more than 40 people in the same room in a police station in Horgoš, a Serbian town on the border with Hungary. The people - men, women and children -, were kept for up to 12 hours all together in one room.



### Trends in violence during pushbacks

Reports of violence and inhumane conditions at European borders remain alarmingly consistent. In Bosnia–Herzegovina, testimonies from individuals subjected to pushbacks frequently describe Croatian police beating people and using dogs to intimidate them. Many return to Sarajevo from the Croatian border with severe injuries, including black eyes, deep gashes on the face and head, and even wounds requiring stitches.

A recurring and systematic practice – reported on for the past several years – is destroying or stealing people’s phones during pushbacks, leaving them in an even more vulnerable situation. Without a phone, they lose contact with family, access to money, storage for essential documents, and navigation tools. Moreover, they are unable to document the violence endured, thus increasing the impunity of perpetrators. In addition to phones, Croatian authorities have also been seizing money and burning clothes and personal belongings. This is not a new tactic –NNK’s October 2024 report *[Burned Borders](#)* documented the widespread and ongoing nature of these acts, which have been taking place for at least a year.

There are also distressing reports of people being forced into the freezing waters of the Korana River near Tržac, at the Bosnian–Croatian border. This is not an isolated incident but rather a continuation of a known practice, previously documented by organizations such as Collective Aid in an October 2024 [blog post](#).

Gun violence has also been reported, though in most cases, firearms appear to be used as blunt weapons to strike people rather than for shooting. Additionally, POM have described many being detained for several days at the Tovarnik Transit Detention Centre near the Croatian–Serbian border, after being apprehended near the Bosnian–Croatian border. A man described one of Croatia’s detention centres (he did not specify which one) as having extremely poor sanitary conditions, including moldy mattresses and very dirty toilets.

Meanwhile, the increasing use of surveillance technology is making movement even more difficult. One man reported being detected by drones three times while attempting to cross into Croatia, resulting in repeated pushbacks.



### Demographics and general trends

This month, Bosnia-Herzegovina registered 610 new arrivals, confirming the declining trends we have been observing for several months. The majority of people on the move in the camps in the country come from Morocco, Syria, Egypt, and Afghanistan.

Most people on the move arriving in Bosnia-Herzegovina do so after travelling through Turkey, Bulgaria and Serbia - many having experienced pushbacks along the way -, with nearly everyone eventually aiming to reach Croatia. A smaller number seek asylum in Bosnia instead. A less frequent but still notable route involves first arriving in Greece, traveling north through North Macedonia and Serbia, and then continuing into Bosnia.

### President of Republika Srpska found guilty of defying the High Representative

On February 27th, Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik was found guilty by the Court of Bosnia-Herzegovina in a first-instance ruling for defying international High Representative Christian Schmidt. He was sentenced to one year in prison and banned from public office for six years. Dodik did not attend the hearing, and the verdict was condemned by Serbia, Hungary, and Russia, which labeled it a politically motivated attack.

In response to the ruling, the Parliamentary Assembly of Republika Srpska passed laws barring the State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA) and the state intelligence service (OSA) from operating within its territory. Furthermore, it voted to prohibit Bosnia's state-level court, prosecutor's office, High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council from exercising jurisdiction within the entity.

These moves have escalated political tensions in Bosnia's already fragile political landscape, raising concerns about the country's stability and the potential impact on migration patterns and policies. For instance, the Parliamentary Assembly of Republika Srpska has already adopted a controversial "foreign agents" law, introducing a special register for non-profit organizations - a measure expected to target NGOs operating in the region.

We will keep monitoring the situation and assess the broader implications of this landmark ruling.



### **Bosnia visits Italy to “improve border management”**

From February 18th to 21st, 2025, representatives from the BiH Ministry of Security, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Service for Foreigners' Affairs, and Border Police visited Rome, Italy, to meet with the Italian Ministry of the Interior and Border Police. While framed as a chance to learn about EU regulations and best practices regarding the legal, procedural, and operational aspects of registering POM, data management and system operability, the visit was essentially a training on how to tighten control and restrict movement, ultimately reinforcing Fortress Europe.



### **Police violence in Bulgaria**

During the past month, people crossing the Bulgarian-Serbian border have continued reporting on violence perpetrated by Bulgarian police, including the use of dogs and different kinds of weapons. Most people on the move we meet describe the severe violence from Bulgarian authorities as “brutal”. One group who spoke to BVMN member organisation Collective Aid recounted their time in detention after being apprehended in Bulgaria, marked by recurrent violence from police. They described having their phones taken from them, as well as their clothes and other possessions. One 17 year old boy also reported being detained for up to 15 days without access to medical assistance and with minimal food.



### Demographics and trends at the Polish–Belarusian border

In February 2025, we gathered reports from 246 people traveling in 140 groups. Among them there were 52 women, accounting for more than 21% of the total number of reports. 6 of these women were pregnant. Reports from minors accounted for nearly 5% of all requests for assistance, and 4 of the 11 minors were traveling not accompanied by a legal guardian or carer. Out of the 246 reports, 64 were from people from Somalia, 27 were from Ethiopia, 22 from Sudan, 18 from Eritrea and 16 from Burundi. Because of the unfavorable conditions of the conversations, the country of origin of 60 people could not be determined.

The typical low number of requests for assistance in the winter months continued, which, as in previous years, seems mostly related to severe weather conditions. For 21 days in February, the average daily temperature in Białowieża did not exceed 0 °C, while on warmer days it reached a maximum of +4 °C. It rained or snowed in the Białowieża Forest for 13 of the 28 February days.

People who attempt to cross the border in winter are much more likely to suffer serious injury, hospitalisation or even death from hypothermia. For this reason, as was the case in January, the vast majority of groups that requested humanitarian aid in February were on the eastern side of the border barrier when contact was made. Most of them, 193 people, were in larger cities in Belarus.

People on the move reported a lack of access to asylum procedures, as well as a complete lack of systemic support. In Belarus, people on the move don't have access to safe housing, they often report sleeping rough or having to share rooms with many people in a similar situation. The "refugee housing market" is reportedly largely controlled by smugglers and rife with abuse. Individuals, especially women and unaccompanied minors, become exposed to serious danger and are dependent on smuggling networks.

*I am a Somali boy who is suffering in Belarus, because I arrived at the Polish border and the soldiers told me that they were harassing me. Since then, I am homeless and I have nothing to eat. This time I have never entered Poland, Polish soldiers arrested me and I was arrested.*

*Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Somalia, February 2025.*



At the time of contact, 9 groups were in the strip between the barrier located on Polish territory and the fortifications on the Belarusian side [2]. These groups comprised a total of 24 people, including 4 children and 3 women. It's important to highlight that these figures are not complete and do not allow us to estimate, even approximately, the actual number of people stuck in the strip between the border fortifications at any given time.

A huge problem for people stuck in the strip between Polish and Belarusian fences is also the very limited access to medical care. People often retreat to Belarusian towns precisely because of health problems – exhaustion caused by their prolonged stay in the forest, injuries from beatings or acquired during attempts to cross the border barrier. More than 28% of all those asking for support declared a need for medical assistance. Unfortunately, even returning to major cities of Belarus does not ensure safe access to medical aid for people on the move.

*I went to the Belarusian forest. We were 6 people trying to cross to Poland. There, the Belarusian army caught us. We managed to run and escape far away, but then they caught two of us and we escaped. I found this young X man who was with us in the forest. His name is X. He was sleeping on the road. His clothes were torn and he was sick. He had marks from beatings on his legs and was hungry. He had no place to sleep. I took him with me to the apartment. Now he is sick and does not eat. They tortured him with electricity. He is now in a state of shock. He does not even speak. I do not have money to take him to the hospital.*

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*Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Sudan traveling with 5 other people, February 2025.*

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[2] In addition to the 5,5 metres high Polish barrier, there is also a smaller fence on the Belarusian side delineating a strip of land, mostly about 1 kilometre wide, most of which lies on the Belarusian territory (the Polish wall is not built directly on the border, so there is a narrow strip between the border and the wall, which lies on the Polish territory and where people on the move should be able to request asylum. However, this is usually not respected). This zone between Polish and Belarusian barriers is controlled by Belarusian forces. People on the move are often trapped there, unable to cross the border to Poland (or being pushed back numerous times) and not allowed by the Belarusian forces to withdraw to Minsk or other Belarusian cities. This zone is often referred to by people on the move with an Arabic word *muharrama* – no man's land.



*I am currently in Belarus. About a month ago, I had surgery. I don't even have clothes to wear now, so the wound is getting cold and susceptible to infection. Our current situation is that I am stranded on the streets, I don't even have clothes to wear, we don't have food, I don't have family to send us food.*

*Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Somalia,  
February 2025.*

In February, only one of the reports came from a group that was in the forest on the western side of the Polish border barrier at the time of contact. Two men, one from Ethiopia and one from Somalia, received humanitarian support from solidarity organisations. They were provided with in-kind assistance, as well as first aid, and supported in expressing their request for international protection [3]. According to the men's accounts, they crossed the border barrier in a larger group of 8, but the rest of their companions were stopped by Polish border guards and pushed back.

During the reported period, humanitarian organizations received pushback reports from 39 people traveling in 24 groups. This number includes 7 women. 13 of these individuals experienced more than one pushback to Belarus - the total number of reported pushbacks was 68. As in previous months, the pushbacks involved brutal violence by Polish border guards. Respondents described primarily: physical and verbal violence, extortion, humiliation, intimidation, theft and destruction of property.

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[3] Assisted Asylum Request is a procedure adopted by organisations working in the area of the Poland-Belarus border. The objective is to reduce the risk of pushback of an asylum seeker and the process is based on the premise known as 'protection through presence', notion that humanitarian presence might deter the potential risk of abuse and, in this specific context, denial of access to asylum procedures. Migrants expressing the intention to seek asylum to humanitarian workers may choose to be accompanied by aid workers during their encounter with the Border Guard.



*I got harmed by the Polish border patrols after entering the Polish forest and they throw me back to Belarus' forest injured. [...] We returned yesterday after the Polish throw us through the fence as we couldn't bare the cold and snow wounded. We have been in the forest for more than a week.*

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*Excerpt from a conversation with a man from Eritrea traveling with 7 other people, February 2025.*

*I reached the Poland-Belarus border, hoping to request asylum in Poland or any other European Union country. But as soon as I crossed, the border guards caught me and the group I was traveling with. I was already injured—my leg was in terrible pain, and I could barely walk. The border guards took us to an immigration detention center. They searched us, forced us to remove our clothes, and left us wearing only our underwear. Then, they put us in a freezing cold room. We stayed there for 12 hours straight—with no food, no warmth, nothing but the unbearable cold. They only gave us water. My body was shaking, my leg was throbbing, and my hope was fading. Then, in the morning, without saying much, they took us and dumped us back at the Belarus border. Just like that. No explanation. No asylum. No mercy. I was devastated. I had nowhere to go. The freezing air cut through my skin, and I had no shelter, no protection from the cold.*

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*Excerpt from a conversation with a man (country of origin unknown), February 2025.*



## Pushback from August 2021 in the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)

On February 12th, 2025, the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) heard arguments in the case of R.A. and Others v. Poland. This is only the tenth case against Poland ever examined by the Grand Chamber since Poland ratified the European Convention on Human Rights in 1993.

The case concerns 32 Afghan nationals who fled their country after the Taliban took power. In August 2021, they crossed the Polish-Belarusian border irregularly and were immediately trapped in the border zone - unable to move forward because of Polish authorities and unable to return due to Belarusian forces blocking their way. Their requests for international protection were ignored, leaving them stranded without food, water, medical assistance, or shelter for weeks until they were forcibly pushed back to Belarus.

This was not the only case heard by the Grand Chamber that day. The Court also examined two other cases concerning pushbacks at the EU's external border with Belarus, in Lithuania and in Latvia. The judgments in these cases will set a critical precedent for how Europe treats asylum seekers at its borders. The outcome of R.A. and Others v. Poland could reshape asylum protections. If the Court allows pushbacks to be carried out in cases like this, it would give states a free pass to forcibly expel people to countries where they face violence and persecution.

The prohibition of torture and inhumane treatment (Article 3 ECHR) is supposed to be absolute -it cannot be weakened, even under the pretext of border security. When Poland refused to process the applicants' asylum requests, it had a legal obligation to determine whether Belarus had a functioning asylum system and could guarantee their safety. It failed to do so, despite overwhelming evidence that Belarus is not a safe country for refugees.

One of the most significant challenges in this case was proving that the applicants were on Polish territory and had requested asylum. The Polish government denied their presence, claiming they had never crossed the border and never sought asylum in Poland. However, this was contradicted by multiple sources, including:

- Video recordings of the applicants explicitly requesting asylum,
- Amnesty International's report, which confirmed their presence in Poland and the forced pushback,
- Statements from the Polish Commissioner for Human Rights and other witnesses.



Polish authorities actively obstructed evidence gathering by:

- Destroying the applicants' phones,
- Declaring a state of emergency and banning access to the border zone,
- Blocking lawyers from meeting with applicants, despite an ECtHR interim measure requiring access,
- Refusing to secure evidence of the camp's location through expert assessment.

The ruling in *R.A. and Others v. Poland*, along with *H.M.M. and Others v. Latvia* and *C.O.C.G. and Others v. Lithuania*, will set a legal standard for the entire region. If pushbacks are legitimized, other countries will be allowed to follow suit with impunity.

### **Processing the suspension of the Right to International Protection**

On February 21st, 2025, Polish Parliament passed the Act on Granting Protection to Foreigners in the Territory of the Republic of Poland. This bill allows the government to temporarily restrict access to international protection as part of a strategy to counter the - vaguely defined - "instrumentalization of migration". The changes are in line with the government's inhumane and illegal pushback policy on the Polish-Belarusian border, and put people who are fleeing from danger in their countries of origin at risk. The introduction of the legislation as proposed contradicts a number of domestic, EU and international laws, and sets a dangerous precedent in which fundamental rights of individuals are subjugated to political interests and can be suspended at any convenient moment.

One of the biggest concerns arising from the bill is that it leaves a large scope for discretion of Border Guard officers on duty in border areas, while lacking any control mechanisms over their actions. Furthermore, even though the law provides an exception for applications from persons belonging to so-called "vulnerable groups," the document omits a number of situations that increase such vulnerability - including children and victims of violence or human trafficking. Most importantly, it fails to take into account that the Border Guard does not effectively identify people from vulnerable groups. In 2023, there were at least 2,800 documented pushbacks from Poland to Belarus, involving a total of 1,775 people. Among them, at least 120 belonged to so-called vulnerable groups: minors, unaccompanied minors, pregnant and elderly people, and people in need of medical care. Even those who were hospitalized were not identified as vulnerable, and were returned to Belarus after leaving the hospital, or even during treatment - as confirmed by Polish courts' rulings.



This is particularly disturbing in light of the fact that the law does not provide any mechanisms to control the actions of the Border Guard, nor the possibility to appeal the authority's decisions. It should also be noted that the temporary ban on staying in the border zone will be prolonged, which also prevents monitoring of the situation by NGOs and the media.

The original draft of the bill also entailed the exclusion of the possibility of filing a joint application by family members. Were this to be applied, it could lead to a situation in which children would be left on Polish territory, while parents or guardians would be returned to Belarus. On February 21st, 2025, Sejm – the lower chamber of Polish parliament – passed an amendment to the draft, but no provision was introduced that would provide an unequivocal basis for recognizing that the application of an eligible (i.e., vulnerable) person may also include their family members. It should be emphasized that when the restriction on the right to submit an application for protection would be in effect, applications from all foreigners deemed as not belonging to vulnerable groups would be automatically refused.



### **GCR's requests to the European Court of Human Rights since 2022**

Since March 2022, the Greek Council for Refugees has lodged 100 requests for the application of interim measures (Rule 39) to the European Court of Human Rights to grant humanitarian assistance and access to the asylum procedure to people on the move at risk of being pushed back at Greece's land and maritime borders. In all cases, the Court accepted GCR's claims and demanded that the Greek government refrain from illegally expelling the people concerned, which in some cases included children and recognised refugees, from its territory. Yet, as reported by GCR, the Court's demands were disregarded in a large number of cases and some of the concerned individuals were pushed back to Turkey, some were arrested and some went missing.

The individuals that were pushed back also complained that they had been victims of physical violence by the Greek authorities, some were reportedly detained in facilities in the Evros region prior to being pushed back. In one case, people on the move were kept stranded on the islets on the Evros river for over a month. Since January 2022, GCR has also sent at least 758 interventions to the Greek authorities and in approximately half of the cases the Greek authorities either did not reply or replied that they had not been able to locate them. In 2024, GCR sent 369 written interventions to the Greek authorities on behalf of 1,928 asylum seekers. 945 of them either went missing or informed GCR that they had been victims of a pushback.

### **Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights visit to Greece**

The Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights made a visit to Greece in February. One of the two areas of focus was human rights violations against people on the move by Greek state actors. In particular, he looked into issues surrounding the inquiry into the circumstances of the Pylos shipwreck and met with the Ombudsman regarding the latter's findings. The Ombudsman's investigation into the mishandling of the rescue of the *Adriana*, the subsequent alleged cover up and obstruction of justice, as well as the unfounded jailing of 9 survivors on charges of trafficking (since exonerated), was obstructed by the Ministry of Maritime Affairs, which was publicly addressed by the Greek National Human Rights Commission.

The visit comes after 3 deaths of non-Greek nationals in state custody in late 2024, as well as a landmark European Court of Human Rights ruling (in January 2025) on an illegal pushback across the Greece-Turkey border in 2019. During his visit, the Commissioner was informed of reports of ongoing pushbacks and violence on both



the land and sea borders, and he remarked on the need for adequate reception facilities, in particular for unaccompanied minors, the numbers of whom arriving in Greece doubled in 2024.

The Commissioner's visit took place at a point of continued expansion of Greece's border infrastructure at Evros as well as alarming developments in the use of AI-generated surveillance technology at the borders and in camps.

### **Aegean crossings: official statistics for February 2025**

According to the data published by the Turkish government, in February 2025, 344 people were rescued by the Turkish Coast Guard in the Aegean. When a pushback wasn't reported, the reason for rescue was nearly always listed as "engine failure". Among those rescued, 157 people had been pushed back in 4 different cases. 606 people were apprehended by the Turkish Coast Guard before leaving the country. Meanwhile, 1,622 people arrived in the Aegean islands this month.

The numbers are much lower than those from January 2025, when 1,399 people were rescued, 452 of whom had been pushed back. A similar decrease can be noted in the number of people arriving in the islands, which went down from 2,514, and the people apprehended by Turkish authorities before leaving the country, which was 2,028, the previous month. When compared to the same period last year, the decrease is even more striking, with 3,357 people registered in the Greek islands in February 2024, 3,413 apprehended and 2,291 rescued, 1,196 of whom had been pushed back.

Despite the fewer arrivals and pushbacks registered, the Aegean remained a deadly place as a result of the inhumane migration policies, and six people on the move died at sea while trying to reach Greece. On February 19th 2025, the Turkish Coast Guard rescued 27 people and 6 bodies were recovered after a shipwreck off the coast of Kuşadası. The Turkish Coast Guard also arrested one supposed "facilitator".

It is too early to read into this change in the migration pattern, as it is not the first time that, for a while, things appear calmer in the Aegean. However, it does fit into a broader decrease in the numbers of people trying to cross recorded since the second week of 2025. It is important to note that, on January 14th 2025 a meeting was held in Istanbul between the Migration and Interior Ministers of Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria to discuss the protection of borders and migration. Even though the concrete outcomes of this meeting are unknown, it is possible that measures agreed could be related to



the decreased numbers of people attempting to cross. On the other hand it must be emphasized that the figures used in this analysis are supplied by the Turkish Coast Guard, and as such a decrease in activity at sea may also result from the intensification of police operations on land.

### **Lesvos**

#### *Woman found dead on a boat arriving in Lesvos*

On February 23rd, a young woman was found dead aboard a boat that had crossed from Turkey to Lesvos. She is believed to be of Afghan origin. Her body was taken to Mytilene Hospital for a forensic examination, yet no further information has been communicated. 18 other people on the move were on the boat. They were transferred to the Closed Controlled Access Centre (CCAC) in Lesvos.

#### *Situation at the CCAC*

The number of CCAC residents has steadily decreased since December, when it was at a maximum capacity of 3,871, to 2,915 on January 31st and 2,342 on February 28th. Nevertheless, community representatives still report overcrowded conditions in certain areas. Moreover, several other issues persist: many of the showers and restrooms remain damaged, there is no hot water, and cash assistance has still not resumed. Another issue is that the 'panic button', an app with which women can silently notify the Greek Police in case they face any threat or danger, is only available to women with a social security number, despite the advocacy efforts of NGOs in Lesvos to make this service more accessible.

### **Kos**

Similar to the situation in Lesvos, the population in the Kos CCAC continued to decline in February, with 1,097 individuals recorded on February 1st, 2025, and 759 on February 28th, 2025, according to the Ministry of Migration and Asylum. Meanwhile, UNHCR reported 415 new arrivals in the Dodecanese islands. While lower numbers of arrivals may be linked to continued illegal pushbacks around Kos, Syrian nationals, who used to represent the majority of arrivals in 2024, are making fewer attempts to reach Europe following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. Additionally, the decrease in camp residents is also due to transfers to the mainland, reportedly linked to renovations in certain sections of the CCAC.



The departure of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) at the beginning of February 2025 has exacerbated concerns over access to mental health and psychological support. The responsibility for protection cases now falls with the Hippocrates program, which continues to operate under severe capacity constraints. While a doctor from the program is now present in the CCAC, significant gaps remain, particularly for the most vulnerable cases.

**Samos**

In February 2025, procedural irregularities and deplorable conditions in the Samos CCAC persisted, with the dire situation in the so-called "Safe Zone" prompting significant judicial decisions. Additionally, I Have Rights (IHR), alongside four other NGOs, sent a joint letter to the EU Commissioner, highlighting ongoing shortcomings and serious human rights concerns within the Samos CCAC.

*Procedural irregularities and deplorable conditions in the Samos CCAC*

Inconsistencies in the provision of documentation raised serious concerns, putting the asylum applications of people at risk. Multiple clients of IHR reported being denied the renewal of their identity cards. This is an alarming development, as failing to renew identity cards in a timely manner could lead authorities to issue a decision canceling their asylum application.

Undignified living and sanitary conditions in the Samos CCAC have also continued. Photos and reports from clients showed large amounts of trash, worsening pre-existing rodent infestations. Clients indicated that these issues are a direct result of insufficient sanitation and cleanliness in the CCAC. In response to the authorities' inaction, respondents self-organized to pick up trash in an effort to compensate for the inadequate waste management. Hygienic concerns are further compounded by reports of clients stating that access to water and sanitation facilities remained limited, with running water available for only a few hours each day.

With nighttime temperatures dropping to  $-3^{\circ}\text{C}$ , several clients reported having no hot water, while other clients reportedly did not have heating in their containers. Overall, the state of residential and sanitation facilities remained concerning, with consistent reports of a lack of lighting or electricity in containers, broken floors, and leaking water from bathrooms.



Furthermore, concerns about food insecurity and inadequate nutrition persisted, as meals were often insufficient in both quality and quantity. One client described the food as "disgusting" that "barely feeds a child." These issues were further exacerbated by long waiting times: clients reportedly had to wait in line for up to two hours to receive food and arrive at least an hour before distribution began to ensure they received a meal at all.

The negative impact of the living conditions was worsened by the delays in the asylum procedure. More than ten clients of IHR reported that their asylum interviews were postponed for up to two months, prolonging their uncertainty and forcing them to stay longer in these precarious living conditions.



Trash inside the Samos CCAC. Source: Anonymous

### *Dire conditions for unaccompanied minors prompts judicial consequences*

The ongoing dire situation for unaccompanied minors in the so-called "Safe Zone," marked by prolonged detention of up to 125 days, deplorable hygienic conditions and lack of access to essential amenities led to two significant judicial decisions this month.

On February 5th, 2025, following litigation by the [Human Rights Legal Project](#), the European Court of Human Rights granted [interim measures](#) for four unaccompanied minors detained in the "Safe Zone," recognizing the imminent risk of irreparable harm posed by the conditions. The Court ordered Greece to provide the minors with adequate food, water, clothing, and medical care, protect them from ill-treatment, and ensure their prompt relocation to appropriate shelter.



In a landmark ruling on February 28th, 2025, the First Administrative Court of Syros officially acknowledged that the confinement of minors in the "Safe Zone" for more than 25 days constitutes de facto detention. The court emphasized that administrative delays in transferring the children to suitable accommodation "cannot justify continued confinement," setting an important precedent for the protection of unaccompanied minors' rights in Greece.

### *Joint Letter to EU Commissioner for Home and Migration*

Alongside four other organizations, IHR called on the EU Commissioner for Home Affairs and Migration, Magnus Brunner, to use the European Commission's oversight to monitor and improve conditions in the Samos CCAC.

Given the EU Commission's central role in the design, funding, operation, and monitoring of CCACs in Greece, and the alarming conditions on Samos, the five organizations urged the Commission to act and ensure that Greek authorities address prevailing shortcomings and human rights concerns.



### Government statistics on “irregular migrant” apprehensions

According to the statistical updates shared by the Directorate of Migration Management, the number of “irregular migrants” apprehended in the month of February was 10,568, bringing the total number for 2025 so far to 24,628.

### Authorities detain dozens in Kırklareli sweep operations

This month, the Provincial Gendarmerie led multiple operations in the Kırklareli province, near the border with Bulgaria, in which they reported the apprehension of many so-called “irregular migrants” who were, according to them, attempting to exit Turkey illegally. On one occasion, 17 people on the move were detained near the Dereköy Border Gate, which connects to Bulgaria. In other operations conducted over the course of a week, 45 people on the move were detained while attempting to cross the border, and one vehicle reportedly used for their transit was seized.

Another inspection resulted in the detention of 66 people on the move and six suspected people smugglers, along with the seizure of three vehicles allegedly used for transit, according to media reports. The people apprehended in these operations were reportedly transferred to the Pehlivan köy Removal Center in Kırklareli province. Pehlivan köy is the closest major removal center to the Turkish–Bulgarian border. A 2022 visit report published by the Human Rights and Inequality Institution of Turkey (TIHEK) found the facility had hygiene issues and was overcrowded due to the frequency of detentions in the region. Human rights lawyers that have spoken to BVMN have stated that the Center is known to them as a site of physical and psychological torture and with very little in the way of monitoring or accountability.

### Uzbek mother of seven released after nearly two months in detention

On the morning of February 25th, Uzbek national Khanifa Mirganieva was finally released from the women-only Çatalca Removal Center and reunited with her family. The Directorate of Migration Management had held her in detention since December 30th, 2024 for nearly two months following a police raid on her home.

She was reportedly detained on suspicion of being a member of a terrorist organization, however the prosecutor’s office later made a decision not to pursue her prosecution. Despite there being no criminal charges against her, she continued to be detained at Çatalca Removal Center.



Her case was primarily reported on by the Haksöz Haberi news agency, an Islamist-oriented news and commentary site, where in February it was reported that she had experienced issues with extending her residency permit for the past three years. A mother of seven children, Mirganieva reportedly had to flee her home country of Uzbekistan 11 years ago due to religious persecution. She and her family came to Turkey to seek refuge. During her detention in Çatalca Removal Center, her health condition deteriorated due to chronic illnesses such as hypertension and diabetes.

Çatalca Removal Center has recently been associated with a range of claims concerning rights violations. These include, in October–November 2024, the case of Ş.N., a Syrian woman and temporary protection holder who reported to her lawyer Mehmet Behzat Yıcak – who had initially been denied access to meet his client – that she was forced to sleep on the floor and been denied food. Att. Yıcak reported on protests inside the Centre by women detained there at the time of his visit. In late November, two Azerbaijani LGBTQ+ activists were detained at Çatalca, where they stated that they were threatened by authorities, reportedly being told, “We will not let you live here.” A January 2nd, 2025 article highlighted the claim of Ozoda Dzhabbarova, an Uzbek national, that the conditions at the Çatalca contributed to her having a miscarriage. Each of these cases has been reported in previous BVMN Monthly Reports.

As with other removal centers in Turkey, the only rights body with the authority and duty to conduct observation visits is TİHEK. As far as could be ascertained from available public information, TİHEK has conducted no visits to Çatalca Removal Center or commented on any of the claims of torture at the Center.

### **Egyptian student detained at Istanbul Airport facing deportation and risk of torture**

The Göçmenlerle Kardeşiz Initiative released a public statement on social media on February 18th, calling for the release of an Egyptian student facing deportation and possible torture or death in Egypt. At the time, he had been held in the Istanbul Airport Transit Center’s “Unacceptable Passenger” section for more than 40 days, on the basis that he did not hold a valid passport. The student was reportedly tried in Egypt in 2016–2017 for being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, but according to news agency Haksöz Haber, was acquitted. Despite this, they state, he was “unjustly detained, subjected to torture and ill-treatment, and his life was threatened.” He reportedly fled to Georgia, but after facing a deportation order there, travelled to Turkey in the hope of seeking asylum.



According to Haksöz Haber, the Istanbul 15th Administrative Court issued a stay of execution for the student, “on the grounds that ‘there are serious and credible reasons to believe that he will be mistreated if he is forced to return to Egypt, and that he may also face difficulties due to this uncertainty and unpredictability, and that the proceedings in question may cause irreparable and impossible damages for the plaintiff.’”

However, they write, despite this decision, no remedial steps have been taken and he continues to be held in the airport, facing the prospect of deportation. They state that “[from] the moment he landed at the airport, the young Egyptian has constantly voiced the risk of torture in his country and has applied for international protection.”

The Göçmenlerle Kardeşiz statement demanded that appropriate action be taken with respect to the decision of the Istanbul 15th Administrative Court, which had clearly recognised the grave risks the young man could face in Egypt. The Haksöz Haberi article that brought attention to the case led with the demand, ‘Do not let there be a second Mohammed Abdel Hafiz case.’ This was a reference to the [2019 deportation](#) from Istanbul to Cairo of an Egyptian political asylum seeker and alleged member of the Muslim Brotherhood, who Egyptian authorities had sentenced to death in absentia in 2017.

### **Mülteci Der report on conditions at Izmir, Aydın Removal Centers**

The Izmir-based Mülteci Der (Refugee Solidarity Association) has published a [new report](#) on conditions in the Izmir Harmandalı and Aydın Removal Centers, located on Turkey’s Aegean coast. The report relies on the testimony of 42 people gathered during visits to the two removal centers by Mülteci Der legal teams from October to December 2024. This follows a [previous report](#) covering visits to the same two centers from July to September 2024, summarised in BVMN’s [previous Monthly Report](#). Izmir Harmandalı and Aydın Removal Centers were originally established with the support of EU funding and are now used to hold “administratively detained” individuals, largely facing deportation, some of whom have asylum claims pending.

The report provides an overview of the systemic issues and malpractices faced by people held in removal centers. These include overcrowding, inadequate healthcare, poor sanitation, degrading living conditions, and disregard for individual vulnerabilities and specific needs. In addition, the report highlights procedural abuses and shortcomings that deny people’s access to fair legal processes. While many of these



issues are recurrent and persistent features of the Izmir Harmandalı and Aydın Removal Centers, Mülteci Der draws particular attention to the deterioration of mental health and resource shortages as two issues that have seen a notable exacerbation since the period of their previous report, including increased cases of anxiety and emotional distress among detainees, as well as concerns regarding malnutrition and dehydration caused by a lack of water, food, and hygiene products.

Living conditions remain overcrowded, unsanitary, and harsh, with no provision for families with children or individuals with specific health concerns. Mülteci Der describes rooms filled to double capacity with people forced to sleep on the floor and newly arrived detainees confined to outdoor areas. Bathrooms are dirty and poorly maintained, with detainees reporting long waits to use cold showers, with soap infrequently provided. Medical care is wholly lacking as testimonies describe inadequate or non-existent medical attention for chronic conditions, serious injuries, and mental health conditions.

Taken together, the report conveys a clear picture of the degrading conditions in the Izmir Harmandalı and Aydın Removal Centers and the suffering of the people detained there. As summarised by one of Mülteci Der's interviewees: "Every day feels like a year here. I feel like I'm losing my mind."

The testimonies also demonstrate how widespread legal and procedural malpractices compound the inhuman living conditions. Due to an absence of interpretation services, detainees are not aware of their legal rights or options and cannot review paperwork relevant to their cases. Reports of delays in accessing legal aid are common. The report shows how information is conveyed verbally or via documents exclusively in Turkish, with detainees repeatedly coerced or forced to sign documents they cannot understand, under threat their detention will be extended if they do not comply.

Mülteci Der's report provides a rare insight into the conditions and procedures prevalent in the Izmir Harmandalı and Aydın Removal Centers. There are more than 30 removal centers in Turkey, many of which are not subject to monitoring or scrutiny. The continued work of gathering and sharing testimonies is vital in providing a degree of accountability for the policies of the Turkish government and the EU, which prioritize deterrence, detention, and deportation as a means of denying their obligations under international law.



### Evictions of informal living sites

In February, Human Rights Observers (HRO) recorded at least 59 evictions of nine different informal living sites where people on the move survive in the area around Calais. These evictions were carried out nearly every 48 hours. HRO was able to count at least 413 people evicted, and eight people arbitrarily arrested by the Border Police during eviction operations. At least 98 tents were taken by the private company appointed by the Prefecture, 20 of which were emptied before being seized, the rest of the belongings left on site. This demonstrates a clear will to strip people of their only possible shelter, rather than an attempt to “clean” the site. A makeshift shelter, where a person in a wheelchair survives, was also emptied once and destroyed another day. At least 20 tarps, used to shelter from the rain, as well as two blankets were seized too. HRO witnessed the seizure of two backpacks and two lifejackets, actions that endanger even more the lives of people trying to cross the Channel.

In the area around Dunkirk, HRO recorded one eviction of a single informal living site. It was a large-scale operation, with many police agents and private cleaning workers deployed. A digger was also present to take people's belongings and destroy makeshift shelters. Buses were chartered to drive people to temporary hosting centers kilometers away from the border. On that day, the police imposed a very large perimeter upon observers, who could not see nor document the eviction properly. Observers noted at least 50 people were evicted and 3 people arrested by the Border Police, but considering the overall population surviving on site, these numbers are probably much higher.

The numbers presented here constitute a very limited portrait of the violence perpetrated against people on the move during evictions, since HRO teams are often kept at a distance and prevented from observing the ongoing police operation, as was the case during the eviction in Dunkirk. This month, observation was totally obstructed at least 14 times. Police forces also attempt to intimidate observers on a daily basis. In February, observers were filmed without notice – a breach in French law – at least seven times, and a police car rushed towards an observer as if it was about to hit her.

Moreover, in February, a living site around Calais that is usually not evicted has been the target of police harassment. Inhabitants of this site told HRO that on February 6th, the police destroyed their tents and other belongings with knives and, when asked why they were doing that, yelled « shut up » at the residents. On February 13th, people recounted that the police came early in the morning to evict them and took their food and tents. 55 people were driven to a temporary hosting center 130 kilometers away from the border.



Police harassment against people on the move during an eviction. Source: @elio\_j\_



Eviction of informal living site in Calais. Source: T.T. HRO

On February 7th, a hearing took place for the administrative judge to rule on the municipality of Calais' request to evict people surviving in the city center of Calais. At the exact time of the hearing, as happens every two days, the police came to these living sites with the private cleaning company to force the inhabitants to leave and



took away at least five tents. Officially, the authorities argue these operations do not constitute evictions, as they instrumentalize penal law to expel people from the areas where they live. In practice, however, the implementation and effects are the same as the official eviction operations. HRO managed to share evidence of the ongoing police operation to the judge, who decided to dismiss the municipality's request due to the fact that the site had already been evicted on the day of the hearing.

### **Prevented use of public transport and other violence outside of evictions**

In February, HRO recorded at least 16 arrests of people on the move in Calais, outside of evictions. Most of these took place at or near the Calais-Ville train station or the bus station, where observers noted daily (and often heavy) police presence. These operations further complicate people on the move's access to public transport, both physically - with controls and arrests -, and in a dissuasive manner. In February, the Sub-Prefecture and the Mayor of Calais launched a new police operation aimed at "securing" the Calais bus lines. Importantly, the authorities selected the lines they deemed frequently used by people on the move. They claim the aim of the operation is not to dissuade people on the move from using public transport, but a police agent inside one of the buses shared the opposite with the observers. Buses are free for everyone in Calais, preventing people from using that service because of their origin or administrative status would constitute a discrimination according to the law.

Lastly, this month, a person on the move with vitiligo shared with HRO that they had been arrested and detained for two days, and that the authorities had laughed at their skin condition and refused to provide support when they expressed they were in pain.

### **Updates from the French-Italian border**

The French-Italian border between Menton and Ventimiglia crosses one of the main migration routes leading out of Italy, where inadequate housing and work conditions for people on the move are structurally leading to homelessness and precarity. The sea-side city of Ventimiglia is a needle eye for people in transit on this route. Similarly to the situation in Northern France, expulsions of informal tent sites under bridges and next to car parks occur regularly. Police and military are also constantly present at the train station where the access to the train platforms is controlled. In the daily racist police controls on the trains from Italy to France, as well as on the buses, white people sitting next to a person racially profiled by the border police are now asked to show their documents too. ID controls by police and military at trains with Ventimiglia as a destination also occur regularly in other Italian cities, such as Milan.



As a result, many people are pushed to take the dangerous mountain paths between Italy and France, which are now also patrolled by drones and helicopters on the French side. Soldiers of Opération Sentinelle, an ongoing French military operation, patrol the border crossings and mountain paths in jeeps. People arrested in such controls get transferred to the border police station in Menton, on the French side of the border. Here, people are detained in two cells in the basement, or in a metal container in the case of unaccompanied minors. As of the beginning of March, an estimated 35 pushbacks were carried out everyday from this police station, which involved leading people to the Italian police station located about a hundred meters up the same road. From the beginning of March, the Italian police station has been in renovation, and Italian police officers have been present in the French police station.

Moreover, this month a special “anti-terror research” task force has been installed in the French border police station. This development has coincided with a rising frequency in testimonies describing long interrogations, in which people arrested at the border are forced to answer very personal questions in a situation of prolonged detention. The police officers interrogating the detainees have been described to exert great pressure on them to answer the questions, as well as to make them sign documents in a language they don’t understand. Furthermore, many respondents report that the authorities sometimes take personal documents from people on the move and refuse to give them back before the pushback, and that any attempt to claim asylum or get informed about their rights is systematically ignored. Most people detained at the French border police station also report experiencing arbitrarily and illegitimately long detentions - such as 10 hours or 24 hours instead of the four hours in a regular “garde à vue”. During the interrogations, fingerprints and pictures are frequently taken.

When people are pushed back and released from the Italian police station, they are made to walk up the steep mountain road into Italy. From there, it is a ten kilometres walk to the city of Ventimiglia. While there is a bus operating a few times a day, it often refuses to take people who can neither show nor buy a ticket.

These policies have deadly consequences for people on the move. The repressive controls on the safe crossing points from Italy to France continue forcing people to attempt passage in life-threatening conditions - such as walking along rail tracks or the highway, climbing up steep cliffs and crossing in the sea -, leading to deaths at this border.



### **Arbitrary age assessments**

Contrary to what is the case in the rest of France, the age assessment of minors in the police station of Menton depends on the evaluation of answers to a set of questions asked by individual police officers. Some minors who get pushed back report to not even get asked these questions after telling police officers their date of birth. Thus, people under 18 - sometimes even those who possess documents stating their date of birth - still get regularly pushed back to Italy, as was the case on February 11th and 12th.



# Testimonies published in February

Link	Incident	Recorded	Demographic	Group size	Organisation
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## Croatia to Bosnia-Herzegovina

<a href="#"><u>1.1.</u></a>	10.10.2024.	4.11.2024.	Afghanistan	18	Collective Aid
<a href="#"><u>1.2.</u></a>	25.10.2024	15.11.2024.	Syria	12	Collective Aid
<a href="#"><u>1.3.</u></a>	4.11.2024	4.1.2025.	Afghanistan	15	Collective Aid
<a href="#"><u>1.4.</u></a>	9.11.2024.	11.11.2024.	Afghanistan	10	Anonymous

## Bosnia to Serbia

<a href="#"><u>2.1.</u></a>	26.9.2024.	16.10.2024.	Morocco	3	Collective Aid
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## Hungary to Serbia

<a href="#"><u>3.1.</u></a>	8.11.2024.	14.11.2024.	Afghanistan, Syria, Turkey	20	Collective Aid
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# Border Violence Monitoring Network

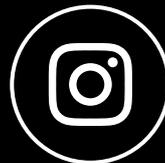
## Network structure and contact

BVMN acts as an alliance of organisations in the 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, and for press and media requests please email us at [mail@borderviolence.eu](mailto:mail@borderviolence.eu).



**@Border\_Violence**