



BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

BORDER MONITORING MONTHLY SNAPSHOT

NOVEMBER 2020

## INTRODUCTION

Over 1,100 men, women and children reported experiencing pushbacks from Croatia to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) during November 2020. The numbers recorded only in BiH throughout November indicate that, for yet another month, **pushbacks continue being systematically used as a tool of border management** – despite the fact that pushbacks are clearly unlawful. The minimum expected response would be to investigate the allegations, and take concrete steps to ensure that these practices stop. Instead, **despite thousands of reports collected by humanitarian workers and grass-roots organizations, despite horrifying episodes of violence recorded, despite the growing number of legal claims submitted, the Croatian authorities continue to deny that pushbacks are happening.**

**22,550** persons\*  
reporting pushbacks  
to BiH since May  
2019

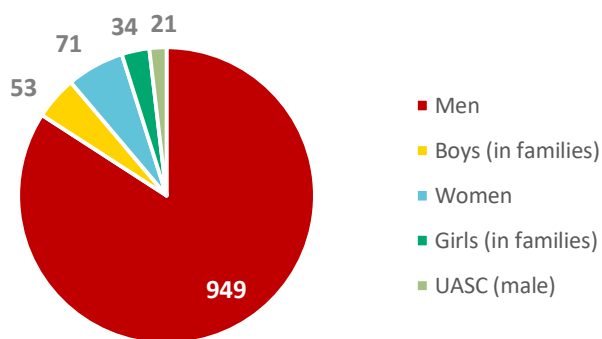
The primary responsibility to prevent pushbacks from continuing undoubtedly lies in the hands of EU Member States, and their duty to protect migrants and asylum-seekers. However, the European Commission shares the burden of responsibility, as it should be the guardian of the correct implementation of the EU's Schengen, human rights and asylum *acquis*. Pushbacks affect more than the public image of either the individual Member States or the EU as a whole. They have a long-lasting and detrimental impact on the EU's legal foundations and proclaimed values. **Controlling migration is not, and can never be, an excuse to ignore, violate or circumvent established legal frameworks – or set aside human rights.** While the public concern expressed by high-level European Commission officials and the pledges made to investigate allegations of pushbacks happening at the EU's external borders may be reassuring – and the most recent judgment passed by the Court of Justice in the

case of Hungary<sup>1</sup> is another step in the right direction – the questions remain to what extent the damage done is reparable and whether the proposed Pact on Migration and Asylum will chart a different course, by **ensuring that safe and legal pathways are available for those seeking international protection, as well as strengthening human rights compliance in border management.**

## MONTHLY SNAPSHOT NOVEMBER 2020

In November 2020, DRC Protection Teams in BiH recorded pushback incidents from Croatia reported by **1,128 persons**; this includes **another rise in the number of chain pushbacks from Slovenia through Croatia to BiH – 102 persons**, and one person reporting a chain pushback from Austria, through Slovenia and Croatia, to BiH.

**1,128** persons\*  
reporting pushbacks to BiH in the month of November 2020



Compared to previous months the rate of women and children reporting pushbacks is also increasing: **over 6% of reports were collected from adult women (71 persons)**, and **9.5% from children – 53 boys and 34 girls** travelling with their family members, and **21 unaccompanied or separated children (UASCs)**. Just over 84% of interviewees were adult males, **949 persons**.



### Chain pushbacks

Out of 1,128 persons reporting pushbacks to BiH in November 2020, 103 persons reported being expelled from Slovenia, through Croatia, to BiH (including one person pushed back all the way from Austria). The number of chain pushbacks had been dropping steadily since July 2020, only to soar again in November. Out of 103 persons experiencing chain pushbacks interviewed by DRC, **87 stated that, after being apprehended, they were taken to a police station in Slovenia, where their pictures, names and fingerprints were taken.** A number of interviewees reported that they were requested to sign papers in Slovenian language. All interviewed persons

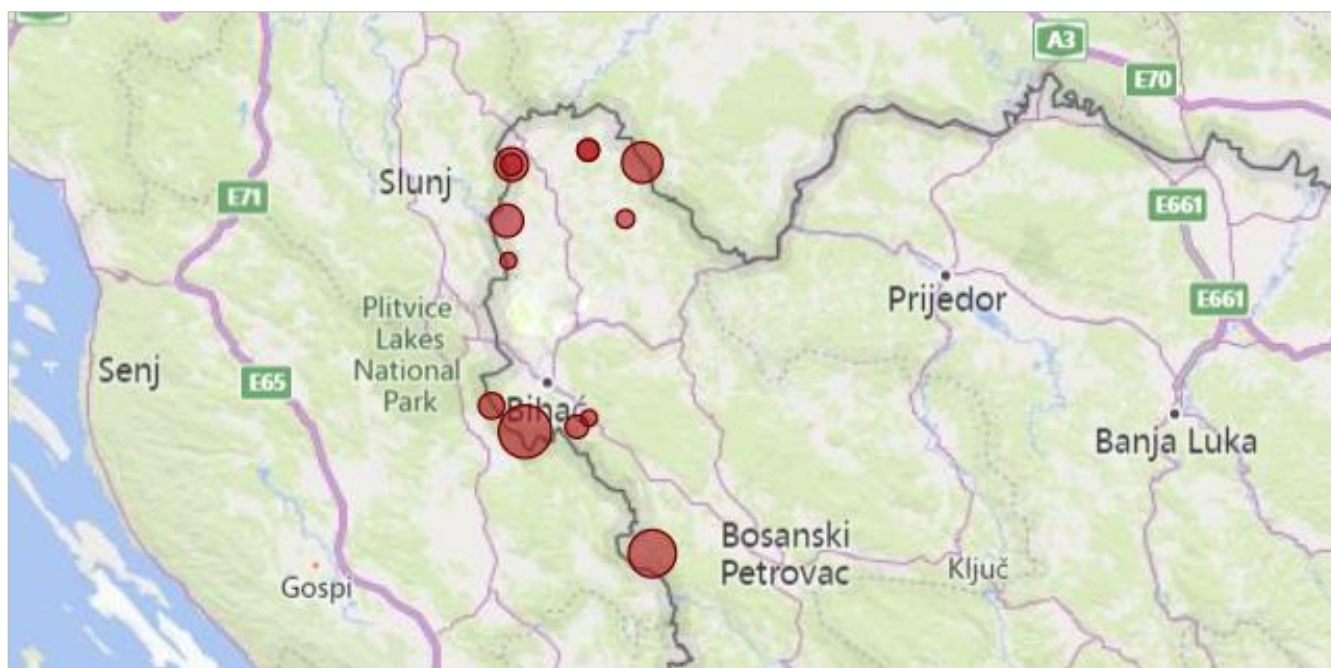
<sup>1</sup> <https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2020-12/cp200161en.pdf>

reported being handed over by the Slovenian police to the Croatian police at the border, and later pushed back to BiH. Physical violence in Slovenia was reported by 11 persons, while 53 interviewees reported experiencing physical violence by the police while being pushed back from Croatia to BiH. One interviewee from Libya reported that he was readmitted from Austria to Slovenia, and then from Slovenia to Croatia, only to be violently pushed back to BiH on 17 November.

On 27 November, a group of four persons from Afghanistan gave the following testimony on a chain pushback from Slovenia and Croatia to BiH:

*“ We arrived near Koper [Slovenia] and decided to spend the night under an old bridge. The police came during the night and found us there, probably someone informed them. It happened on the evening of November 23. There were four policemen, they took us to the police station where we spent two nights. The police treated us nicely, we had food and water. They took our backpacks and cell phones. We signed some statements, but we didn't have an interpreter, we agreed in English. On the morning of November 25, they put us in a van with seven other Pakistanis, two of whom were minors. In the van were two border police officers, a woman and a man. We were soon handed over at the border to the Croatian border police. We saw that they also gave them our things and that a Croatian policeman signed some papers that the Slovenian policemen took with them. There were two Croatian policemen who put us in a van and after a long drive in the evening brought us to the border with BiH, where we were met by four other Croatian border policemen. Several of us were beaten with a police baton and forced to go to the territory of BiH. After a few hours of walking, we came to Velika Kladusa.”*

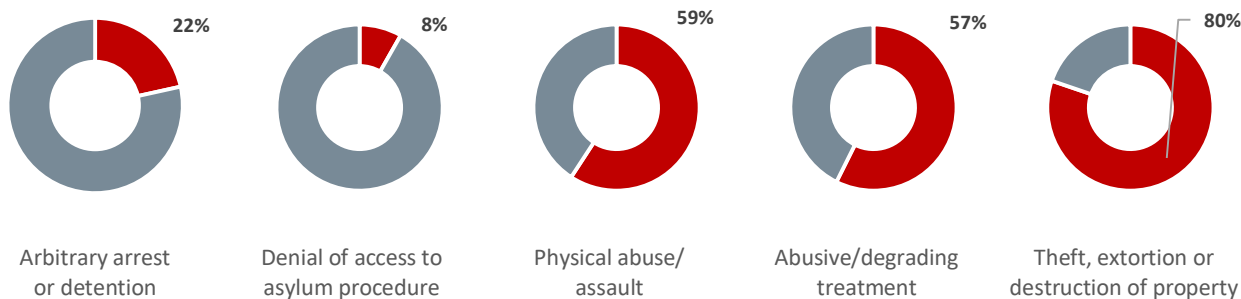
HEATMAP OF PUSHBACK LOCATIONS, SEPTEMBER 2020



### **Theft and destruction of property, abusive and degrading treatment, physical violence**

While the overall number of pushback reports collected during November was lower compared to previous months, **the rates of violations reported, including physical violence, remained unchanged:**

## # OF PERSONS REPORTING SPECIFIC TYPE OF VIOLENCE DURING PUSHBACK INCIDENT



**Asylum was explicitly sought by, and denied for, 91 persons in total, 80 in Croatia and 11 in Slovenia.**

On 6 November, DRC interviewed a five-member family from Afghanistan that reported being pushed back from Croatia the same day, close to the village of Bosanska Bojna:

Five interviewees from Afghanistan, a family including father, grandfather, wife, and two children, reported having crossed to Croatia on 4 November 2020, near the settlement of Bosanska Bojna. Four police officers apprehended them on 6 November at around 6am, while they were trying to cross the road heading towards Zagreb. The interviewees reported that the police officers searched them, damaged three cell phones (broke their screens), and confiscated personal documents such as attestations of intention to seek asylum in BiH. The family requested asylum but the police denied the option.

Before the deportation, the head of the family refused to walk towards the Bosnian territory. One of the four police officers first used a police baton and started beating him. After he refused again, police used electro-shockers to force the family to walk towards BiH. The family reported being deported at 1pm on 6 November 2020.

Reports on **theft, extortion and destruction of property** were continuously collected over the month of November. **905** out of 1,128 persons interviewed reported that their **personal belongings were taken away and in some cases burned**, while **23** interviewees reported that their **documents were retained or destroyed** (including 2 passports).

When it comes to **abusive and degrading treatment**, the reported patterns of abuse remain largely similar to those recorded in previous months. In total, **647** interviewees reported one or several types of abusive and degrading treatment, such as prolonged and violent driving that would provoke nausea (reported by 124 persons), firing of shots in the air (reported by 79 persons), being required to lie on the ground or kneel for an hour or more (reported by 44 persons), forced river crossings (reported by 35 persons), intimidation with dogs or dog attacks (reported by 35 persons), taking away people's shoes or shoelaces (reported by 296 persons), denial of access to food, toilets or water during detention (reported by 16 persons), **being stripped to underwear and having their clothes taken away (reported by 204 persons)**, **use of pepper spray or electro-shockers (reported by 38 persons)**.

On 3 November, in front of Temporary Reception Center (TRC) Miral, a DRC Protection Officer interviewed a group of five persons from Bangladesh who reported being pushed back on the same day, after having experienced the following mistreatment:

*“ We spent nine days in the Croatian forests and reached road number 3 in Croatia, which is located near the Slovenian border. There we were intercepted by the Army. There were five Army officers in olive green uniforms and black masks over their heads. They stopped us by holding a weapon in their hands and one fired*

*into the air. It was about eight o'clock in the evening when we were intercepted. The moment we heard the shot, we started to run away from the Army. Five officers managed to catch five of us. We immediately got a slap, then they searched us and took our mobile phones. After they searched us, they ordered us to take off our shoes and jackets and place them on a pile. After that we had to stand in line one behind the other. One officer stood in front of the line, one at the end and one in the middle. We walked for about an hour without shoes and over rocks. If we talked or moaned, we got a slap.*

*After an hour of walking we came to a road. There we saw a police deportation van with two police officers in blue uniforms. They ordered us to get into the van. We drove for about 1.5 hours, then the van stopped. We thought we had arrived and would be deported but we were in the van for about two hours. In the meantime, we were banging, yelling, asking for help but no one was opening. After two hours the door was opened by a person in a completely black suit, wearing a black mask over his face. He roughly and violently pulled us out of the van. There were eight police officers in dark uniforms and were arranged in three groups. The first group of two police officers lined us up and several times used electro-shockers on our backs and legs. Then we went to four police officers who kicked us with boots and batons. After that two police officers kicked us into the river. It was dark and very cold.*

*It all lasted about an hour. Wet, we headed to TRC Miral and there we got accommodation in a container, dry clothes and food. It was about 3.30 when we arrived to the camp."*

Even though episodes of extreme violence, similar to those reported in October, were not recorded in November, **physical abuse was still reported by 698 interviewees**, including beatings with batons, wooden sticks and metal shafts, as well as kicking and punching. Men, women and children reported being exposed to physical violence. The following testimony was collected on 3 November, and recounts an incident experienced on 18 October, as reported by two families from Afghanistan interviewed in TRC Usivak, Sarajevo:

They were in a group of 10 people, two families (four adults and five children) and a single man, all from Afghanistan. They left from Sturlic around 9pm and walked through the forest for 3-4 hours, when they reached a small wooden bridge and walked for another 30-40 minutes. When they were in a village with a small church in it, the police intercepted them on the road, shouting. The police were in dark grey or black uniforms, their car was a regular one, and they saw the families from afar through cameras. They placed them in a white car with metal bars and drove violently for an hour, turning here and there, which made the children vomit.

They surrendered the families to another police unit. This police unit had dark blue uniforms and balaclavas, there were five or six of them. The only insignia they had was something red on the left side of their jackets. It was too dark, they had flashlights that they pointed at the crying children and yelled at them to shut up. They took the first family of four, because a woman spoke some English, and took them a bit further away, and lined up the rest of the group to sit on small walls. First, they made a husband take off his clothes in front of his children. The wife said that they wanted to reach Zagreb, but no one listened. When it was her turn, she said that they should not touch her because she's a Muslim woman, so they took a blanket from their car, gave it to her husband, told him to cover her up, and told her to take off her clothes because they wanted to search everything. Her husband could cover her up only from one side, and the police were all around. As for the children, they just searched them with their clothes on. The second family heard the woman screaming and crying, and when they wanted to see what was going on, the police kicked the mother in her back so that she fell, and hit the daughter on her head. The husband of the second family also had to take his clothes off in front of his children and then cover his teenage daughter when she was taking her clothes off; again there was one police officer that could see her, but she was till forced to unclothe. When it was the mother's turn, she couldn't take off her tight pants, and she told the police to

search her with their hands, which they did. The daughter complained, and the police said they should be grateful for not touching all of them; the police started swearing at them and sending them kisses. The father asked his family to be quiet, because he was afraid of what the police could do next. The police told them not to make problems and not to come back. The woman from the first family asked to take their bags back, but the police didn't want to. When she asked for blankets for the children at least, one of the police officers hit her hard on her mouth, her children started crying, and she started yelling, so the other police officer hit her on her back, and the third one hit her husband who fell on the ground. Her older son begged her not to yell because the police might hit her again, and the younger one started apologizing to the police. Both families mentioned that the police also beat the single man, but they didn't give any details.

The police showed them the wrong, longer way to BiH, and they were forced to go that way. They returned to BiH near Velika Kladusa, and were helped by a local woman who fed them and called the Bosnian police, who brought them in front of TRC Miral.

On 17 November 2020, a DRC Protection Officer interviewed three families from Afghanistan, including three men, three women and four children, who reported the following incident:

*“ When we entered Croatia, we walked on a macadam road for four hours. Around 1pm, two policemen in black uniforms caught us. They shot in the air and told us to stop and sit on the ground, which we did. After 10 minutes, two police cars arrived. They searched us all and took all valuable items we had (watches, mobile phones, power banks). When they found the Qur'an, they asked us, 'Is this the Quran?'. When we confirmed it was, they took it from us and threw it in the trash.*

*They told us to hand over the money we had hidden with us. We gave them 250 KM. Then one policeman said, 'Now we will search you and if we find euros with you that you did not give us, we will beat you'.*

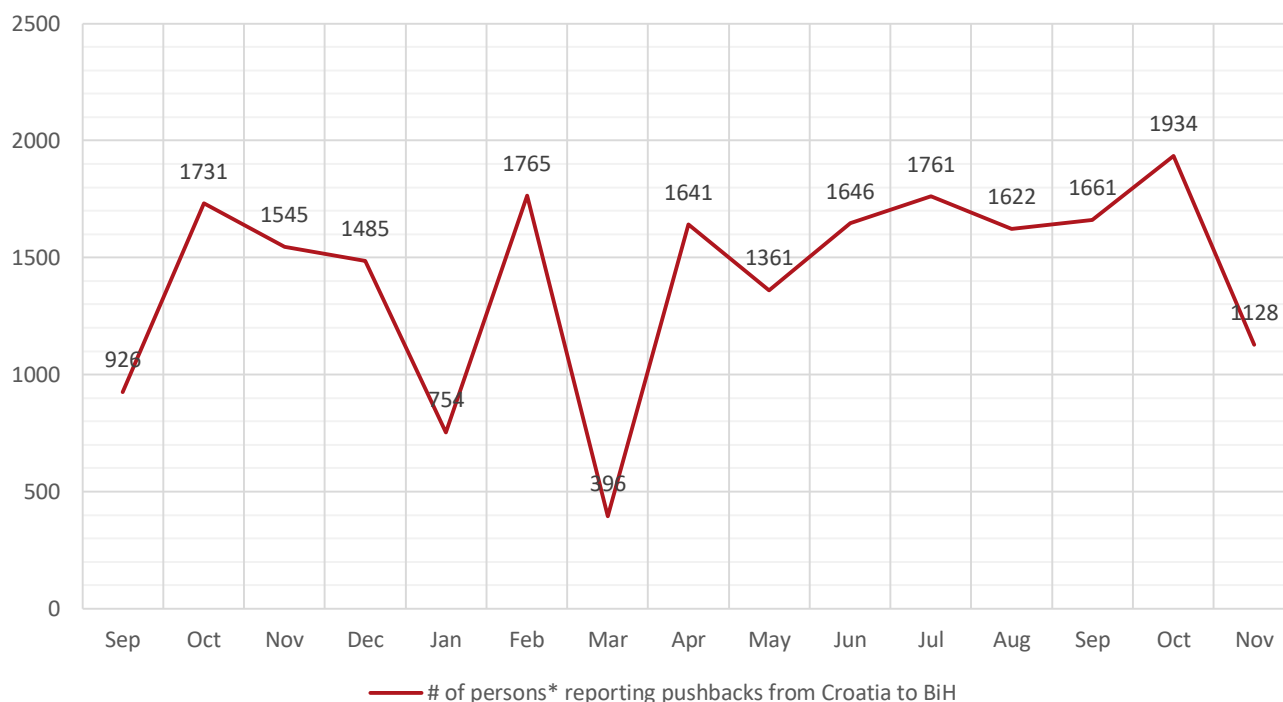
*One of us had to take off his underwear to be searched. When they searched me, they found 450 euros hidden in the collar of my jacket. The policeman started taking my clothes, trying to find more euros. Then the policeman who searched me got very angry and started yelling at me. He asked me, 'Why didn't you give me the money when I asked you to?'. I explained to them that it was because we needed money to buy food and water.*

*When he finished, he took a truncheon and opened it (stretched it to be longer) and started beating me on the head, and when I fell he kicked me in the legs. I fainted. Other members of my group put me in a van that deported us to the border with BiH. We were deported on November 7 at 2:30pm, near the village of Glinica.*

DRC Protection and Medical Teams continue providing immediate assistance to persons experiencing pushbacks to BiH. In November 2020, DRC teams assisted 432 persons experiencing pushbacks with distribution of food and 56 persons with non-food items. Additionally, 84 people were provided with medical first aid by mobile teams, and 58 were referred to DRC infirmaries for follow-up medical care.

## OVERALL TRENDS 2019-2020

Migration flows and pushbacks were significantly affected by the COVID-19 crisis as of March 2020. As a result, figures for March do not necessarily reflect overall trends:



*Note: DRC began systematizing data collection (incident reports) related to pushbacks in the course of 2019, with the progressive deployment of outreach teams in BiH since May 2019; this ensures accurate recording following daily coverage in all areas where asylum seekers and migrants report pushbacks to BiH.*

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, DRC has significantly scaled up the humanitarian health response for refugees and migrants in BiH. DRC has developed preparedness and response planning, in coordination with the BiH health authorities and other agencies, including:

- establishment of isolation areas for COVID-19 prevention in migrant reception centers;
- information dissemination on prevention of COVID-19;
- procurement of personal protective equipment for humanitarian staff and healthcare workers;
- support to healthcare facilities through provision of essential medical equipment;
- development of protocols for screening, identification and referral to healthcare of COVID-19 cases within the refugee and migrant community.

**DRC strongly advocates for equitable access to primary and secondary healthcare for asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants affected by COVID-19.** As of 15 January 2021, there have been **33 cases of COVID-19 identified in reception centers** in BiH. DRC publishes weekly Situation Reports on COVID-19 preparedness and response: [DRC BiH COVID-19 Situation Reports](#).

\* *The number of persons reporting pushbacks does not necessarily represent the number of unique individuals, as the same individual(s) may experience repeated pushbacks to BiH. However, repeated cases represent distinct instances of pushbacks. Each pushback is recorded as a separate case.*

Border Protection Monitoring (BPM) is an integral part of the Danish Refugee Council's humanitarian assistance to asylum seekers and migrants in out-of-site locations in BiH. DRC operates outreach protection teams and mobile medical teams – in partnership with the Red Cross (RC) of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina – in Una-Sana, Sarajevo, Herzegovina-Neretva and Tuzla Cantons, and in Republika Srpska. In addition to border protection monitoring, the DRC and RC outreach teams ensure identification, profiling and referral of vulnerable individuals and groups, provision of medical first aid, and immediate assistance (food and other essential items such as winter clothing) for asylum seekers and migrants without access to formal accommodation and essential services. The outreach response complements the DRC health and protection program implemented in all reception facilities in BiH.

For additional information, please contact Nicola Bay, Country Director, [nicola.bay@drc.ngo](mailto:nicola.bay@drc.ngo).

*Photo credit: Jan Grarup, October 2020 (Mobile phones destroyed during pushback, Una Sana Canton).*