Pushback

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Pushbacks, or push-backs, are expulsions of non-citizens, refugees and other migrants, most often to a neighboring country. They are **forced** backward movements carried out with minimal or no administrative procedure, or in a combination of formal and informal actions, orders and incidents, relying on means and techniques of control, surveillance, capture and detainment, even including extensive use of force, physical and other violence, weapons, nature as a **weaponized landscape**, etc. Pushbacks are carried out by the police, the military or other state security authorities with assistance from various actors, from local residents who report encounters with people on the move to the police, to the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, formerly known as Frontex, which, for example, operates informally in Greece with the same mission, to private vessels hired by the Maltese government to divert ships with refugees and other migrants. The term entered use in Croatian during the period when the **Balkan corridor** was active, with the first reports on the **profiling** and expulsion of refugees from the corridor.

Pushbacks can be the topic of social disputes and continuous media spectacularization of the border, as is the case with Croatia or Greece (cf., e.g., Graf 2021; Popović et al. 2022), but also almost normalized when it comes to pushbacks from Hungary (cf. weekly reports of the Welcome! Initiative). While pushbacks in Hungary are carried out in the name of preserving national homogeneity and sovereignty (cf., e.g., Rajaram 2016) through newly adopted legal provisions (which allow pushbacks within an eight-kilometer radius from the border), in Croatia, they are generally executed in secret, usually at night, in secluded locations on the green border and in the name of controlling the EU's external border, which is how Croatia proves its readiness to join the **Schengen** area, and for which it receives abundant financial, logistical and political support from the most important bodies of the European Union (cf. Augustová and Sapoch 2020; Isakjee et al. 2020).

Countries, as shown by the examples of Greece and Croatia (Popović et al. 2022: 71, 137-138), can deny testimonies, documents, recordings and reports about pushbacks. Another approach is normalizing pushbacks, thereby integrating them into the security discourse and legislative framework, while also not shying away from fabricating legal fiction and euphemisms. According to official communications, the Croatian police do not carry out mass and forceful expulsions at the green border, but rather, as worded by the Schengen Borders Code, possibly *discourages* people from entry, as some other police forces apply readmissions (Italian *riamissione*), returns (Italian *respingimento*, Slovenian *vračanja*), refusal of entry / refusal at the border (Spanish *denegación de entrada / rechazo en frontera*) and other forms of expulsion that more or less overlap with pushbacks.

Photo collage from Bihać. Traces of pushback on a migrant's body and a border line carved into the landscape. Winter 2021. Photo: Bojan Mucko

Today, despite the fact that it is not a legal term, the word "pushback" is more frequently used in official communication, for example, in documents of the Ombudswoman of the Republic of Croatia or in committee meetings of the Croatian Parliament. Debates in the European Parliament have referred to pushbacks for a long time now, as well as discussions in the United Nations since recently. In these and related institutional frameworks, pushbacks are questioned and condemned for violating the prohibition of collective expulsion (cf. the *European Convention on Human Rights*), as the crime of enforced disappearance, which is in certain circumstances defined as the crime against humanity (cf. the *Convention for the Protection of All Persons from*

Enforced Disappearance), for violating the principle of *non-refoulement* from the *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, denying the right to asylum, rights to life, rights of appeal, prohibitions against torture and inhumane treatment and other issues (cf. Keady-Tabbal and Mann 2021). From this perspective, pushback can also be seen as a euphemism, as a term that directly describes the manner and direction of forced movement, but which also obscures its causes and consequences. With the idea to use a term that is not necessarily part of the legal register, here we opt for its orthographic domestication, as in *pušbek,* or translation of the English term "pushbacks" using semantically and historically burdensome terms such as *protjerivanja* in the Croatian or *wywózki* in the Polish context. People on the move we spoke to rarely used the term "pushback." Instead, when communicating in English, they usually used the verb "deport," thus updating the term that was phased out of European legal nomenclature after the Second World War and the millions of people deported to death (cf. Kamto 2006: 244).

Pushback, in addition to denial (included in understanding pushbacks as a denial to enter the country), also implies physical pushing and shoving, and it was sometimes translated in the media as such, albeit very rarely, in Croatia, Serbia and the region or some EU documents. After all, the term entered the field of migration and **refugeehood** through reports on pushing ships and boats carrying Vietnamese refugees away from the territorial waters of Southeast Asian countries in the 1970s (Grant 1979). During the 2000s, Italy and Malta started increasingly resorting to similar practices, pushing or towing refugee ships away from their shores, such as a pushback from 2005 described by Daniel from Eritrea with the following words: "The Maltese boat brought a rope. They tied it to our boat and towed us. After two hours as the sun was going down the Maltese boat changed direction and took us to Libya." Since then, pushbacks have been continuously documented on the Greek-Turkish border, as well as on the borders between Spain and Morocco in Ceuta and Melilla (Karamanidou and Kasparek 2022: 21), and since the 2010s on the borders of Serbia and Bulgaria. Since the reactivation of border controls following the **long summer of migration**, pushbacks have been carried out on the French-Italian, Hungarian-Serbian, Croatian-Serbian borders and other borders along the corridor (cf. Karamanidou and Kasparek 2022: 16-17). Since 2018 and the diversion of movement to Bosnia and Herzegovina, pushbacks have intensified along its border with Croatia and on the Slovenian-Croatian border, as well as, somewhat later, on the borders of Austria and Italy with Slovenia. At the same time, countries on the Mediterranean Sea increasingly resort to **pullbacks** and strategies of ignoring vessels in distress (cf. **maritime cemetery**).

Recent forensic reconstructions of pushbacks carried out in the **forests** at the Poland-Belarus border, or on the Marica/Evros river on the border between Greece and Turkey, analytically dissect the events while separating and visualizing the pushback elements in these contexts. In the Croatian context, these elements include interception (on the road, on a train, in a bus, in an asylum center, in the forest, etc.) which can also take the form of capture (cf. **letter from a hiker**), which uses numerous technological means (cf. **forest cameras**, heartbeat detectors, drones, helicopters, ships, fences, etc.) and animals, primarily dogs (cf. **Candy** and **Bubo and Endi**), as well as immobilization and imprisonment (cf. **detention**) in police stations, but also in other places, and returning people to the border in police cars or unmarked white vans with no fresh air supply or with alternating heating and cooling. In addition to these cases, according to many articles, reports and testimonies we have heard, we should note the destruction and theft of property (**mobile phones**, chargers, money, documents, **backpacks**, clothes, shoes, etc.), humiliation and insults, stripping clothes, slapping, beating, shooting weapons (into the air, a car), and shoving people down slopes, into rivers, etc. Since the start of these incidents being systematically documented for Croatia in 2016 (cf. Hameršak 2021, cf. links published in the Open Letter of the CMS), pushbacks have become more and more common, and even more brutal. Aside from the mentioned forms of violence, today pushbacks are associated with sexual violence, including rape. Pushbacks indirectly and directly cause **border deaths**, including the death of **Madina Hussiny**, a girl from Afghanistan, who died during a pushback.

As shown by various maps and reports, pushbacks are not unique to the countries at the " *limes* of the EU" (Andrijasevic and Walters 2010: 992), but are used as a technology for border control all over the world. In addition, although the media may leave a different impression, they are not limited by the number of people they affect, nor by the locations where they take place. Pushback can be the routine expulsion of one person over the green border, but also of hundreds or even thousands of people, as a pushback from 2016 involved North Macedonia banishing more than 1,500 people into Greece. Moreover, a pushback can start near the border line or deep within the national territory (cf. BVMN map) and can end in a neighboring country, or even in a neighboring country of a neighboring country, as well as a country in which the person in question had never set foot in beforehand. A few months after we met four-year-old Amir and his father in Bihać in the summer of 2018, the Croatian police banished them across the green border to Serbia, even though they had never been there before. The term chain pushback is sometimes used for successive pushbacks that run across several borders, for example from Austria to Slovenia, from Slovenia to Croatia, from Croatia to Serbia or to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Specifically related to Bosnia and Herzegovina and the complex relations between its internal, municipal, cantonal and entity borders, the literature sometimes refers to internal pushbacks (cf. Mlinarević and Ahmetašević 2019: 31).

Finally, pushbacks are not sporadic incidents, but "forms of systemic violence against refugees" (Bužinkić and

Avon 2020). As Lena Karamanidou and Bernd Kasparek (2022) point out, they are not simply aberrations from the laws and values of the European Union that could be prevented through the rule of law and respect for human rights. Pushbacks are normalized border management technologies inherent in the Westphalian border system and embedded in the racialized, violent border regimes of liberal nation states (Karamanidou and Kasparek 2022: 14). Ultimately, they are a specific form of control and management of movement with movement (cf. Tazzioli 2017; Garelli and Tazzioli 2018), more precisely, with forced backward movement. However, they do not stop the movement in the long run. On the contrary, people on the move are almost forced to undertake new movements after pushbacks, a new attempt to cross the border or a new **game**, when discussing the **Balkan route** context. They can decide to go on a new game on the same day, or spend weeks or months in preparation. The game, as well as those that come after, can end in a pushback, which people on the move count in the high double digits, just as they count the number of games. Thus, pushbacks are repetitive, like the game of which they are a part (cf. Jovanović 2021: 446), and they often result in hypermobility and chaotic, constant circulation of people in a very limited territory, as if they were contained in movement (see **pushbacks maps; map of R*'s journey from Tunisia** and **Balkan circuit**). At the same time, in order to avoid new pushbacks, people on the move try to **appropriate** elements of the same migration management system to which pushbacks belong. One such tactic involves a gender and age division of the group and a *game* with multiple phases that starts with the transition of groups that are systemically labeled as vulnerable (women and children) and which enables a subsequent attempt at "family reunification" with other members of the group. This type of tactical invention implies taking over categories from the spectrum of **vulnerability** in order to subvert the system and continue the movement, even at the high cost of indefinite waiting, being stuck and family separation.

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