

# PUSHED, BEATEN, LEFT TO DIE

## EUROPEAN PUSHBACK REPORT 2024

FEBRUARY 2025



## MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

This report analyzes data on pushbacks from EU member states to third countries in 2024, highlighting ongoing violations of international and EU law.

It draws from NGO reports, research groups, human rights organizations, UN agencies, government services and interviews with organizations active in Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Greece, Poland, Croatia, Finland, and Bulgaria. In total, 120.457 pushbacks were recorded, underscoring the persistence of this practice.

Overall, the trend of normalizing pushbacks persists, requiring stronger enforcement and greater accountability from both member states and EU institutions. The report concludes with recommendations for the EU, its member states, and Frontex to address these ongoing human rights violations.

### **This report is a collaboration between:**

11.11.11 (Belgium), Hungarian Helsinki Committee, We Are Monitoring Association (Poland), Centre for Peace Studies (Croatia), Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH), Sienos Grupė (Lithuania), Centre for Legal Aid – Voice in Bulgaria (CLA), Foundation Mission Wings (Bulgaria), I Want to Help Refugees/Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem (Latvia).

## PREFACE

The number of pushbacks at Europe's external borders has risen sharply in recent years, to the extent that they have become a systematic practice within EU migration policy.<sup>1</sup>

Pushbacks are practices that result in the removal of persons seeking protection, individually or in groups, without an individualized assessment in line with human rights obligations and due process guarantees. This is in complete violation of international and European law (see box). Pushbacks are often accompanied by violence and the destruction or confiscation of personal belongings.

The ongoing reports of pushbacks indicate a systematic failure on behalf of the EU to enforce respect for one of the most fundamental human rights. This report maps out the number of pushbacks in 2024 in the various member states. Additionally, the report provides an overview of the situation on the ground in the member states, offering insights into the practical realities faced in the field. The report touches upon judicial and legislative developments across various EU member states, outlining the evolution of policies and legislation relevant to the issues at hand. It also sheds light on the role of EU institutions and Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, in addressing these challenges.

We conclude this report with recommendations for EU member states, the European Commission and Frontex.

### **PUSHBACKS PROHIBITED UNDER INTERNATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LAW**

The right to seek asylum is anchored in international and European law. The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) explicitly prohibits collective expulsion. The principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits expulsion from individuals to countries where their safety may be at risk, is anchored in the UN Refugee Convention, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the ECHR. This ensures that prior to every decision a specific examination takes place and that no general expulsion measures can be taken. The EU Schengen Border Code, which regulates entries on the external borders of the Schengen Zone, also stipulates that EU member states must act in accordance with European law and 'the obligations concerning access to international protection and, more specifically, the principle of non-refoulement'. All EU member states are bound by these treaties and must respect the right to seek international protection in the EU. Prior to any expulsion an individual assessment must be made of the potential safety risks for the individual in question.

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<sup>1</sup> 11.11.11, Illegality without borders, pushbacks report 2023.

## METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this report, 11.11.11 (Belgium), Hungarian Helsinki Committee, We Are Monitoring Association (Poland), Centre for Peace Studies (Croatia), Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH), Sienos Grupė (Lithuania), Centre for Legal Aid – Voice in Bulgaria (CLA), Foundation Mission Wings (Bulgaria), I Want to Help Refugees/Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem (Latvia) collected all available data on pushbacks from EU member states (including their maritime zones of Search and Rescue) to third countries for the year 2024. This concerns data from NGO reports, research groups, human rights organizations, UN organizations and government services. This information was supplemented with interviews with human rights organizations that are active in Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Greece, Poland, Croatia, Finland and Bulgaria. The data can be verified through the source citation that accompanies every figure.

The numbers put forward in the report concern the pushbacks of individual persons. In practice, people are often sent back in groups. In this case the number of people in the group is taken into account to present the number of individual pushbacks. For instance, when 40 people are returned in a single pushback operation, this is recorded in the report as 40 pushbacks. Many people are pushed back on multiple occasions at different moments, sometimes over an extended period of time. It is impossible - and not desirable - to filter these data in the analysis. When a single person is illegally pushed back on three separate occasions, these are effectively taken into consideration as three pushbacks.

In most cases of pushbacks to Libya and to Lebanon, it is not an EU member state that executes the pushback, but the Libyan and Lebanese coast guard that intercept people and forcibly return them to Libya and Lebanon. However, the support from Italy, Cyprus and the EU in these pushbacks is so direct and extensive (monitoring and coordination of interceptions from the air, financial and material support to the coast guard, training...) that these actions are also taken into account as pushbacks by EU member states.

# PUSHBACKS REMAIN A SYSTEMATIC PRACTICE ACROSS THE EU, AMOUNTING TO **120.457** PUSHBACKS IN 2024



## BULGARIA

### DATA

In Bulgaria, widespread pushbacks to Turkey were reported in 2024. Since April 2024, the Bulgarian Ministry of Interior has started publishing monthly statistics about the number of third-country nationals, who, after their apprehension at the border, “voluntarily went back and returned into the territory of neighboring countries”. According to the [statistics of the Bulgarian Ministry](#), in 2024, 55,166 third-country nationals attempted to irregularly cross the border, whereby **52,534** of them “voluntarily” went back into the territory of Turkey after their apprehension by the Bulgarian border police. This represents a 71 % - decrease from the number recorded for the same period in 2023, where the Bulgarian border officers reportedly apprehended and deterred 175,964 third-country nationals from entering Bulgarian territory. In Bulgaria, there is no independent mechanism, which could confirm if the practice of third-country nationals voluntarily going back into neighboring countries complies with human rights standards. At the same time, local NGOs and grassroots organizations [report](#) that the vast majority of these practices actually involved pushbacks of people from Bulgarian territory.

During the summer of 2024, Bulgarian grassroots organizations recorded a large **increase in the reported cases and distress calls**, where migrants and asylum seekers faced violent pushbacks by border officials, ended up in a critical health condition, disappeared, or died, including children in migration, during their attempts to enter Bulgaria. In the summer period, the number of distress calls could reach around four to five per day. **In 2024, Bulgarian grassroots organizations recorded distress calls concerning around 350 people, who, upon their attempts to cross the border, went missing, died or were in an emergency situation due to a serious health condition and exhaustion.**<sup>2</sup>

## TRENDS

Tightened Bulgarian border policies worsened the humanitarian crisis for people on the move, highlighting the growing need for search and rescue efforts, life-saving assistance, and the recovery and identification of deceased individuals for repatriation. In 2024, there were **reports of people in critical health conditions sending distress alerts, only to be violently pushed back instead of receiving medical aid.**

The reported pushbacks **involved beatings, use of police dogs, inhumane practices such as undressing, confiscation and robbery of personal belongings like mobile phones and money.** Among the people subjected to pushbacks were families with children and unaccompanied minors especially from Syria, Afghanistan, Morocco and Egypt. Pushback practices are usually reported from the Turkish-Bulgarian and Turkish-Serbian borders. So far, there has been **no complete investigation and no court case regarding pushbacks practices in Bulgaria.** Authorities routinely dismiss pushbacks reports on the ground of insufficient evidence.<sup>3</sup>

In February 2024, the network **Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN)** published an investigation report that revealed routine **violence against migrants and pushbacks by Bulgarian border police.** The investigation found migrants stripped naked, robbed of their belongings, attacked by police dogs and “forced to swim back to Turkey, even if they do not have the skills or strength to do it”. BIRN reported Frontex border guards are intentionally kept away by the authorities from “hot points” where pushbacks usually occur.

Throughout 2024 local organizations received reports of **persons in critical medical conditions being pushed back to Turkey.** This was the case in February for a group of seven people from Syria and in the summer for a group of four persons from Morocco, two of them were reported in a grave health condition and after their pushback, one of the men was reported to be hospitalized in Turkey. In this case the use of physical violence was reported.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout 2024, local organizations received reports of **unaccompanied minors, having been pushed back to Turkey.** In spring 2024, a case of an **unaccompanied minor** from Syria was reported, where the boy was **shot in the leg** by Bulgarian officers as the boy had irregularly crossed the Turkish-Bulgarian border. He underwent medical surgery due to the shot wound. The boy reported he was pushed back several times by Bulgarian border guards during his previous attempts to cross the border into Bulgaria. In July 2024, it was reported that, following a pushback, **a Syrian minor was returned from Turkey to Syria.**<sup>5</sup>

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2 Info via Mission Wings Foundation Bulgaria.

3 Info via Mission Wings Foundation Bulgaria and Voice in Bulgaria.

4 Info via Mission Wings Foundation Bulgaria.

5 Info via Mission Wings Foundation Bulgaria.

In September 2024, research by **Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN)** into eight Frontex Serious Incident Reports (SIR) and other internal documents revealed how **Frontex officers** deployed in Bulgaria were **intimidated by Bulgaria's border police not to report on recurrent pushbacks and abuse**. The reports include details of alleged brutalities committed by Bulgarian officers taking part in Frontex operations, including people beaten with sticks, forced to strip naked, theft of belongings, verbal abuse and serious injuries inflicted by service dogs. In none of the investigated incidents did Frontex officers intervene in the moments when confronted with wrongdoing. Multiple SIR explicitly recognize that “the presence or involvement of Frontex officers in an event is not necessarily a guarantee for fundamental rights compliance”.

In December 2024 the NGOs **No Name Kitchen (NNK)** and **Collectivo** reported on the **death of three Egyptian minors** near the Turkish-Bulgarian border. According to the organizations, Bulgarian authorities ignored calls for help, and actively blocked rescue teams from reaching the minors. NNK reported that the day after the alert calls, NKK rescue teams found one minor dead, surrounded by boot prints and dog paw marks, suggesting authorities had been on the spot, but chose not to assist or recover the body. NNK stressed that the tragic event is not an isolated case and that for years the Bulgarian Border Police have “ignored emergency calls, denied medical assistance to people on the move, and subjected them to violence and pushbacks, even in life-threatening situations”. NKK also reports “constant harassment and intimidation of activists with detentions, interrogations and other tactics meant to criminalize solidarity.”

Despite continuous and persistent reports of rights violations, **EU institutions stepped up their support for border management in Bulgaria**. During a visit of Frontex Director Hans Leijten to Bulgaria in February 2024, Frontex announced a **tripling of the Frontex presence** to 500 officers. In March 2024 the **European Commission** launched a Cooperation Framework with Bulgaria on border and migration management. The commission announced Bulgaria could apply for additional funding to extend or upgrade the existing border surveillance systems; purchase of means of transport including with thermo-vision capabilities; purchase of operating equipment such as movement detection cameras and thermo-vision cameras and the development or upgrades of systems. On 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2025, Bulgaria became a **full member of the Schengen Area** after a decision by the European Council, despite criticisms by NGOs on the human rights situation in Bulgaria.

## GREECE

### DATA

In 2024, a total of 508 illegal pushback incidents were reported in the **Aegean Sea**, carried out by the Greek coast guard, resulting in pushbacks of **14,482 people**. Of these incidents, 205 were so called drift-backs: where the Greek coast guard transferred people into life rafts and left them adrift at sea, impacting 5,882 people.

Systematic pushbacks were also documented at the country's **land border** with Turkey, along the Evros river. Over the period January-December 2024, the NGO Greek Council for Refugees requested provisional measures from the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) for facts related to **pushbacks of 303 individuals in the Evros region**, including unaccompanied minors and families with children. Many of them were Turkish nationals that were arrested and imprisoned in Turkey after being pushed back. In all these cases the Court imposed the requested measures and ordered the Greek government not to remove the refugees from the country's territory and, in the majority of the cases, to provide them with food, water and proper medical care. A large number of refugees went missing after the Court's decision and GCR was not aware of their whereabouts.

## TRENDS

Despite a 2023 recommendation by the Frontex Fundamental Rights Officer Jonas Grimheden to temporarily suspend the agency's activities in Greece, **Frontex maintained its operations throughout 2024**.

In January 2024 the NGO **Forensic Architecture** published an update on '**drift-backs**' in the **Aegean Sea**. According to the report, in the past three years, there have been over 2000 cases of drift-backs in the Aegean Sea. 55,445 people have been deported, 24 have lost their lives and 17 have disappeared. Frontex is recorded as being directly involved in 122 pushback incidents and having knowledge of 417 more.

In January 2024 an **internal Frontex report** (Serious Incident Report) on the Pylos shipwreck of June 2023, that claimed the lives of up to 650 people, was published. The report states that Frontex staff conducted interviews with survivors, and characterized **survivors' accounts that the boat sank because of the towing of the vessel with a rope "consistent"**. This aligns with previous reports suggesting that the boat sank due to an attempt by the Greek coast guard to tow it out of the Greek search and rescue zone, indicating a pushback operation.

On 7 February 2024 the **European Parliament** adopted a resolution that raised **grave concerns** about serious threats to democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights in Greece, including the treatment of migrants, **the systematic pushbacks** and the attacks against civil society. The parliament called on the European Commission to act, making full use of the tools available to address the breaches of EU values in Greece, including **assessing the use of EU funds** under the Common Provisions Regulation in line with the Charter of Fundamental Rights

On 26 February 2024, the **European Ombudsman** released her conclusions on EU search and rescue as related to the **Pylos shipwreck**. In her report, the European Ombudsman underlined that there are growing concerns about **persistent violations of fundamental rights** in Greece's border control operations, and that the **investigation** of the shipwreck and any assessment of the facts is **severely compromised** by the absence of video or other recording of the shipwreck and the following events, which raises again a pattern of inadequate handling and subsequent investigation of such incidents by the Greek authorities.

In April 2024 **UNHCR intervened before the European Court of Human Rights** in the case (G.R.J. v. Greece) of an alleged **pushback from Greece to Türkiye of an Afghan national** who was an unaccompanied minor at the relevant time. The intervention reports that in the period 2020-2022, UNHCR recorded 809 incidents of 'summary forced return' at land and sea borders involving at least 28,497 individuals. UNHCR observed that in most cases, the individuals affected were already on the territory of Greece, including in its territorial waters, or under its jurisdiction, when they were apprehended, placed under the control of the Greek authorities, and ultimately summarily removed. According to UNHCR the frequency of incident reports together with the credibility and consistency of the accounts are indicative of **a systematic practice, while the severity of the alleged incidents means they could amount to serious violations** of international and European refugee and human rights law. In January 2025, **the European Court of Human Rights condemned Greece** for these acts in a landmark case. The Court recognized the **"systematic practice of pushbacks** by the Greek authorities of third-country nationals from the Evros region to Türkiye" and the fact that the Greek judicial authorities failed to conduct an effective criminal investigation despite the prima facie evidence.

Concerns regarding the **space for civil society** remain. In April 2024, the **Greek National Commission for Human Rights** noted that the **situation of human rights defenders working with migrants and asylum seekers had deteriorated** and made an urgent appeal to the Greek government to act, proposing concrete measures. In May 2024 an arrest warrant was issued against Tommy Olsen, human rights defender and founder of Aegean Boat Report. Olsen faces a prison sentence of up to 20 years. The United Nations special rapporteur for human rights defenders, described the case against Olsen as disturbing. In July 2024, the **European Commission**



published its 2024 Rule of Law Report. In the [Country Chapter](#) on the rule of law situation in Greece, the Commission notes that the **civic space in Greece remains obstructed** due to concerns in relation to civil society organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers.

In June 2024 an internal document from the EU's border agency Frontex [leaked](#) in which the agency recognizes it is **'likely', 'credible' and 'plausible' that seven individuals were pushed back from Samos to Turkish territorial waters and abandoned at sea by the Greek Coast Guard which led to the death of one of them.**

In June 2024 **BBC** (after an investigation featuring in the documentary [Dead Calm: Killing in the Med?](#)) [reported](#) that the **pushback practices of the Greek coastguard caused the deaths of 43 people between 2020 and 2023.**

In June 2024, The **Recording Mechanism of Incidents of Informal Forced Returns**, established by the Greek National Commission for Human Rights presented its **[annual report on pushbacks in 2023](#)**. The report includes testimonies on 45 incidents of informal forced returns. Based on the testimonies, the total number of alleged victims in these incidents is estimated to be at least 1,438 individuals.

In November 2024 the **Greek Council for Refugees (GCR)** published a [report](#) on pushbacks in Greece, providing detailed descriptions of twelve pushback cases at the Evros border region that occurred in 2023 and were legally represented by GCR before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). GCR stressed that despite the numerous reports on pushbacks, **not a single pushback case has been tried in a Greek courtroom**, confirming to a large extent the ineffectiveness of the investigations into rights violations allegedly committed by the Greek authorities at the EU land and sea external borders.

In July 2024 the **Council of Europe Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT)** issued a [report](#) on Greece. The report concludes that **violent pushbacks of foreign nationals, including unaccompanied children continue to take place**. The CPT called on the Greek authorities to “end the violent, dangerous and illegal pushback operations across the land border and at sea and to carry out effective investigations into all allegations.” The CPT stressed that all foreign nationals arriving at the border or present in the territory of Greece who wish to request international protection should be effectively protected against the risk of refoulement, including possible chain refoulement.

In July 2024, the **EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)** issued a [report](#) in which it decried the lack of investigation into alleged ill-treatment at the EU's borders. The FRA **found** that Greece among other member states **“did not effectively investigate incidents of ill treatment and loss of life during border management”**. It cited several incidents in which people were subjected to mistreatment without consequences for the perpetrators. It **added** that fear and intimidation also prevented victims from reporting mistreatment.”

In September 2024, the NGO **Aegean Boat Report**, issued a [report](#) on **Frontex involvement in a pushback operation** in the Aegean Sea that occurred in February 2024. The report is based on independent findings derived from contacts with the passengers of the migrant boat, videos and photos, as well as a [Serious Incident Report](#) from Frontex Fundamental Rights Office (FRO). The FRO confirms that the Frontex vessel did encounter the migrant boat that was pushed back and underlines that the modus operandi described by the NGO is consistent with practices associated with the Greek Coastguard. The FRO notes “with concern that the mission report from the captain of the Frontex vessel is incomplete, as it does not mention any encounters with migrant boats in the shift under scrutiny.”

In December 2024, the **UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination** published its [findings](#) on Greece. The Committee expressed concerns about **reported incidents of pushbacks and forced returns at sea and land borders, involving the excessive use of force, cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, arbitrary detention without legal guarantees, and sometimes leading to death of migrants and asylum seekers**. It asked Greece to investigate all

reports of human rights abuses, including forced return, pushback, excessive use of force and violence, and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment by law enforcement officials.

## HUNGARY

### DATA

In Hungary **5,713 pushbacks** were recorded in 2024. These figures were published by the Hungarian Police. The credibility of these figures was confirmed in conversations between 11.11.11 and local human rights organizations in Hungary.

### TRENDS

The 2024 pushback numbers show a significant decrease compared with previous years (98.687 pushbacks in 2023 and 158.565 pushbacks in 2022). This decline is due to a police operation in Serbia that took place in the end of 2023 during which migrants were forcibly evacuated from the entire northern border area with Hungary and Romania. 7,000 people were relocated to different camps in southern areas without being informed of their destination. Local aid groups reported that people were not allowed to take their personal belongings and suffered physical violence. Hungarian authorities participated in the operation. Due to the continued police presence in the North of Serbia, migrants cannot access the Serbian-Hungarian border and are compelled to choose a different migratory route. As a result, the number of migrants attempting to cross the Serbian-Hungarian border decreased in 2024.

Hungary continues to effectively **block access to asylum applications** due to a 2020 law that prevents submitting asylum requests within the country, coupled with 2016 legislation on pushbacks that allows police to remove unlawfully staying third-country nationals, regardless of their personal circumstances, without individually assessing (even registering) their requests for asylum. Hungary received just 13 applications for asylum in the first half of 2024. The NGO **Hungarian Helsinki Committee** (HHC) reports that pushbacks are becoming more and more violent. They also note that individuals arriving by plane without a valid visa who seek asylum are taken to the Serbian border and expelled. In May 2024 **IOM Hungary** stressed the adverse effects of this closed border policy, and noted the rise of a lucrative smuggling network as crossing the border becomes more expensive and dangerous. Local NGOs observe the same trend, emphasizing that smugglers have become essential since crossing the border by other means is virtually impossible.

In January 2024 the **European Court for Human Rights** condemned Hungary for pushing back an Iraqi Kurdish child to Serbia in 2017 without individualized procedures, and without registering his asylum application. The court ruled that the pushback without legal remedy and regard to individual circumstances violated the prohibition of collective expulsion. In particular, the Court criticised the fact that the victim of the Hungarian state's violation in this case was a child in need of help.

In June 2024 the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (**PICUM**) and European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) published a report on the use of EU resources available under the Border Management and Visa Instrument (BMVI) for EU Member States, highlighting the fact that Hungary continues to receive EU funding for border management, despite serious risks for contributing to human rights violations. The financial support is directed towards the purchase of vehicles, systems for biometric data registration and border infrastructure

including the renovation of a transit zone that was earlier targeted by a judgement of the EU Court of Justice for unlawfully detaining third country nationals. Criticisms from the European Parliament regarding transparency in the assessment process led to a lawsuit concerning budget disbursement to Hungary.

In March 2024, the Members of the **European Parliament** decided to file a lawsuit against the European Commission concerning the contested decision to disburse the 10.2 billion euros to Hungary, including the BMVI programme, claiming that the decision was based on political considerations rather than on the concrete improvements in the area of rule of law.

On 13 June 2024 the **European Court of Justice (ECJ)** imposed a fine of €200 million on Hungary for failing to comply with EU law on international protection and returning third-country nationals. In 2020, the ECJ had ruled that the 2016 Hungarian legislation of pushbacks, as further amended and extended in March 2017, constitutes a violation of European law. The decision of the courts follows an infringement case initiated by the European Commission, taking the view that Hungary still had not complied with the 2020 judgment. Additionally, Hungary faces a daily fine of €1 million until it amends the legislation that allows the - often violent - pushbacks of migrants at the country's borders. The ECJ ruled that Hungary had committed an "unprecedented and exceptionally serious breach of EU law". Hungarian **Prime Minister Viktor Orbán** condemned the ruling as "outrageous and unacceptable," asserting that Hungary would not yield to "financial blackmail by Brussels bureaucrats."

In September 2024 the **European Court of Human Rights** ruled that the Hungarian state had violated the prohibition of collective expulsion when it collectively expelled and pushed back four children and their parents to Serbia in 2019, disregarding their individual circumstances. It is the seventh case in which the European Court of Human Rights has ruled on the unlawful practice of pushbacks in Hungary.

In December 2024, the **Council of Europe Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT)** published a report on its 2023 periodic visit to Hungary. In the report, the CPT regrets that the Hungarian authorities failed to act upon the recommendations concerning forced returns/refoulement made repeatedly by the CPT in previous visit reports. The CPT once again urged the Hungarian authorities to put an end to the practice of pushbacks to the Serbian side of the border and take the necessary steps, including of legislative nature, to ensure that all foreign nationals arriving at the border or present in the territory of Hungary are effectively protected against the risk of refoulement, including chain refoulement.

## POLAND

### DATA

Between January and the end of November 2024, **13,600 pushbacks** at the Polish border with Belarus were recorded by the Polish authorities.<sup>6</sup> Local NGOs criticize the lack of transparency regarding the methodology behind these figures and cannot confirm their credibility.

Between January and the end of November 2024, 3,146 pushbacks at the Polish border with Belarus were recorded by the **NGO We Are Monitoring**.

### TRENDS

In January 2024, a group of **101 NGOs and 550 activists, artists and academics** called on Poland's **new prime minister, Donald Tusk, to end** the previous government's practice of **pushbacks to Belarus**.

In February 2024, the international NGO **Médecins sans Frontières (MSF)** published a Project Update on their operations at the Belarus border. The update contains **testimonies by people describing that 'EU border guards have opened fire on them, teargassed them, beaten them, stolen their valuables, destroyed their possessions and threatened them with tasers, dogs, metal rods, and chains**. People also report being pushed back into Belarus through rivers, stripped of their clothing and forced to stand in their underwear for hours at night in the rain.' After two years **MSF concluded its activities** in Belarus finding that the 'medical needs were outweighed by needs for protection and legal support, which requires the special expertise of dedicated organizations'. The organization called on the state authorities of Belarus, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia to 'immediately stop inflicting violence on people on the move in the border area dividing Belarus from the EU.'

Also in February 2024, **MSF** published a report (Death Despair and Destitution) including a chapter on border violence in Poland. According to the report, between the months of January and September 2023, 66 (**35.3%**) **patients seen by MSF in Poland, proactively reported having suffered from pushbacks at the Polish-Belarusian border**. A total of 117 (62.5%) patients experienced trauma related to violence, most of which had reportedly taken place in the border area.

In June 2024, **Poland reintroduced a no-go zone** at its border with Belarus to 'fight irregular migration'. The 60-kilometer-long border zone bans unauthorised people from coming within 200 metres of the Polish side of the border in some places and up to two kilometers in others. The measure was criticized by both Poland's commissioner for human rights and the Council of Europe's commissioner for human rights. The Council of Europe's Commissioner expressed concern about a decrease in the level of public scrutiny and a lack of accountability". In September 2024, the Polish government announced an extension of the measures for another three months.

In July 2024 the international NGO **Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)** published a Briefing Note on the situation at the Belarus border that reports **increased violence against people on the move by uniformed personnel, including pushbacks** of people who already declared the will to apply for international protection.

In September 2024, NRC reported that since June 2024, **uniformed personnel routinely force migrants to sign documents** which state that they had been informed about the possibility of applying for protection and do not wish to do so. This was added to another already used practice of forcing people to sign a document agreeing to leave Poland.

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<sup>6</sup> Based on the response of the Polish Border Guard Headquarters to queries filed under access to public information.

In October 2024, the **Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights** published written comments to the **European Court of Human Rights** in cases related to the alleged summary returns of asylum seekers by Poland, Latvia and Lithuania to Belarus.

In December 2024, **Human Rights Watch (HRW)** published a report on 'brutal pushbacks' at the Polish border with Belarus. The report describes a **consistent pattern of abuse** by Polish border and law enforcement officials, including 'unlawful pushbacks, beatings with batons, use of pepper spray, and destruction or confiscation of their phones'. The organization conducted in-depth interviews with 22 asylum seekers in Poland. Seventeen of them had experienced at least one pushback by Polish border officials in 2024 before successfully entering Poland. The report contains testimonies from people that were apprehended kilometers inside Polish territory and summarily forced back to Belarus without due process, even though in many cases they had explicitly asked to seek asylum.

In December 2024 the NGO **We Are Monitoring** published a report that provides an overview of the situation at the Polish-Belarusian border in the first 12 months after the new government of Donald Tusk took office in December 2023. Based on the testimonies collected, We Are Monitoring concludes that the situation at the border has not changed and pushbacks remain a systematic practice.

## LATVIA

### DATA

In Latvia **5,388 pushbacks** were reported in 2024 along the border with Belarus. These figures were reported by the Latvian government.

### TRENDS

The practice of pushbacks at the Latvia-Belarus border continues to persist. As Belarussian guards do not allow migrants to return further into Belarus, they often find themselves **stuck in the forested zone between the two countries for days or weeks**. Between October 2023 and June 2024, nine unidentified individuals died in the border region after crossing the Latvia-Belarus border and were buried in Latvia.

In June 2024, the NGOs **Fundacija Ocalenie, Human Constanta, Sienos Grupė and Gribu palīdzēt bēgļiem** published a joint report on migrants' deaths at the EU-Belarusian border. By the end of March 2024, **116 border deaths had been documented** in Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland since 2021 and at least another 26 cases had been reported by migrants in testimonies. The report stresses that harsh conditions and prolonged stay in the forest due to pushbacks can lead to exhaustion and hypothermia, the most frequent cause of death in the border areas.

In June 2024 **The Guardian** reported on the case of a Dutch **couple facing prison sentences of up to eight years for helping refugees** who had crossed into Latvia from Belarus. The two had traveled to the border area to provide help to the sister of one of them. They were arrested on suspicion of people smuggling. According to The Guardian, the trial appears to be 'part of an attempt to intimidate anyone who may want to help at the border.' The article also mentions the case of a Latvian human rights defender that faces up to two years of prison sentence for assisting asylum seekers at the border.

In July 2024, 27 migrants were arrested by the Latvian border guard and removed to Belarus without being able to request asylum.

In September 2024, **UNHCR** published a bi-annual fact sheet on the situation in Latvia. The fact sheet highlights concern about "**ongoing state practices at the border that are at variance with international law.**"

In October 2024, near the Belarusian border, Latvian police chased a transport vehicle with 46 individuals on board. The vehicle was stopped 150 km away from the border into Latvian territory. Officers used firearms to stop the vehicle. During the incident, two migrants sustained gunshot wounds. **43 of the detained migrants were removed to Belarus, without being able to request asylum** while three remained hospitalized for treatment.

## CROATIA

### DATA

In 2024, the NGO Save the Children outreach teams identified **1,905 refugees and migrants who were pushed back from Croatia**, including 333 children, out of whom 228 were unaccompanied.

In 2024, the international NGO **Danish Refugee Council** recorded 384 cases of pushbacks in January and February before ending their protection activities in the Una-Sana Canton. We cannot completely rule out that there is an overlap in the monitoring of Save the Children and Danish Refugee Council. That is why we only take into account the Save the Children monitoring in the final count.<sup>7</sup>

### TRENDS

Throughout 2024, children and adults experiencing pushbacks continued reporting violence and other humiliating and unlawful practices by the Croatian border guards, including pushing, beating by hand and batons, stripping, appropriation of property and destruction of personal belongings such as phones. Some refugees and migrants reported being pushed back from deep into the Croatian territory (Zagreb) and testified about being threatened or robbed by criminal groups operating within Croatian territory. Reported pushback cases included children who were hungry, thirsty, exhausted, frightened and severely affected by harsh weather conditions, some of which required medical assistance. In one pushback case, the outreach team of **Save the Children** identified an 11-year-old unaccompanied girl from Syria with hearing and speech impairments.

In October 2024, the NGO **No Name Kitchen** published a report on the practices of the Croatian police at the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The report **presents evidence of police officers burning essential items** such as clothing, phones and documents to push people back. In a series of “burn piles” along the Croatia-BiH border NNK identified hundreds of melted phones, remnants of clothing, backpacks, shoes, passports and passport photos.

Throughout 2024, the NGO **Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN)** published monthly reports on pushbacks in the Balkan region. The reports include testimonies of violent pushbacks into Bosnia perpetrated by Croatian border authorities. The November report highlights that heightened securitization of borders along the Balkan route resulted in an increased risk of death by drowning at these borders. The network received numerous reports of individuals who suffered serious injuries after falling or throwing themselves from bridges along the Bosnian-Croatian border, when fleeing from Croatian officers and facing the imminent threat of apprehension, violence and pushback.

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<sup>7</sup> Info via Save the Children North West Balkans. Save the Children is present at the main exit point from Bosnia and Herzegovina, the region located at the border with Croatia, Una-Sana Canton. At present, Save the Children outreach teams covering the border area are the only outreach service for refugees and migrants, including those who have been pushed back from Croatia.

## LITHUANIA

### DATA

In Lithuania **1.002 pushbacks** were reported in 2024 along the border with Belarus. The Lithuanian government publishes these figures on a daily basis. Conversations between 11.11.11 and a local human rights organization confirm the credibility of those figures.

### TRENDS

The Lithuanian '**state of emergency**' that bans people from lodging asylum requests if they enter irregularly has been constantly **renewed**, despite a 2022 ruling by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) that the Lithuanian restrictions to the right to apply for asylum are incompatible with EU law. Also, **official crossing points** between the Lithuanian and the Belarus border remain **closed** to asylum seekers. People are not allowed to approach checkpoints by foot or bicycle. This results in people being stuck on the Belarus side of the border for longer periods of time. Lithuania's **State Border Law** (May 2023) **that allows pushbacks** under certain conditions **remains in force**. Exceptions for certain individuals were initially proposed but not adopted, with the interior minister at the time viewing them as incentives for migration.

**Only 205 asylum applications** were lodged in Lithuania in the first half of 2024.

There are still reports of **violent actions by Lithuanian border guards**. In April 2024, the NGO **Human Rights Monitoring Institute (HRMI)**, published a report on three cases involving unlawful restrictions of migrants' liberty, abuses by Lithuanian authorities, and pushbacks to Belarus. According to their report, migrants were repeatedly pushed back towards Belarussian border areas, leaving many stranded in limbo between the countries even as they suffered from extreme exposure to and frostbite from extremely cold temperatures. Lithuanian officials reportedly refused to allow them to submit asylum applications and physically abused them.

In May 2024 the **European Court of Human Rights (ECHR)** **granted an interim measure preventing the expulsion** of seven Cuban nationals that crossed the border from Belarus.

In its Operational Update of September 2024, **UNHCR** raised **concerns that the 2023 Lithuanian law authorizes pushbacks and may lead to individuals not being granted effective access to territory and the right to seek asylum.**

Civic space for organizations monitoring and providing help to migrants at the border seems to be slightly improving, with a multi-year authorization for a human rights organization to operate in the border area.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Interview Sienos Grupe.

## FINLAND

### DATA

In December 2024, an independent blog called Migrant Tales reported on alleged pushback practices at the Finnish-Russian border that began at the end of 2023. 11.11.11 was not able to verify these accounts.

### TRENDS

In July 2024, a **new law aimed at preventing asylum seekers from entering** Finland via its border with Russia **came into effect**. The legislation was **criticized by UNHCR**, finding that it conflicts with international and European refugee and human rights law. UNHCR stressed that the principle of non-refoulement is a non-derogable obligation that applies to all states and that the right to seek asylum applies to everyone, regardless of the mode of entry.

By the end of 2024 all border crossing points were closed.

## LIBYA

### DATA

In most cases of pushbacks to Libya, it is not an EU member state that executes the pushback, but the Libyan coast guard that intercepts people and forcibly returns them to Libya. However, the support from Italy and the EU in these pushbacks is so direct and extensive (aerial monitoring and coordination of interceptions, financial and material support to the coast guard, training...) that these actions are also taken into account as pushbacks by EU member states.

According to the UN migration agency IOM **21,762 migrants** were **intercepted and forcibly returned** to Libya in 2024.

### TRENDS

As in the previous years, **violent and even deadly behavior by the Libyan coast guard** has been repeatedly documented in 2024. In March 2024, the crew of a SOS Humanity rescue ship was threatened by a Libyan coast guard vessel as they tried to rescue 77 migrants from three small boats. At least one person drowned and more than 20 were forced back to Libya. During a rescue by Mediterranea Saving Humans in April 2024, Libyan coast guards opened fire on one of the NGO's lifeboats, causing panic and leading to several people falling into the water. According to the NGO, migrants were also whipped on the Libyan patrol boat. In June 2024, the German ngo Sea-Watch published a video showing Libyan coast guards using sticks to beat migrants who had just been rescued by a merchant ship. The migrants had been forced to get off the tanker and were returned to Libya.

In July 2024, the **UN High Commissioner for Human Rights** Volker Türk called for a review of the EU deal with Libya.

In September 2024, the **European Court of Auditors** published an audit on the EU Trust Fund for Africa (the fund financing the Libyan coast guard), in which it condemned the European Commission for **insufficiently addressing risks to the do-no-harm principle** in its support for the Libyan coast guard.



## LEBANON

### DATA

In many cases of pushbacks to Lebanon, it is not an EU member state that executes the pushback, but the Lebanese coast guard that intercepts people and forcibly returns them to Lebanon. However, the support from EU member states and EU agencies in these pushbacks is so direct and extensive that these actions are also taken into account as pushbacks by EU member states. It concerns support for the monitoring capacity of the Lebanese Navy to detect boats, delivery of boats, training and international collaboration platforms.

In 2024, the Lebanese coast guard intercepted and returned 16 boats to Lebanon, while the Cypriot coast guard pushed back 7 boats. As a result, **3,768 people were forcibly returned.**<sup>9</sup>

### TRENDS

The independent media platform **Inkstick** reported that in April 2024, five small fishing boats carrying nearly 500 Syrian refugees that set off from Lebanese shores were intercepted by Cypriot authorities and pushed to Lebanon.

In June 2024, **UNHCR** raised alarm over the **interceptions and subsequent pushbacks** by Cypriot authorities of asylum seekers attempting to reach Cypriot shores. According to UNHCR these practices result in the risks of direct or chain refoulement for affected asylum-seekers. UNHCR raised specific concerns for the safety and well-being of some 31 asylum-seekers including seven children, who were trapped in the UN Buffer Zone (BZ). Some of them had crossed the BZ into Cyprus but were later removed by police and pushed back to the BZ.

In September 2024, **Human Rights Watch** published a report on pushbacks and pullbacks of asylum seekers between Cyprus and Lebanon, based on interviews with 16 Syrian refugees and asylum seekers who had tried to leave Lebanon by boat. The report mentions that between January and July 2024, UNHCR identified six Cyprus-bound boats returned to Lebanon and five boats intercepted by the Lebanese authorities. The report describes **excessive force** used by Lebanese and Cypriot authorities at the time of arrest and during detention, including beatings, body restraints, and verbal insults. HRW called upon Cyprus to cease all pushbacks and collective expulsions and allow people to claim international protection upon entering the country.

In October 2024, the **European Court of Human Rights** ruled that Cyprus violated human rights by pushing Syrians back to Lebanon without properly assessing their asylum claims or risks they could face. The court found this to be collective expulsion, lacking individual processing and legal safeguards.

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<sup>9</sup> Monitoring via Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH).

## CONCLUSION

Pushbacks remain a systematic practice across the EU, amounting to **120.457 pushbacks** in 2024. These numbers, almost certainly an underestimate, underscore the persistent violation of international and EU law. Alongside this, the shrinking space for civil society and the criminalization of humanitarian work have made it increasingly difficult to monitor and report on these human rights violations, with less witnesses and accountability becoming even harder to achieve.

Legal actions at the national level continue to fall short in achieving accountability. Not a single pushback case has been tried in a Greek courtroom and not a single border police officer in Bulgaria has been sanctioned, despite the numerous reports of violations in both countries.

The troubling trend of the legalization of pushbacks continues in certain EU member states, with the Finnish law of 2024 that empowers the authorities to limit the reception of asylum applications at the border, granting them powers to prevent entry, including by force as the latest example. Similar legislation was adopted in Latvia and Lithuania (2023) and Poland (2021).

The European Court of Justice (ECJ) decision to fine Hungary for its pushback practices, following the European Commission's infringement proceedings, is a positive step that should be applauded. However, the Commission's inconsistent stance—with greater leniency toward other countries like Bulgaria, despite triple violations and increased border protection budgets—raises concerns about selective enforcement of human rights standards. The landmark January 2025 ruling of the European Court of Human Rights on pushbacks in Greece is another important glimmer of hope, that should be followed by actions of the EU institutions.

The positions of the Fundamental Rights Officer (FRO), Jonas Grimheden, within Frontex are another positive development, yet the FRO appears powerless in effecting substantial change. Meanwhile, the Frontex management board continues to fall short of placing human rights at the core of its activities, highlighting a systemic failure to address the root causes of abuse at EU borders. Whereas the 11.11.11 Annual Report on pushbacks of 2023 was cautiously optimistic on the new leadership of Frontex and the discourse of the new Frontex Director Hans Leijtens, promising accountability, respect for fundamental rights and transparency, there is little reason for confidence based on this 2024 report. Little has changed when it comes to the situation on the ground. Reports of Frontex involvement in pushbacks continue to emerge.

In conclusion, while there are glimmers of progress, such as the ECJ ruling, the overall trend points to a troubling normalization of pushbacks and a retreat from the EU's commitments to human rights. Addressing these issues requires stronger enforcement mechanisms and greater accountability for both individual states and EU institutions.

## FOR EU MEMBER STATES

- > Immediately halt all pushbacks and collective expulsions and allow people to claim international protection at the border or upon arrival in the country.
- > Ensure accountability by investigating all allegations, and, where warranted, prosecuting any agents of police, border guard or other security agencies who have used or ordered excessive use of force or other ill-treatment against migrants, asylum seekers or refugees in their custody.
- > Set up effective and independent monitoring that ensures respect for fundamental rights. This entails:
  - > an expansion of the geographical and procedural scope of the monitoring mechanism foreseen in the EU Migration Pact to make sure it covers areas of border management.
  - > guarantees that the mechanism can operate independently from the national authorities, with the involvement of independent organisations (such as national human rights organisations, ombuds organisations, local and international NGOs or civil society organisations);
  - > guaranteed and unlimited access for the mechanism to all relevant documentation and data, as well as the possibility to carry out unannounced site visits at relevant locations (police stations, transit/reception centres, pre-removal centres and border regions).
- > In relation to Frontex and in their capacity as a member of the Frontex management board:
  - > advocate for the immediate scale back of Frontex activities and limit them to monitoring in member states that systematically break the rules. This is in line with the Frontex regulation.
  - > advocate for further internal reforms of Frontex, with a stronger role for the Fundamental Rights Officer.
  - > Make sure human rights expertise is represented in the agency's Management Board, in the formal representation as in preparatory meetings at national level.
  - > Make participation in Frontex operations dependent on independent assessments of the human rights situation and suspend the deployment of means and personnel in case of violations by Frontex or the host country of the operation.
  - > re-evaluate the collaboration between Frontex and non-EU member states and examine whether it contributes to human rights violations. This is definitely the case for the collaboration between Frontex and the Libyan coast guard.
- > Encourage the European Commission to fulfil its role as 'Guardian of the Treaties' and, in line with article 258 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), institute infringement procedures against countries that do not respect European regulations.
- > In their bilateral contacts with the involved member states systematically pay attention to the human rights situation in terms of border management and to remind them of their obligations under international law.
- > Advocate within the EU for making border management funding dependent on respect for human rights and to suspend funding when these rights are violated.
- > Make funding to third countries conditional on the implementation of effective human rights safeguards. This includes ensuring that funding does not facilitate interceptions at sea (pullbacks), which violate international maritime law, the right to seek asylum, and the right to leave one's country.
- > Oppose the criminalisation of the work of human rights organisations and other NGOs that are active on the external borders or save lives in the Mediterranean.

## FOR THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

- > Fulfill its role as 'Guardian of the Treaties' and, in line with article 258 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), institute infringement procedures against countries that do not respect European regulations.
- > Suspend funding for border management in countries that do not respect European regulations.
- > Suspend support for Libyan and Lebanese coast guards and security agencies until guarantees are in place that support is not used for operations that contribute to summary expulsions, arbitrary arrest and detention, or ill-treatment. Increase the transparency and accountability of support for migration management in third countries.
- > Develop ongoing independent, public human rights impact assessment to ensure that all current and future support does not contribute to human rights violations in the context of border management.

## FOR FRONTEX

- > Immediate scale back Frontex activities and limit them to monitoring in member states where fundamental rights violations are systemic and likely to persist.
- > Re-evaluate the collaborations between Frontex and non-EU member states and examine whether they contribute to human rights violations. This is definitely the case for the collaboration between Frontex and the Libyan coast guard.
- > Strengthen the human rights framework and further empower the Fundamental Rights Officer (FRO) with adequate resources, personnel and the ability to effectively monitor and address human rights concerns and the ability to issue binding recommendations in cases of human rights violations.

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