

# The Push-Back Map

## Mapping Border Violence in Europe and Beyond. A Collective Self-Reflection

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PUSH-BACK MAP COLLECTIVE

**Abstract:** This is a collective interview, more specifically a dialogue among members of the Push-Back Map Collective, a project dedicated to mapping the institutional violence of the European border regime. It explores the idea behind it by positioning this work within political struggles against a set of particular brutal practices of the border regime. It carves out its main aspects and investigates the potentials of political organising based on mapping – by making an invisible structure visible.

**Keywords:** Push-backs, mapping, Balkan route, institutional violence, transnational organising

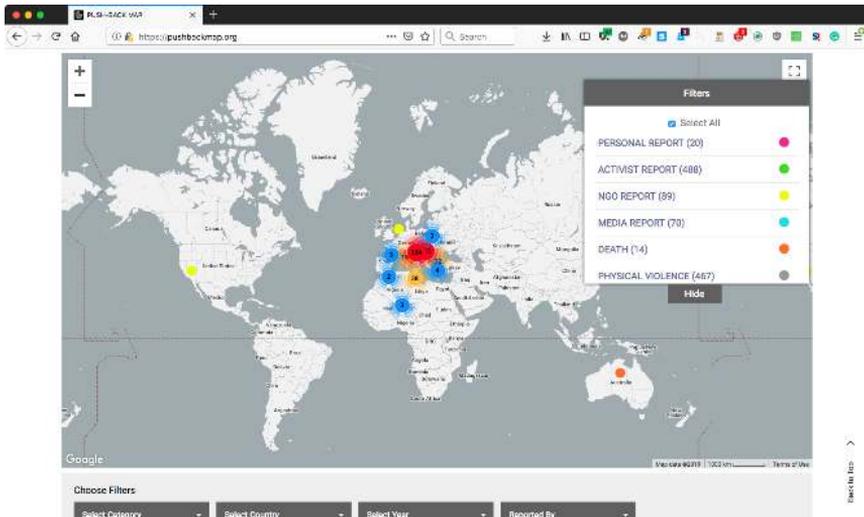
### COLLECTIVE INTERVIEW PART I

*PBM 1: So, how are we going to do this self-interview? Shall we start from what is the Push-Back Map Project? I mean what's the idea behind it? Why did we decide to do it?*

*PBM 2: Yes! The idea behind the Push-Back Map is to provide a space for the visualisation, documentation, and denunciation of push-backs. It was started by several groups and individuals who are, or have been, active on the Balkan route since 2015. The Push-Back Map is a collaborative project of activists from different countries some of whom made their way across the Balkan route themselves.*

*PBM 1: And is the map only reporting push-backs happening in the Balkans?*

*PBM 2: The project is not limited geographically, although it has been initiated by groups and individuals mainly active in Southeastern Europe. But push-backs and border violence are happening in so many places—it is a global phenomenon.*



Screenshot of the Push-Back Map of 23.09.2019.

*PBM 1: To make it clear: can you explain the point of this map? Why focus on push-backs?*

*PBM 2: The history of push-backs is also a history of resistance with relentless movements across borders and activist struggles. Some of them are at times unsuccessful, still others at times successful—and never stopping! This map intends to document this continued struggle collectively and hopes to empower people to report experienced or witnessed push-backs and keep the struggle up!*

*PBM 2: I think if we really want to explain we need to describe the map. It is a website: pushbackmap.org. But what does it do?*

*PBM 1: It is an online documentation tool. It provides a space to visualise the systematic and institutionalised nature of push-backs conducted by the authorities. The map is an inclusive and open tool for people targeted by, witnessing, and counteracting push-backs. It serves as a live tool as well as an archive. We are also mapping reports from newspapers and NGOs and all other related documentation about push-backs. It collects and centralises evidence and aims to increase the visibility of the systemic*

practices of expulsion. We hope to contribute to exposing the resulting harassment, violence, and death.

*PBM 2: Ok, and from a more practical point: I am at the border; I want to report a push-back, but my internet connection is really bad, and I don't speak English. What do I do?*

*PBM 1:* The map is a multilingual platform: there is a form for reporting experienced or witnessed push-backs and uploading evidence. There is also a mobile phone application for easier access. The map offers an option, a tool, and aims to encourage people who experience push-backs to themselves document what is happening at border areas, rather than being continuously identified as victims who cannot speak for themselves. Our position is not only to counteract and denounce push-backs and border violence, but also support the right to move freely and safely across borders in order to enjoy a life in dignity. We are aware of the constant daily struggle of people on the move, and it would be naive to believe that this tool can revolutionarily redefine their precarious journeys; however, we believe it is an option that must be there.

*PBM 2: Alright, this is great, but I am going to be very blunt. What does push-back actually mean?*

*PBM 1:* A push-back occurs when people are expelled shortly after entering the territory of a country without being granted the possibility to start administrative procedures to stay, to access the mechanisms of international protection, to explain their personal circumstances, or to object to their treatment. Push-backs are expulsions, direct deportations, readmissions, or other forms of immediate involuntary return across one or several territorial borders. Depending on the regulatory framework in place, these forms of forced displacement can be legalised under national law—as in Hungary—or semi-formalised, for example by relying on bilateral agreements or informal practices. They put those in danger who attempt to cross borders by pushing people to risk their lives once more with arduous crossings. In many cases, push-backs are also combined with violence and different sorts of degrading treatment. This institutional violence follows a clear deterrence and containment strategy aiming to control and restrain people's movement.

*PBM 2: But push-backs are not a new practice in any sense and have occurred before the ›summer of migration‹ of 2015.*

The opening of the Balkan corridor partially halted these brutal practices. However, push-backs started to re-emerge with the gradual closure of the Corridor. So, we decided to start documenting push-backs since March 2016 when the Corridor was closed. With its closure the practices strongly increased. Similar developments can also be observed at sea where the refoulements to Libya or Turkey have been halted for some time, but are now occurring regularly again (see Alarmphone reports).

*PBM 1: Can you explain how you understand the practice of push-backs within the broader framework of the EU border regime?*

*PBM 2:* We see push-backs as an ›institutional practice‹ of the European Union. Mapping them can be a way to outline their dimensions and their meaning for the European border regime. It therefore means to reconstruct and, in a sense, map and visualise this invisible ›institutional practice‹. There is simply no other way to make the institutional practice visible than by mapping it out. So that is what we aim to do: counting and pinning every single push-back. The institutional practice of push-backs does not have a headquarter in Brussels or Warsaw, no press conferences, and there is no website to refer to and no spokesperson; meaning that, on an institutional level, push-backs remain an opaque practice literally happening in the dark since they mostly remain officially undocumented by the conducting authorities.

*So how to deal with this ›invisible institutional practice‹?*

*PBM 1:* From a migrant solidarity perspective, it should not exist; neither with, nor without a headquarter anywhere. It simply needs to stop. The legal void in the lawless border zones needs to be addressed at its roots: the vulnerability of migrants because of their status in Europe. I think this concept of ›institutional practice‹ should be better unpacked. Maybe we can see it from the angle of institutionalised violence that is inherent to state authorities. There is no authority without violence.

*Can you tell me, politically speaking, what does it mean then to map push-backs apart from the visualisation of these events?*

*PBM 2:* Concerning the idea of creating a document that allows us to witness the dimensions of push-backs in Europe, ›mapping‹ push-backs means four things that belong together: first, to visualise single events from a multitude of different sources and second, to thereby proof the existence of the European-wide practice of expul-

sions. We can, literally, ›zoom out‹ and get a bigger picture of what is happening all over Europe, particularly—but not only—at its margins. We can then virtually see each of these single events as a manifestation of a European-wide phenomenon. So, thirdly, the map brings to mind the importance of push-backs—despite being predominantly ›illegal‹—for the functionality of the EU border regime.

And last but not least, to map these events also means to counteract the structure of the situation in which the invisibility—of state actors, of the course of events, and of the migrants who are pushed back—is the key to its functioning. In this sense, making push-backs visible and naming them as an institutional practice is a crucial political act. In this sense, we are inspired by projects such as the Watch the Med Alarm Phone or Forensic Oceanography.

*PBM 1: To end with an outlook: what are the potentials and limitations of the Push-Back Map project?*

*PBM 2:* As a transnational collective from different fields of radical politics, we also want to stress the political approach to our work and to migrant solidarity in general. We see our work embedded in a broader genealogy of anti-capitalist, antifascist, and feminist struggles. We don't want to cooperate with any authorities or improve ›border management‹. We struggle for borderless and classless societies. We know that mapping testimonies has many limitations. But one main goal of the mapping project is also to provide a platform for transnational, non-hierarchical, radical grassroots organising, intervening, and exchange. We try to frame the Push-Back Map as a space and a platform for collecting reports from a broad variety of sources and places. We thereby hope to support, supplement, and embed the impressive work that is continuously done by different structures and somehow enhance the ›toolbox‹ of possible interventions.

*PBM 1: Agreed! But now, what about the limitations?*

*PBM 2:* Well, documenting in itself is limited. There is always the urge to do more, more concrete, and more ›radical‹ stuff. There are already hundreds, if not thousands, of reports on the subject yet little has changed. We often ask ourselves if the map could possibly become a sort of ›Alarmphone‹, initiating direct interventions.

*Could it become a live tool where direct action follows a submitted report?*

*PBM 1:* In some contexts, this has been tried already on a small scale. But it is certainly difficult to do on a larger scale as it is not based in one legal framework of one national law. It would be necessary to have local actors involved in each country.

*PBM 2:* But that is exactly where we also see a potential of the map: as an open, inclusive, and multilingual tool, it can serve as a stepping-stone for transnational organising, building on and strengthening transnational ties among groups, activists, and people on the move in different locations. This is in fact already happening.

*PBM 1:* In fact, the main task of the project we see at the moment is to remain vocal and not shut up about these horrendous practices: The institutionalised daily violence of push-backs at borders cannot remain invisible. It has to stop! By witnessing, documenting, and denouncing push-backs, we support the continuous struggle for freedom of movement and the right to stay for all!

## **COLLECTIVE INTERVIEW PART II— AFTER LONG MEETINGS AND SKYPE CALLS**

*PBM 1:* So, quite some time has passed since we did our collective self-interview. Since the end of February/beginning of March the situation has escalated so drastically and rapidly that we thought we needed to update it. The escalation at the Greek-Turkish border was followed by the massive outbreak of the Covid-19 virus across Europe. These events are profoundly changing the border regimes. So, the question we are asking to ourselves is: *Does it still make sense to continue with the mapping of push-backs in the current situation?*

*PBM 2:* What has been happening in Greece since the beginning of March 2020 is a very extreme suspension of basic rights: The Greek government has suspended the right to submit asylum applications; they are detaining every new arrival, including babies, children, and people with serious health risks; they have decided to push-back everyone attempting to cross the EU/Greek border with Turkey. By implementing these practices, the Greek and EU authorities have basically legalised push-backs and they use FRONTEX openly pushing people back at sea. The EU has financially and politically invested into this. This situation is a clusterfuck!

*PBM 1:* Yes! Additionally, in February, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg passed a judgement that more or less legalised Spain's push-back practices

at the Moroccan border fences of Ceuta and Melilla. This means to me that the legal way to counter push-backs has reached its limits. The decrying of push-backs as ›illegal‹ has become meaningless. The normalisation of push-backs, and the violence that comes with it, has been the first step to subsequently legalise these practices. It is a tendency that we have observed for a while now. For example, in the Balkans, the normalisation of institutional violence was, and continues to be, the daily reality for far too many people.

*PBM 2:* Yet, I think we are witnessing a turning point regarding border practices and push-backs. In the beginning of the year 2020, only a few governments wanted to openly admit that they were conducting extremely violent push-backs on a daily basis. Within a few weeks, all main EU authorities have suddenly become confident in supporting Greece in their push-back practices to Turkey. Previously it was only the right wing populists, like Orban or Salvini, encouraging push-backs, today, the head of the European Commission, Van der Leyen, is applauding Greece for being Europe's ›shield‹, approving a wave of renewed nationalisms and nationalists which feel comfortable to shoot people at the northern Greek-Turkish border.

*PBM 1:* True. And this martial language is further accelerating with the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. What is currently happening across Europe is every authoritarian's wet dream: fundamental rights are being curtailed, borders are closed, and freedom of movement is abolished. But this time for the entire population! Although the virus targets everyone, no matter their legal status, it also renders structural inequalities more apparent: who has a house to stay in during the quarantine, and who hasn't; who has access to hygienic and medical care, and who hasn't; who is able to physically distance themselves, and who is confined and crammed in a camp with hundreds or even thousands of other people.

*PBM 2:* So let's try to analyse this: the EU just pulled off its mask, or its multiple masks made of all these nice old concepts of good liberal European middle class people, who believe in human rights, cultural diversity, and so on. Today, many are ready to openly say: we need to defend the borders. It makes me really angry!

*PBM 1:* The pandemic increasingly appears to be used to re-fortify the nation-states along their national borders. We should not let this happen! There are a number of moments of solidarity, not only on a local level but also transnationally. However, we have to rally for a solidarity that includes everyone, that leaves no one behind,

and not out on the streets, not in factories or exploited in the agricultural fields, not at militarised border zones, not in overcrowded camps, not in deportation prisons!

*PBM 2:* I agree, but to get back to the topic: What about our mapping? What do we do with the map? Does it still make sense to continue revealing one push-back after another, when the EU has suspended all border crossings for an unknown amount of time on top of normalising and basically legalising push-backs?

*PBM 1:* I think collecting testimonies of individual push-backs remains an important act of solidarity with the people on the move. It may be legalised and normalised, but it will never be ok, and we will continue to struggle against this and for the freedom of movement and the right to stay for everyone. Within the current Agambian-Foucauldian nightmare of a biopolitical state of exception, it is more important than ever to witness and report on the acts of authorities.

*PBM 2:* But it has also become much more difficult! Politically, though, I think the strategy can no longer be only collecting reports of push-backs, but we need to show the system behind it. We should try to visualise that push-backs are an institution within a broader system which is profiting from push-backs. We have been discussing this for a while now. Already before the current escalation, we thought we had to make the ›infrastructures‹ of this ›institution‹ visible.

*PBM 1:* True. The idea is to add one more layer into the map. We jokingly called it the ›Know-Your-Enemy Pin‹. This pin maps data on the infrastructure behind push-backs across Europe. In other words, it collects places as well as legislative elements of the anti-migration and fortification regime: police stations, prisons, and other official and unofficial places of confinement, but also court rulings, or policy decisions.

*PBM 2:* The push-back infrastructure pin is already on the map and ready to be filled with content. The aim is to make clear that push-backs are just one of the many tools that would not exist without the structure and logistics to support them. With the data collected, we can create a new layer on the Push-Back Map—a kind of counter-map—and reveal how the practice of push-back is embedded in a variety of anti-migration infrastructures, which all contribute to normalising the European border regime and more than ever as Fortress Europe.

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## Authors

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**Patricia Artimova** is a PhD student at the University of Ostrava, Czech Republic. In her research she analyzes migration movements and the changing perception of migration in the Balkans, mainly in Serbia. Since 2015, she is an active member of volunteer initiatives operating in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Karolína Augustová** is a PhD candidate in Sociology and International Relations at Aston University, researching the displaced people's everyday experiences of border violence along South-Eastern Europe. She is interested in how diverse forms of violence (direct/structural/cultural) affect everyday social processes along borders as well as how the role of intersectionality (masculinity with other locations) plays in violence. In her research, she uses activist ethnography; volunteering in informal refugee camps.

**Selma Banich** is a Zagreb-based artist, social activist, and community organizer. Her artistic and social practice is based on processual, research, and activist work and is politically inspired by anarchism and feminism.

**Barbara Beznec** graduated in Political Science of International Relations at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University in Ljubljana, where she later earned her PhD on the subject of European Citizenship. She is a researcher of migration at the Research Center of the Slovenian Academy of Science and Arts.

**Emina Bužinkić** is a political activist examining the state and police violence against migrants and refugees, particularly concerning issues of border control and violence. Her work extends to understanding the inscriptions of border regimes in the field of schooling by researching the experiences of refugee and migrant students. She is currently obtaining her PhD in critical studies in education and human rights at the University of Minnesota in the United States. She is linked to the Centre for Peace Studies (*Centar za mirovne studije*), the Welcome! Initiative (*Inicijativa Dobrodošli!*), and the Taste of Home (*Okus doma*) in Croatia. Recently she has been

working with the *Transbalkan Solidarity* and *Pirate Care Syllabus Writing Collective*.

**Céline Cantat** is a postdoctoral fellow at Sciences Po with H2020 project MAGYC-Migration Governance and Asylum Crises. Previously, Céline was a Marie-Curie Fellow at CEU, Budapest, studying migration solidarity groups along the Balkan route. She holds a PhD in Refugee Studies from the University of East London and is co-editor of *Refugee Protection and Civil Society in Europe* (Palgrave, 2018) and *Challenging the Political Across Borders: Migrants' and Solidarity Struggle* (CPS Book Series, 2019).

**Andrea Contenta** is an independent researcher and a humanitarian worker. After spending some years between Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan focusing on violence, conflicts and displacement, he decided to move to Belgrade following the Balkan corridor. Today he lives and works in Athens.

**Marijana Hameršak** is a senior research associate at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, Zagreb. Her main areas of research and teaching are migration, children's literature and book history. She is the author of the books *Pričalice* (*Taletellers*, 2011) and *Uvod u dječju književnost* (*Introduction to the Children's Literature*, with Dubravka Zima, 2015), and she has edited several edited collections, with the most recent one, being *Formation and Disintegration of the Balkan Refugee Corridor* (with Emina Bužinkić, 2018).

**Sabine Hess** is professor at the Institute for Cultural Anthropology/European Ethnology, University of Göttingen, since 2011. Her main areas of research and teaching are migration and border regime studies, anthropology of policy with a focus on EU integration and processes of Europeanisation. She is a founding member of the online journal *movements* and of *kritnet* (Network for Critical Border and Migration Studies).

**Azra Hromadžić** is Associate Professor and O'Hanley Faculty Scholar in the Department of Anthropology at Syracuse University. She is the author of *Citizens of an Empty Nation: Youth and State-making in Postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina* (translated into Serbian *Samo Bosne nema: mladi i građenje države u posleratnoj Bosni i Hercegovini*). She also co-edited a volume (with Monika Palmberger), titled *Care Across Distance: Ethnographic Explorations of Aging and Migration*. She is currently working on a new book that investigates riverine citizenship in northwestern Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Civil initiative **Info Kolpa** started in the spring of 2018 as a response to illegal actions of Slovene police, which started systematically denying people the right to seek asylum in Slovenia and pushing people back to Croatia. In the autumn of 2018, we established an informal telephone number for assistance to people wishing to seek asylum in Slovenia. The help we provided proved unsuccessful but with operating the number, we gained a lot of information on practice of push-backs on Slovene-Croatian border, which we presented to Slovene and international public.

**Teodora Jovanović** is as a research assistant at the Institute of Ethnography of SASA and a doctoral student of ethnology and anthropology at University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy. For her doctoral thesis, she conducted an ethnographic fieldwork in reception centers for asylum seekers in Serbia. Previously, she worked in »Miksal-ište« refugee aid center in Belgrade, and she was involved in »Refugees in Towns« project at Tufts University, Boston, as a local case study researcher.

**Andrej Kurnik** is assistant professor at Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana. He is a member of editorial board of *Časopis za kritiko znanosti* (Journal for Critique of Sciences).

**Romana Pozniak** is a PhD candidate with working experience in the humanitarian sector and an interest in the area of humanitarianism, biopolitics, refugee studies, and anthropology of labor. Her dissertation explores transformations, practices, and narratives of humanitarian work with migrants/refugees/asylum seekers in post-transitional Croatia. She works at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research in Zagreb.

The **Push-Back Map Collective** is a transnational group of people that come from different fields of radical politics like feminism, anti-capitalism, and anti-racist struggles. Its members are active in documenting and counteracting push-backs and violence at the internal and external(ised) borders of the EU. One main goal of the mapping project is to provide a platform for transnational, non-hierarchical, radical grassroots interventions and exchange.

**Robert Rydzewski** is a PhD candidate at the Department of Anthropology and Ethnology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland. Formerly, he held a scholarship at the Central European University in Budapest and was a Doctoral Fellow Researcher at the Wirth Institute for Austrian and Central European Studies at University of Alberta in Edmonton in Canada. His scientific interests are migration, civil society, transformations of post-Yugoslav cities. Currently, he is completing his PhD dissertation about the migrant movement in the Serbian part of the Balkan route.

**Jack Sapoch** is an activist affiliated with the NGO No Name Kitchen, where he coordinates the collection of push-back testimonies. In this capacity, he works in the wider Border Violence Monitoring Network—a joint-project organized by independent NGOs—to draw attention to the issue of border violence in the Western Balkans. He received his undergraduate degree from Bates College (USA) where he researched the institutional influences affecting refugee assistance in the ›barracks‹ of Belgrade in 2017.

**Zita Seichter, Miriam Neßler** and **Paul Knopf** met each other at Bauhaus-University Weimar in 2017. Today, they are studying Art and Architecture, Urban Studies as well as Human Geography and Regional Development in Weimar, Berlin and Eberswalde. Besides being interested in border regime practices in Belgrade and beyond, they are involved in activist and artistic contexts, researching and teaching on Solidarity Cities, the Right to the City, transformation strategies from a decolonizing perspective as well as art and architecture in the context of the Anthropocene. Related publication: Eckardt, Frank / Neßler, Miriam / Seichter, Zita (Hg.) (2019): *Weit weg und unbeachtet. Stadt und Flüchtende in Belgrad seit Schließung der Balkanroute.*

**Marc Speer** holds a degree in Sociology and is currently finalizing his PhD thesis on the *Humanitarian Border Regime* at the Institute for Cultural Anthropology/European Ethnology at the University of Göttingen, Germany. In addition he works for the research association *bordermonitoring.eu*, focusing in particular on the European border regime in South-Eastern Europe.

**Marta Stojić Mitrović** is an ethnologist and anthropologist working at the Institute of Ethnography of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade. In her research, she focuses on discourses and practices related to the topics of migration, citizenship, human rights and discrimination in Serbian, regional, and the EU context.