

Backpacks Ablaze, Backpacks Afloat

'Trash' and Pushbacks at the Croatian-Bosnian Border

Povzetek

Nahrbtniki v ognju, nahrbtniki na vodi: rasno pogojene »smeti« in prisilna vračanja na hrvaško-bosanski meji

Delovanje Hrvaške kot varuhinje meja Evropske unije zaznamujejo nasilni 'pushbacki' – prisilna vračanja ljudi na poti v sosednje države. Poleg zavračanja prošelj za azil, uporabe pretirane fizične sile, sistematičnega uničevanja telefonov in rasno motiviranih zlorab, hrvaške mejne oblasti pogosto sežigajo osebne predmete ljudi v gozdovih, ustvarjajo skupna odlagališča ter mečejo oblačila v reke. Na podlagi etnografskih raziskav in arhiva pričevanj o prisilnih vračanjih, ki jih vodi mreža Border Violence Monitoring Network, se ta raziskava osredotoča na zavržene in uničene predmete ob hrvaško-bosanski meji. Članek preučuje, kako se rasizacija ljudi na poti izraža skozi sledi, ter raziskuje, kako dejanje smetenja (ang. *trashing*) govori o nasilju. Ključno izhodišče članka je, da je rasno pogojeno nasilje, ki ga izvajajo mejni policisti, tesno prepleteno z rasizacijo, ki so ji ljudje na poti izpostavljeni v lokalnih javnih sferah. Sledi v naravnem okolju tako postanejo »smeti« v lokalnih socialnih interakcijah in spletnih razpravah. Članek trdi, da hrvaški mejni policisti s svojimi dejanji prispevajo k obstoječi onesnaženosti in hkrati izkoriščajo ksenofobna čustva. Dejanje smetenja kot tehnika prisilnega vračanja presega zgolj izbris posameznih identitet in epistemološko nasilje meja – združuje vzroke vidnega onesnaženja, uteleša nasilje in ljudi na poti označuje kot invazivne onesnaževalce, ki si 'zaslužijo' nasilje. Z opiranjem na ksenofobna čustva v civilni družbi in s soustvarjanjem materialne konfiguracije mejnega prostora hrvaške oblasti aktivno sodelujejo pri vzpostavljanju infrastruktur nadzora, onesnaženja, nasilja in smrti. Razumevanje materialne zasnove naravnih obmejnih okolij tako ponuja izhodišče za metodologijo preučevanja sledi nasilja.

Ključne besede: prisilna vračanja, rasizacija, sledi, onesnaževanje, smetenje

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Abstract

Croatia's performance as the gatekeeper of the European Union borders has been characterised by violent pushbacks of people on the move to neighbouring countries. Beyond the denial of asylum requests, the use of excessive physical violence, the systematic destruction of phones, or racialised abuse, Croatian border authorities frequently resort to burning people's belongings in forests, creating collective dumping points, and throwing clothes into rivers. Drawing on ethnographic research and the Border Violence Monitoring Network's archive of pushback testimonies, this research centres on discarded and destroyed belongings at the Croatian-Bosnian border. This article inquires into the racialisation of people on the move through traces and explores how 'trashing' speaks to violence. Crucially, this argues that the racialised violence that border guards administer is intertwined with the racialisation that people on the move are subjected to in local public spheres. Traces in natural environments, then, become 'trash' in local encounters and online debates. This article contends that Croatian border guards contribute to existing pollution and make use of xenophobic sentiments. 'Trashing' as a pushback technique is productive beyond contributing to the erasure of individual identities and the epistemic violence of borders. It conflates the causes of ostensible pollution, exemplifies violence, and racialises people on the move as invasive polluters deserving of violence. By drawing on xenophobic sentiments in civil society and adding to the material configuration of the border space, Croatian authorities are active participants in the creation of infrastructures of capture, pollution, violence, and death. Taking seriously the material configuration of natural border environments accordingly provides an inroad to a methodology of traces of violence.

Keywords: pushbacks, racialisation, traces, pollution, trashing

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They started hitting them with an iron stick, about two or more times per person, then the officers ordered them to get on their knees and started slapping them. They told them: 'Never come back to Croatia'. The respondent reported that authorities took off all their clothes except their underwear, they burnt all their clothes, their mobile phones, their money and everything else they had. Then the police threw them into the river, beating and kicking them. (BVMN, 16/10/23)¹

We find ourselves on the Croatian side of the border between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Surveillance towers and border crossing points mark the borderline along Karlovac and Cetingrad, extending down to Gornji Brgat. This border is heavily surveilled. After all, Europe is 'protected' right here, at the geographical fringes of the European Union.

We are in a rented Fiat 500—an unsuspecting car might allow us to do our research unnoticed. That plan does not work. Thirty seconds after driving onto a road parallel to the borderline, we are stopped by border authorities in a Ford pickup. The Croatian police collect our information and ask a few questions.

In the afternoon, we turn into the parking lot of a supermarket to get coffee and water. An empty police transporter is parked a few spots away, with fenced windows and benches in the back. We know these are pushback vans. But it seems to be a calm shift; the officer spends some time in the supermarket and calmly drives off. He will keep patrolling. We get back into the car, newly alert. I don't really need the coffee anymore. As we drive, we pass tower after tower.

At 10 pm, we make our way to a restaurant for a last bite. Our outdoor table is placed right by a roundabout on the main street that runs through Korenica. Almost every minute, different sizes of police cars enter and shoot off in all directions for the entirety of our dinner. Like an automated control hub, it steers every patrol toward a new crime scene. As if someone were continuously reloading and firing. This roundabout feels like a slingshot.

This here is the border of the EU. It is palpable; even as a visitor, you can feel it. Surveillance towers and police presence tell you so.

The next morning, we cross the Croatian land border and enter Bosnia. None of the above awaits us here. But driving along the Una River, you can still tell that this is a border. Emergency flood barriers, funded by the EU, have been raised in the last two years along Croatian river towns. There is no such protection on

1 References following the format 'BVMN, 00/00/00' refer to the dates of individual pushback testimonies assembled by the Border Violence Monitoring Network, with the filters 'Pushback from' and 'Pushback to' set to 'Croatia' and 'Bosnia' respectively. These are not included as individually in the literature list; the map of testimonies can be accessed via <https://borderviolence.eu/testimonies> (22 October 2025).

the Bosnian side; instead, the riverbanks appear wrecked from overflowing water, and unrooted trees hover above the stream. In the mountains, we often see a significant amount of trash on either side of most roads.

We continue driving and visit known pushback locations on the Bosnian side. In a remote area by a river, we park the car and walk. We find massive piles of belongings left behind; suitcases, water bottles, food wrappers, and smashed phones. Our contact says this is where the Croatian police enter Bosnia and force people to leave their possessions. They say these piles are smaller than they were a few weeks ago. Most likely, this space was cleaned and forcibly trashed again. Is 'trashed' the right word?

Looking around, you can again feel that this is the border. Reminders are left for those passing by.

At the border to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Croatian police randomly set fire to the belongings of people on the move (PoM), establish dedicated burn sites not far away from roads and walking paths, dump belongings in forests, or throw possessions into rivers (BVMN, 2019b: 10-1; BVMN, 28/03/23; 16/10/23; 21/01/24; No Name Kitchen 2024). This takes place during pushbacks, generally referring to border authorities refusing to assess asylum applications and transporting people back across borders outside of readmission frameworks (Augustová and Sapoch, 2020: 229). Among the different forms of violence that are administered during pushbacks, the destruction of personal belongings of PoM plays into the obliteration of evidence of rights violations by the state (Brot für die Welt, 2024). Crucially, it contributes to the epistemic erasure of individual identities and border crossings—it renders invisible and conceals the daily encounters between border authorities and PoM at European Union (EU) borders (No Name Kitchen, 2024: 37). While there have been occasional public admissions of violence at borders by the Croatian government and spokespersons, its practice is generally denied (Davies et al., 2022; SRF, 2019: 01:10). The burning of belongings, however, does not only erase but simultaneously makes violent pushbacks visible. Not only can the smoke of fires rise above tree lines and be smelled, but it also requires containment and extinguishment, leaving behind burn marks and ashes. Similarly, belongings discarded at collective pushback locations and clothes in rivers bring a localised visibility to the violence of borders and pollute natural environments. Ashes and residues visibly mark the forest; soaked belongings submerge and emerge as they travel through rivers. Whether strategic or accidental, border guards leave behind traces for locals, journalists, or activists to discover.

This research picks up on the generative power of traces and how belongings left behind, destroyed, or discarded in nature speak to violence at the Croatian-

-Bosnian border. It departs from the idea that labelling things as ‘trash’ oversimplifies the reality of border crossings (De Léon, 2013: 327). Research on belongings-left-behind during border crossings in the Sonoran Desert and the Mediterranean (Jungfleisch, 2025; Quintanilla, 2020; Squire, 2014) highlight how the racialisation of PoM—staging them as less human, dirty, or deserving of suffering, takes place when people interact with discarded belongings, for instance in legal debates on what constitutes ‘trash’ or ‘humanitarian aid’. In the Croatian-Bosnian context, similar dynamics have been identified over recent years. In local and digital discourse, PoM travelling through forests or bathing at rivers are presented as polluters and disruptive to local relationships with nature (Czerny et al., 2023; Leutloff-Grandits, 2022; Hameršak and Pleše, 2021; Hromadžić, 2020). Here, PoM are staged as ‘dirty’ and ‘foreign’ bodies, to which ‘trash’ in nature seems a fitting contribution. Asking about belongings-left-behind is, however, more nuanced than this suggests. At EU borders, this involves the question of violence. When a local hiker or an activist stumbles across PoM’s belongings at the Croatian-Bosnian border, are they encountering evidence of a border crossing or of violence? Or is it simply ‘trash’? At what point does something become ‘trash’, how, and to whom?

In a nutshell, this research aims to address the racialisation of PoM through traces left in nature, and how ‘trashing’ by Croatian border guards speaks to violence. Contrary to border violence investigations that seek to ‘uncover’ the crimes of border police or hidden logics of EU borders, this takes seriously a certain visibility of pushbacks. It sets out to understand ‘trashing’ as a form of racialised pushback practice and explores this within the material configuration of the Croatian-Bosnian border spaces. I argue that by taking, destroying, and discarding the belongings of PoM in forests and rivers, Croatian border guards leave traces of violence that become ‘trash’ in local encounters. These contribute to existing pollution, conflate different causes and either deny or exemplify the violent context, and racialise PoM as invasive bodies that deserve violence. I further argue that this illustrates traces as a productive methodological access, and the importance of this incision in research to problematise customary violent practices at EU borders. In a humanitarian space that is criminalised and shrinking, access to the field is curtailed and interactions are precarious (BVMN, 2024a; 2024c).² Traces as a creative methodological entry point pushes back by developing the meaning of different forms and structures of violence against PoM that tend to stay ‘below the radar’ (Augustová, 2023; Benghellab et al., 2025; Solf, 2024; Squire, 2014).

2 Reports on the criminalisation of movement and the work of journalists and activists by governments, courts, and media across national contexts can be accessed via borderviolence.eu (24 October 2025).

Researching traces of border violence and pushbacks

This research draws on the Border Violence Monitoring Network's (BVMN) digital archive of border violence testimonies, which assembles written individual and group accounts of pushbacks at EU borders. These are collected in interviews by member organisations of the network since 2017 and detail the number of officers involved, gear used and uniforms worn, type of violence, as well as estimated locations, sometimes including photographs (Augustová and Sapoch, 2020: 220-223; BVMN, 2025d). This research focuses on testimonies of pushbacks at the Croatian-Bosnian border from 2023 to 2025, utilising the BVMN archive more broadly. Alongside the mapping of the locations provided in pushback testimonies that reference the burning of belongings or discarding them into rivers, this encompasses an analysis of how different forms of violence, such as injuries from nature, theft and destruction of belongings, or verbal abuse, intersect (Solf, 2024).

Moreover, this research also draws on ethnographic fieldwork along both sides of BiH's northern and western border with Croatia, from Korenica to Jasenovac and Bihać to Buzim in May 2025. The field impressions detailed at the beginning of this article stem from this project work within BVMN and encompass border assessments and interviews with representatives from civil society organisations. This provided both mediated and unmediated impressions of the material configuration of the border, pollution, and violent trends. Following (and adding to) the mapping of pushback locations in the BVMN archive, field visits deliberately explored known pushback locations, especially on the Bosnian side. Analysis of these materials focuses on widening the conception of racialisation and violence as confined to individual interactions and takes stock of how they can unfold beyond a momentary encounter. Beyond field work and PoM testimonies, this research avenue centrally concerns the perspectives of that very border space. To access how racialisation unfolds, and the role pollution plays, this project mobilises regional and local sources. Ethnographic work on abandoned border spaces, local attitudes toward migration, research on discursive practices, activist reporting on violent trends, as well as journalist reporting on pollution, provide the primary input and guiding thread to explore the role that 'trash' plays in the context of pushbacks.

Grounding research about violent, discriminatory, and abandoned border spaces in local perspectives forms an indispensable part of this research and clarifies the position this work occupies. While I do use testimonies and therefore mediations of perspectives of PoM, this research is not an attempt to lend a voice to 'the lived experience of migration' (Genova, 2023; Picozza, 2020: 39). Rather, I use these testimonies as an ethico-ontological starting point and touchstone to

draw together violent and discriminatory practices and sentiments at the Croatian–Bosnian border. More broadly, this research began as an academic study in 2023 and continued in the BVMN Research & Investigations Team, in which the researcher has been an active member since 2024.³ The advantages of researching border violence at EU borders, with an EU passport, with the backing of BVMN, are numerous, and stand in stark contrast to the daily life at this border for both PoM and some locals. This research does not argue against the presence and role of the ethical concerns and specifically colonial dynamics involved in searching migration at EU borders (Genova, 2023; Picozza, 2020). Instead, it attempts to recognise them and write against, through, and with them. The impressions from fieldwork, illustrated at the start of the article, are importantly just that. They are the personal impressions of a visiting researcher, encapsulating how this subjective engagement informs and structures the colour palette of the picture this article paints. Most importantly, taking the position of activist-researcher puts the political dimension of knowledge production front and centre: Engaging in solidarity, activism, and research is not neutral but is decidedly positioned against state-led narratives on migration and the daily violence of EU borders from a position of privilege (Augustová, 2023: 5-8; Benghellab et al., 2025; Davies et al., 2022: 171; Hameršak, 2021: 57).

Along these lines, this interdisciplinary research attempts to write out of, with, and into BVMN testimonies by weaving them together with local narratives and data in thematic exploration. Against onto-epistemological fixities and hierarchies between theory, empirics, desk, or field research, it follows a diffractive ethos to explore the racialisation of PoM through traces (Barad, 2007; Fisher, 2018; Squire, 2014). This means to focus on the interplay of (non)human actors and elements as we look at how racialisation takes place through dehumanisation and apprehensions during pushbacks and in public, and how traces of violence and crossing imprint on the landscape and become trash. Asking about traces seeks to enable ever-more comprehensive critiques of violence at EU borders.

3 The Research Master's thesis this research builds on is linked in the literature list (Solf, 2024). A condensed version of this new article can also be found in the 'media' section of borderviolence.eu (24 October 2025).

Sketching how traces become trash

To set the scene for the racialisation and violence in the encounter with traces, the following section introduces Croatian pushbacks at the border to BiH. This illustrates that the violence that is administered to PoM in the form of beatings, destruction of belongings, or verbal abuse is racialised. The racialised violence of pushbacks, however, is not confined to remote places of violence at the border. This discussion problematises how public racialisation by police contributes to hostile perceptions and how xenophobic, local discourse stages PoM as subjects deserving of violence. I assert that the racialisation in local discourse or through public apprehensions is very much intertwined with the racialised violence people are subjected to during pushbacks. This includes the regional and public things, activities, and places that become associated with racialised PoM turning into infrastructures of capture and violence.

Having cleared this ground, the article moves on to discuss traces of violence, specifically the destruction of belongings of PoM in forests and rivers at the border. Alongside already-existing, regional problems with pollution and xenophobic sentiments that present PoM as invasive and dirty bodies, I illustrate how belongings-left-behind or destroyed become 'trash'. Different causes for things to be left in nature—for instance, violent border guards versus people leaving to escape them, are disregarded and conflated with unrelated pollution in local encounters I argue that leaving burn piles, creating dumping locations, and throwing clothes into rivers evokes and reinforces racialised perspectives on PoM by both denying and exemplifying violent context and staging them as invasive polluters deserving of violence. Further, I contend that when border guards actively contribute to pollution in the area, forests and rivers become infrastructures of racialised pollution, violence, and death.

Continuity and consistency:

Racialised violence in and away from the public eye

Testimonies collected by member organisations of the BVMN have documented rights violations at EU borders since 2017 in individual and group accounts as well as monthly reports (Davies et al., 2022: 176). In BVMN's archive, roughly 70% of pushback testimonies involve Croatia, 53% of which denote illegal removals to BiH. Pushbacks violate a variety of legal provisions, such as Art. 13 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, or Art. 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights. This ranges from the obligation to perform individual

assessments of an asylum request to the prohibition of collective expulsion, torture or inhumane treatment, to the rights of an applicant to obtain information on asylum procedures (Augustová and Sapoch, 2020: 229). While most people are apprehended deep into Croatia, 90% of Croatian pushbacks take place along the ‘green border’—a term commonly used to refer to forests, mountain, and other natural terrains between official border crossing points, mainly near the Bosnian towns and cities of Velika Kladuša, Sturlić, and Bihać (Augustová and Sapoch, 2020: 227; BVMN, 2023b: 4). Here, authorities use the remoteness of forests and mountains or carve roads for surveillance and pushback away from the public eye. During violent pushbacks, PoM experience racialised and dehumanising violence on the individual level.

Beyond the denial of asylum requests or expressed intentions to do so, border police apply physical violence, racialised and sexualised abuse, force people to undress, unleash dogs to attack, use electroshock weapons, detain PoM at unofficial locations or at police stations, deprive people of food, drink, or sanitary facilities, manipulate temperatures inside border police transporters, drive violently, and push people down slopes and into rivers (ibid.: 220-2; Asylum Information Database, 2024; BVMN, 2022: 3-4). Most prominently, the theft and destruction of phones eliminates the possibility for people to record evidence, navigate, or prove claims of their journeys (Brot für die Welt, 2024). ID cards, passports, medication or medical documents, as well as bags and clothes, are consistently taken, which deprives PoM of resources necessary for survival (Augustová and Sapoch, 2020: 224; BVMN 2024b: 14). BVMN testimonies further capture how ‘authorities treated us worse than how you would treat animals’ (BVMN, 28/03/23) and force PoM ‘to kneel how dogs sit’ (BVMN, 02/01/23). PoM repeatedly detail experiencing racial abuse and treatment at the hands of border guards (BVMN 08/11/21; 16/07/22; 13/11/23; 30/04/25). Often, this includes specifically Islamophobic language and abuse (BVMN 21/10/18; 13/05/19). The daily social, political, and material dimensions of racialised Croatian pushbacks have been investigated and captured in ethnographic research by Augustová (2023: 42-47). Unsurprisingly, this has not reduced in frequency nor in scope (BVMN, 2025a: 11-15; 2025b: 14; 2025c: 21-22).

The general context of pushbacks follows a process of racialisation. At the Croatian-Bosnian border, this is strongly intertwined with the violence and conflicts of the last decades. Croatian discourse on migration became securitised as soon as the humanitarian corridor was put in place, developing the racialisation of PoM and their presence as an invasive threat in conjunction (Župarić-Ilić and Valenta, 2019: 131). The closure of the corridor relied on racializing practices that sorted people in transit by (perceived) nationality and fuelled racialised sentiments within the society at large (Beznec and Kurnik, 2020: 36, 40).

Vuković (2018: 174-6, 181) illustrates how statements and discussions on Facebook, sometimes involving Red Cross volunteers and Croatian politicians, open a window into the mobilisation of regional memory of wars to stage a need for national defence against PoM. In Zagreb, the work of solidarity initiatives to provide basic aid in public spaces became the subject of local narratives that depicted recipients as ‘undeserving’ or ‘lesser than human’. Importantly, the discursive racialisation of PoM and solidarity work does not take place in complete isolation from the racialisation of PoM during pushbacks. Instead, the racialisation that takes place during pushbacks feeds on and mobilises racialisation in local, public perception. In 2022 alone, the Croatian Ministry of the Interior referenced 12,701 apprehensions of PoM in border spaces and another 34,492 across Croatian territory (Asylum Information Database, 2022: 25). The latter happen anywhere in public space: people are frequently picked out in the street, in cafés (BVMN, 13/02/23), in restaurants (BVMN, 31/01/23; 27/11/23), at bus stops (BVMN, 01/09/24), on trains (BVMN, 01/03/24), or at gas stations:

At 7am, the respondent reports that he went to a café nearby to buy hot coffee and cigarettes. Inside the café, he saw 5 people: he describes them as wearing dark blue uniforms with a large ‘policija’ sign on the back, and identifies them as Croatian police officer [...] They all looked at him and then followed him out of the café. The respondent recalls that the female officer stopped him and asked him to identify himself and to show his passport. He replied that he did not have his passport with him, so the officer then asked him to enter a vehicle that he describes as a large black van with fences on its windows. In the van, there were already 4 people, visibly very injured and in pain. They had to wait for a while in the van, and then it drove off. (BVMN, 13/02/23)

Violence in public places, such as people getting dragged out of public transportation (BVMN, 01/03/24), is clearly meant to police movement by racialising PoM. Here, physical appearance is tied to assumed legal status in a public demonstration of the ‘deserving’ subjects of state intervention (Haraway, 1997: 294-295). This policing started as soon as the so-called humanitarian corridor along the Balkan route was closed in March 2016 (Zocchi, 2021: 32). In BiH, Ključ’s police began stopping buses before their arrival to Bihać and ordering people to get off the bus. In 2017, administrative checkpoints were set up across the country and between its federal subdivisions (Ahmetašević and Mlinarević, 2019: 31; Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020: 77). Kicking people off buses was less of a question of making life significantly more difficult for PoM, but to signal illegal-

ity in local publics. Adding to this, Croatian right-wing groups created an online debate about PoM hiking through forests as direct threats to people's homes and safety:

I have met animals in the forest a million times, and never had any problems, but it is better not to have anything to do with these ones [...] I would rather meet a bear in the forest than a group of migrants. (Czerny et al., 2023: 213)

Such perceptions of PoM passing through forests, likening them to animals, echo in border regions such as Gorski Kotar and beyond (ibid.: 213-4; Ružić and D'Alessio, 2024: 82-85, 90). How the presence of invasive foreign bodies could justly be met with violence was notably captured in the statement of then-Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović in 2019:

Illegal pushbacks? Why do you think they are illegal? We are talking about illegal migration, people trying to cross into Croatia illegally and the police pushing them back into Bosnia-Herzegovina [...] Of course when you are pushing people back, there is a little bit of force. (SRF, 2019: 01:10)⁴

Both the moment of intervention as well as the surrounding discourse communicate an illegality of PoM that not only warrants intervention by the state, but one from which violence is inextricable. The processes of racialisation that occur during and around pushbacks are thus multiple. Public apprehensions directly communicate the racialisation of PoM to the people witnessing and inform local (online) discourse. Importantly, this racialisation extends to space; it extends to how infrastructures, things, and activities PoM engage with are understood. In the matter of a few years, sometimes months, public and private sites began carrying different meanings for the daily life of locals and people passing through. While in the early days, forest huts offered places of rest for PoM, citizen alerts and the strategic use of such huts by border guards have risen in frequency (BVMN, 05/04/23; Hameršak and Pleše, 2021: 212). Importantly, huts in the forest, bus stops, gas stations, or public infrastructures and spaces do not 'possess' essential properties (Aradau, 2010: 492) that denote them as neu-

4 In March 2025, Božniovčić, Croatia's serving prime minister, welcomed that 'returning illegal migrants is no longer a taboo topic [in the EU]' (Hina, 2025).

tral places of transport or rest. Instead, policing public spaces and civil society serves to enact a binary, one in which there are decidedly mobile and immobile bodies. The point here is to take seriously the impact of continuous, visible police interventions against groups in public life, while discourse in local (digital) spaces creates xenophobic imagery. Boarding a bus, buying cigarettes, sitting down to have coffee, or owning an undamaged smartphone become parts of public life that are reserved for people of a certain physical appearance. At the same time, the very same evokes a sense of illegality if practised by racialised PoM.⁵ Over time, these infrastructures become generative of that very binary categorisation (Aradau, 2010: 506-7). At all times, this racialisation is strongly intertwined with violence. Gunshots around Bihać in the evening hours, activist work or breaking investigations (BVMN, 2019b: 17-8; Davies et al., 2022; No Name Kitchen, 2024; Tondo, 2018) clarify that pushback violence in remote border spaces is not necessarily all that 'remote'.

In this racialisation of violence against certain groups, I argue that none of these dynamics necessarily precede or succeed each other; rather, they are the elements of a simultaneously developing, racialised understanding of illegality and violence. It is an illegality that can justifiably be met with violence in a public demonstration. In this reading, the racialisation that PoM are subjected to in public is very much intertwined with the racialisation PoM experience during violent pushbacks. It illustrates racialised violence as a continuity. By following the intertwined processes of racialising PoM and violence toward them during pushbacks and within civil society structures, we have therefore set the scene to address racialisation through traces—in this case, trash. In the following, this article dives into the practice of border guards destroying belongings during pushbacks, discusses the racialisation of PoM in nature and situates this within the broader context of pollution of nature in BiH. As belongings-left-behind become trash, they begin to merge behind a racialised veil of justifiable violence.

5 See chapter two 'Imagining the Balkan Route' in Augustová (2023), in particular pp. 28., as well as Helms (2025) pp. 480.

Belongings stolen, sunk, and lit on fire

The Croatian police took everything we had. They took it all, and they threw it in a fire they had made. They threw our clothes - the extra clothes we had in our bags - into the fire. They took our phones. (BVMN, 2025c: 11-12)

Evidence of pushback operations is often scarce. Despite this, pushbacks and border crossings remain visible through the things people leave or are forced to leave behind. A field investigation by No Name Kitchen (2024) from October 2023 until August 2024 compiles evidence on eight spots used by Croatian border police to burn possessions of PoM, including phones, power banks, clothing, and other personal items. Alerted by a tip, the team found hundreds of melted phones, backpacks, shoes, passports, prescription medicine, and folders to hold documents. The burn piles are located in known pushback areas near the Croatian-Bosnian border. No Name Kitchen teams continued to visit these sites, confirming continuous use by Croatian police as well as attempted cover-ups of the traces (ibid.: 6-7, 15). Some of these have been confirmed pushback locations for years (Lighthouse Reports, 2021).

Oddly enough, although these sites are located in forests and are supposedly remote, they are never far from roads that are easily accessible by car and are also close to walking paths. As such, they remain in place to be encountered by locals. Close by in the hilly areas of Bosnia's Northwest, waste dumping along roads is a visible problem. Czerny et al. (2023) investigate Croatian right-wing social media and the derogatory, racialised discussions that surround photographs of food wrappers or clothes left in forests. In these posts, personal belongings become the generative centre of xenophobic narratives: Citizens find 'proof' that people in transit structurally trash local spaces and disrupt the intimate relationship between nature and local populations (Czerny et al., 2023: 214-5; Hromadžić, 2020). Croatian Facebook comments have drawn parallels between the border and Zagreb's main waste disposal site Jakuševac, a rather striking symbolism (Vuković, 2018: 182). The pollution of local environments, led by Croatian border guards during pushbacks, is, however, not confined to Croatian forests:

The group [...] explained that the officers stole their money (more than 50 euros) and took the jackets and shoes they were wearing and all the belongings they kept in their bags and threw them in the water. Afterwards, they recalled having to

wear their wet clothes, as they had no other option. The officers took the food that was in the bags; they threw some apples at them, smashed the rest of the food, and threw it in the water as well. (BVMN, 28/03/23)

Testimonies detailing border guards chucking clothes into rivers (BVMN, 28/03/23; 28/03/23; 14/01/24) and the loss of belongings during river pushes highlight the pollution in BiH. Waste and pollution remain a continuous issue along the Drina and Danube Rivers and their tributaries, a result of the establishment of illegal landfills across the country (Emric, 2024; Trepanić Hebib, 2025). Similarly, ore exploitation and resulting pollution are locally felt problems along the Sana River. Though the visible waste in rivers at the western and northern border with Croatia is less striking to the eye than in other parts of the country, their pollution has been a pressing issue for locals for at least 20 years (Economic Commission for Europe, 2004; Maksimović, 2024). During pushbacks, the practice of throwing belongings into water bodies directly contributes to the pollution of nature in Bosnia. This is less so a question of the exact share that the belongings of PoM present in the overall river waste, but a question of staging PoM as polluters. Xenophobic stories from locals about PoM paint them as carrying scabies, lice, and polluting Bosnian rivers (Helms, 2022: 291; Hromadžić, 2020). As illustrated earlier, Croatian border authorities themselves echo such hostile and racialised local sentiments during pushback operations. Here, belongings-left in nature are not simply traces of crossing and pushbacks. They become trash.

Vicki Squire's (2014) and Quintanilla's (2020) analyses are helpful here: Belongings are not left as trash but need to be discarded, and visibly become trash in local perceptions, as wind, rain, sun, or sand deteriorate the appearance of items. Other than destroying practical items and those of emotional value (No Name Kitchen, 2024: 37-8), setting belongings to fire leaves traces of PoM without much information about the event. For instance, PoM also need to make fires for warmth, yet cannot expose themselves to surveillance technologies (BVMN, 04/01/23), or may have to discard clothes due to changing temperatures, for ease of movement, or to quickly evade apprehension. In an encounter with belongings in the forest or the river, the differences between survival strategy and racialised state violence become blurred. This conflation of causes for why things are left in nature, and why traces exist in the first place, denies the humanity of PoM. Further, they are staged as invasive polluters of natural spaces, as dirty, foreign bodies to an otherwise untouched relationship between locals and the environment. In local encounters with these things and debates that surround them, PoM are racialised in the process of traces becoming trash.

In the same vein as the preceding discussion, the racialisation of PoM does not only refer to their bodies but also to the traces they leave. It encompasses the space generally. Part of the locals' relationship to these rivers, namely Una, Sana, Korana, or Glina, is the fact that these are border infrastructures (Hromadžić, 2020; Šehić, 2011). This can equally be derived from official designation, people (dying while) crossing (BVMN, 2023a: 7), police patrols, gun shots in the evening hours around Bihać (BVMN, 2019b: 17-8), or trash travelling at its surface—the Korana in particular is commonly used to push people into water, back across the border (Asylum Information Database, 2022: 17; BVMN, 11/05/19; 31/10/19; 12/02/22; 09/01/24; 01/03/24). Importantly, this clarifies the link to violence and the contribution of Croatian border guards to the material configuration of natural border environments. Consistent reporting of burning belongings throughout the last years and the multitude of documented burn locations close to walking paths and roads (No Name Kitchen, 2024) points to the creation of 'permanent' marks and traces of pushbacks in Croatian forests (Augustová, 2023: 56-7; BVMN, 20/10/23; 16/10/23; 21/01/24). Croatian border police forcing people to leave their belongings behind in Croatian and Bosnian forests without burning them down, especially during group pushbacks, presents a similar dynamic. In contrast, Croatian forestry management companies are regularly tasked with clearing vegetation in forests or riverbanks for border surveillance (Hameršak and Pleše, 2021: 209-10). In the perception of nature and 'natural borders' such as rivers, I argue that discarding PoM's belongings plays a significant role: a river is not simply polluted by citizens and companies, but also by PoM during border crossings. This speaks to an ambiguous practice of (in)visibilising violence against PoM while racialising their traces: Either, PoM are polluting natural terrain, or their crossings are violently and visibly stopped. Accordingly, leaving traces that become trash provides the justification for the presence of PoM to be met with violence, and the proof that it is. They exemplify violence. Through the belongings-left-behind by border guards, events recorded, and stories told, forests and rivers become infrastructures of pollution, violence, and death.

Relying on traces

This article has focused on the role of traces in the form of belongings-left-behind and destroyed in Croatian-Bosnian border environments. Picking up on Croatian border guards establishing burn sites for the belongings of PoM, collective dumping sites, and throwing belongings into the river during violent

pushbacks, this departed from the proposition that labelling things as trash is an oversimplification. Instead, this article contends that traces speak to meaning-making processes. Accordingly, we have problematised the racialisation of PoM through traces, and how trashing speaks to violence.

Through the analysis of BVMN testimonies and regional research on the reception of PoM in Croatia and BiH over the last decade, this has illustrated how PoM are racialised during pushbacks and in the local public. Crucially, I have argued that the racialisation people experience during violent encounters with the police is a continuity of the racialisation they are exposed to in civil society. Here, apprehensions in public and the mobilisation of xenophobic sentiments stage PoM as racialised subjects deserving of intervention and violence. Furthermore, the places, things, and activities that PoM use daily become infrastructures of capture and violence. When we look at belongings left in nature in the following, we can see the multidimensional racialisation of PoM through traces, and how trash speaks to violence. Pollution in the hills, forests, and rivers in BiH presents an already-existing problem. When border guards leave traces of their violence through the belongings of PoM, they invite the conflation of varying reasons for belongings staying behind in nature with general pollution. In local encounters with these items, PoM are staged as invasive, dirty polluters of Croatian forests through xenophobic narratives. By creating burn piles, collective dumping points, and throwing belongings into rivers, border guards take part in constructing PoM as polluters. In this process, I argue that this does not merely erase the context of violence or the individual identities of people. Instead, this is tied to violence in these environments. The trashing by Croatian border guards exemplifies violence; as racialised trash, it further legitimises it. Here, natural environments become infrastructures of pollution, violence, and death.

Implicit in this agenda is the conceptual work involved in going after traces. This research has illustrated how traces left in nature can be accessed to problematise EU borders. Ultimately, this research stages traces as methodological entry points that bear the potential to investigate the racialisation and violence PoM are subjected to. Crucially, this illustrates how violence extends beyond the moment when a border guard injures and violates the rights of a PoM. It is an essential point to note the role of racialising continuities between the encounters of PoM with border guards in remote spaces, their movement in civil society, and their relation to EU geopolitics. Brito (2023), for instance, argues that the destruction of PoM's belongings constitutes the colonial continuity of dispossession. In this light, trashing is a racializing pushback technique in the context of continuously violent EU borders. Here, it is imperative to clarify that this article does not identify specific actors or parts of Croatian and Bosnian civil

society as causally responsible for the violence PoM experience at the hands of the border police. Rather, the point of this narrative is to disengage the idea that the racialised violence of EU borders takes place in an exceptional or isolated social realm. Border violence plays into and draws from local, regional, and geopolitical social fabrics—such as pollution or frustration with the lack of resources afforded to a specific region by central governments (Leutloff-Grandits, 2022; Ružić and D’Alessio, 2024: 81–86). Economically weak and disregarded by their central governments, border police structurally trash forests and rivers: trash, trash, trash with a figure to blame.

Pushbacks, too, are part of everyday life at the external borders of the EU. Accordingly, purposeful pollution of local environments and through burn piles in forests transform these spaces alongside the construction of border crossing points, surveillance towers, or intensifying police patrols in nearby towns when night sets in. Along these lines, orders within the Croatian police to push people back and ‘leave no trace’ do not equal the absence of traces (BVMN, 2019a). Setting items on fire, throwing clothes into rivers, and creating piles of forcibly left belongings—trashing, is indicative of governing an EU border by relying on the visibility of pushbacks. Following traces provides an inroad to understand how nature structures border violence and is modified for it, and how it can be approached as a site and archive of violence (Teunissen, 2025). For academia and activism, investigating structural pollution and the creation of burn piles by Croatian border guards illustrates how to mobilise a counterweight to the institutional denial of pushbacks. This is evidence of a systemic, racialised violent practice. This is about recognising that seemingly negligible details of violence matter. They are the lasting imprints of a violent border regime. They are not abstract, nor are they only found in isolated spaces; they are right there for us to see.

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