

Report on the Unlawful Pushbacks from FYROM/Macedonia to Greece on 14 March 2016

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Introduction

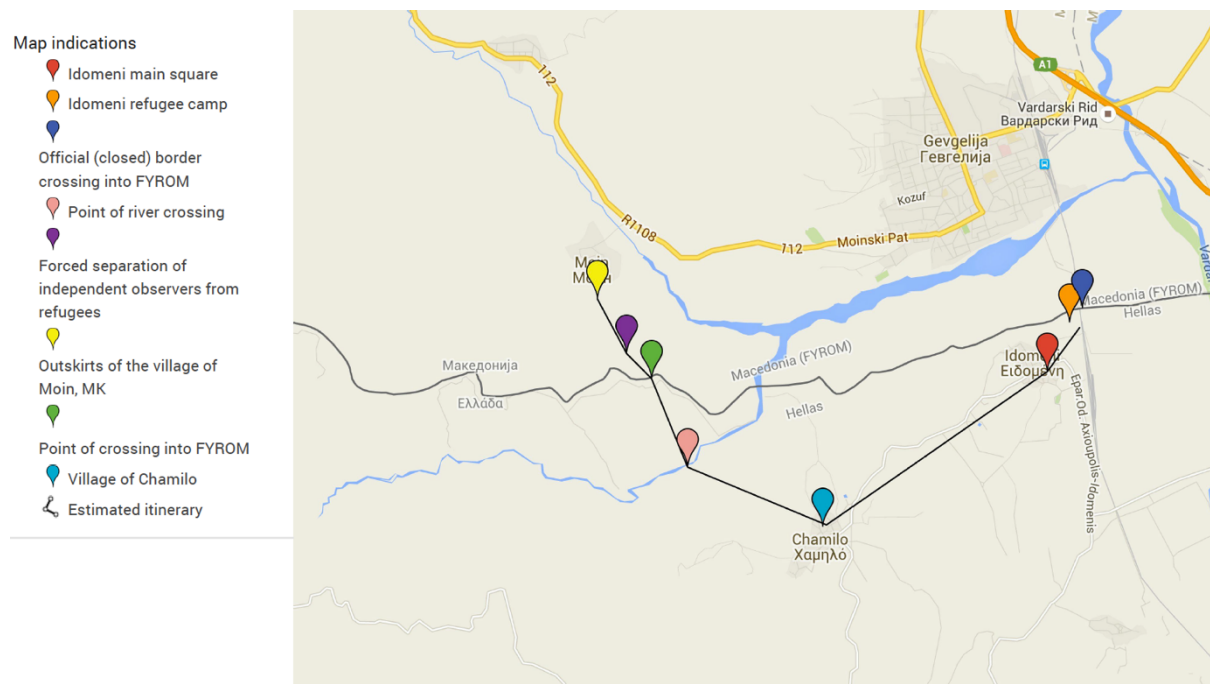
This Moving Europe report describes and analyses the unlawful and violent pushback of around 2000 people from FYROM/Macedonia to Greece which took place on the evening and night of 14 March 2016. This report provides a detailed account of the march which led to the entering of around 2000 people into Macedonian territory and their subsequent collective expulsion to Greece. This report combines the testimonies published in the aftermath of the march on the Moving Europe Idomeni Live Ticker and the observations of the Moving Europe team during the march. It further clarifies the erroneous journalistic reports which followed the events, notably, the allegation that three people died during the march. The aim of this report is to denounce the violence and illegality of these pushbacks, undertaken by the Macedonian authorities. Macedonia, as a signatory of the European Convention on Human Rights is prohibited from collectively expelling non-nationals from its territory, as stipulated in Art 4 Protocol 4.

Description of the events

On Monday 14 March 2016, at around midday several hundred refugees from Idomeni camp, northern Greece, gathered in the square of the village of Idomeni and in a collective movement, started walking westward, towards the village of Chamilo, Greece. Rapidly, several hundred others joined the back end of the procession, amounting the total number of people on the move to about 2000. Amongst the people who took part in the march were several international journalists, aid workers and independent observers. After the village of Chamilo, the procession made its way down a path which led to a river. A human chain formed in order to help the most vulnerable ones to cross the water and a rope was

fastened for that purpose too. The water at the point of crossing was about 70 centimetres deep and the current was relatively strong. After the river, the people made their way up a small hill, towards the visible fence separating Greek territory from Macedonian territory. A path ran along the fence for another couple of kilometres. At some point, the fence ended and the people passed into Macedonian territory. The only sign that a border had been crossed, came at the sight of several Macedonian soldiers, who proceeded to separate all journalists and independent observers from the refugees. This enforced separation was not done by means of identity document checks, but on the basis of racial profiling. The refugees were then split into groups of around 50 people and made to sit on the ground outside, on the outskirts of the village of Moin (Моин). They were forced to wait there for several hours without food or water and were subjected to various humiliations (see testimonies below). Group by group, they were then put into military trucks and brought to different points along the Macedonian border fence. There, the Macedonian soldiers cut holes into the fence and pushed them back into Greek territory without any consideration of individual circumstances. At no point were refugees given the possibility to ask for international protection.

Figure 1: map of estimated itinerary



Testimonies

The Moving Europe team gathered testimonies of people who crossed into Macedonian/FYROM territory after having taken part in the march. Near the village of Moin, Macedonia, independent observers were separated from the refugees by Macedonian military. The statements below describe the events that took place after this separation. These are testimonies from people whom the Moving Europe team marched with and visited on 15 March 2016 in the camp in Idomeni. These individuals were all returned unlawfully from Macedonia/FYROM to Greece, without having been given the possibility to ask for international protection and without an examination of individual circumstances.

Testimony 1

The first testimony is of a family of five; two adults and three children, one of which is a three-months old baby. When they crossed through to Macedonia, the crowd they were in was separated into groups of about 50 people and made to sit on the ground. Guarded by the military, they were made to sit for 10 hours outside. They were not given any food and when they asked for water the military refused their request, even when it was to mix the water with powder for the baby's milk. They witnessed both women and men being beaten by the army. After the long wait, they were brought to a hole in the border fence and pushed through it back to Greece. They could see the hotel close to the official car and truck border crossing in the distance so they started walking towards it because they knew it was close to the camp. The walk back to Idomeni camp lasted 1 hour.

Testimony 2

The second statement comes from an elderly couple, a man and a woman, who both have a heart condition. They crossed the border to Macedonia/FYROM and were stopped by the army. They were kept in the village close to where they were stopped for several hours together with a group of about 100 people. At first, they were outside in the cold, still wet from crossing the river. Then they say they were taken to some kind of shelter, where it was still very cold. Here, police and military were drinking alcohol, laughing a lot and making fun of them. The army would beat whoever spoke up against them in this setting. All the people were then loaded into an old truck and brought to the fence. Here, the couple saw the soldiers cut a hole in the fence. Whilst they were being pushed back to Greece, the soldiers insulted them with animal names such as cow, dog and donkey. They also told them they were "Muslim dogs". The walk back to the camp took them around one hour.

Testimony 3

D, a young man told us that he crossed the river, walked some more and ended up in a village where there was Macedonian military. The military divided him and the others he was with into big groups. There were no NGOs nor the UNHCR present where they were made to wait. Eventually, the military brought them to a car and the car brought them back to the border. From the border D walked back to the camp in Idomeni. When he came back to his friends in the camp, they told him they were beaten up by the police on the Macedonian side and were told never to come back to Macedonia. He was back at the camp

at 6 o'clock in the evening but he said that many kept coming all through the night, until around 2am.

Testimony 4

After having crossed into Macedonia, M was separated from the journalists and the activists he was with. The group he was a part of was made to sit for seven hours on the ground in the village. Whilst they were waiting in the cold, he said the group tried several times to start a fire. At first the military did not allow them to, but in the end they succeeded. "Either they would have killed us or we would have just died of the cold" he declared, "so we managed to make the fire, despite the military not wanting us to". After seven hours waiting outside, M's group was transported in old trucks "like the ones I saw in the films of the second war", to a location in the mountains. M estimated that the drive lasted 30 minutes. Then the army cut a hole in the fence and pushed the people back onto Greek territory. He then had to walk in the dark for about 15 kilometres, a 4 hour walk in total, back to Idomeni camp. He ended his statement by saying "whether we make it to Europe with the relocation program or by another way, I am sure we will find our way to Europe because we are smart. The life of a refugee is very dangerous and adventurous".

Clarifications of the erroneous reports published in the media after the march

As reported correctly by several media outlets such as Balkan Newsbeat and the telegraf.mk on the morning of 14 March 2016, at around 6:45am three people were reported dead at the police station in Gevgelija. They died of drowning, in the Suva Reka river southern Macedonia/FYROM. 23 other people were rescued.

These deaths occurred in the night before the march took place. They were reported in the morning before the march had set off. No individual died during the march on 14 March 2016.

A flyer was allegedly distributed the night before the march, on 13 March 2016, indicating an itinerary to be taken in order to cross into Macedonia. Many of the media reports following the march focused on this flyer. The Moving Europe team saw the flyer when it was published in the press on 14 March 2016. The itinerary indicated on the flyer, which was allegedly distributed in the camp before the march set off, was not the one followed by the Moving Europe team and those with whom they walked.