

The Third Quarterly Report in 2022

(July – August – September 2022)



About Klikaktiv

Klikaktiv – Center for Development of Social Policies is a non-profit civil society organization which provides legal counseling and psychosocial services to people on the move, asylum seekers and refugees in Serbia. The team is present on the external EU borders, namely covering border areas between Serbia and Croatia/Hungary/Romania, but also Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The report covers the main trends in the field concerning people on the move in Serbia, particularly in the northern border area with EU member states (Croatia, Hungary and Romania). There is particular focus on monitoring and documenting violent push backs from the EU member states, as well as presence and participation of foreign police officers and Frontex staff during these practices. The report includes testimonies of refugees who reported increased brutality and humiliation by the border police, including refugee women, children, the elderly who experienced violence at the hands of the Hungarian police and Frontex on the Hungarian border with Serbia.

For more information and regular updates on our work, you can visit Klikaktiv's [webpage](#) and [Facebook page](#).

For any additional information, comments or suggestions, feel free to contact us: info@klikaktiv.org.



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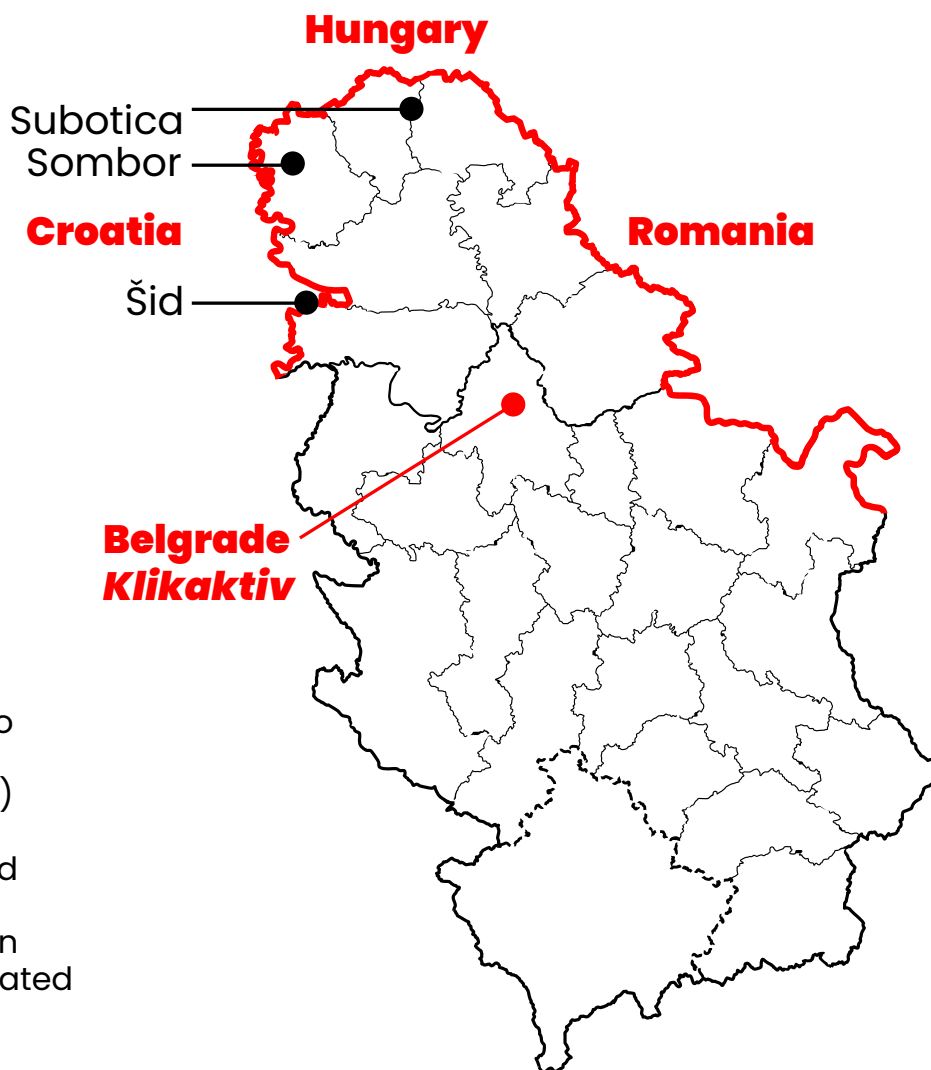


Key Trends in the reporting period

- The trend of **increased number of people on the move on “the Balkan route” and in Serbia** continued. The number of refugees sleeping rough in informal settlements in the border area between Serbia and EU external borders increased, as well as the number of such settlements. During the summer 2022, number of women, toddlers and unaccompanied minors in the border area also increased.
- According to Klikaktiv’s data, the majority of refugees in Serbia come from **Afghanistan and Syria**, with the number of Syrian people rising since the summer 2022. The new arrivals from Syria include families and women traveling alone, as well as a significant proportion of young unaccompanied boys (7-14 years old). Many of them stated the fear of deportation from Turkey to Syria as the reason why they left Turkey and continued their journey.
- Majority of new arrivals enter Serbia through **Bulgaria** (unlike in the previous months when it was mostly through North Macedonia).
- The trend of **violent push backs to Serbia from EU member states** also continued, while the brutality of Hungarian police significantly increased, with **testimonies of physical violence on women, toddlers, teenage girls and the elderly. Some refugees also reported physical violence at the hands of Frontex in Hungary.**



Snapshot of Klikaktiv's work in the third quarter of 2022



Borders covered:
Croatia, Hungary, Romania
(EU external borders)

Klikaktiv has been selected to cooperate with the National Prevention Mechanism (NPM) in the next two years. Within this cooperation, Klikaktiv and NPM's team will visit, monitor and report on the condition in institutions which are designated to persons who have been deprived of their liberty.



Total number of legal and psychosocial services which Klikaktiv provided in the reporting period: 6272

Percentage of women and children (including unaccompanied boys and girls) among Klikaktiv's beneficiaries in the border area: 11% (a significant increase compared to the previous months)

Majority of people on the move came from: Syria 41% (with the share of Syrians increasing each month) and Afghanistan 28%



People on the move who reported they had entered Serbia via the visa-free regime (Burundi, India, Egypt, Tunisia - combined): 15%



Number of field visits: 36



Number of different squats visited: 16

Context: general situation of people on the move, including important events that significantly influenced the migration situation

In the reporting period, the most important and notable trend was a significant increase of the number of people on the move in Serbia in particular and on “the Balkan route” in general.

This was indicated through data from different sources. Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, mandated for management of official accommodation facilities, and UNHCR reported [3 633 persons in the camps in March](#), [4 836 in June](#) and [6 185 in September](#). According to the UNHCR’s latest [report](#) the total capacity of camps in Serbia is 7240. However, these numbers are not evenly distributed among the centers: while the reception centers in the south of the country (Bosilegrad, Sjenica) have just a few persons accommodated in them, the camps in the north (Sombor, Adaševci, Kikinda) are significantly overcrowded with notorious hygienic conditions as a result.

Secondly, the latest [Frontex’s report](#) in the period also indicated that “the Balkan route” is currently the most active one, citing “**the highest number of arrivals since 2016**”. At the same time, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency reported on its response in the Western Balkans by “celebrating “expanding footprint” beyond the EU in [a report](#) on third country cooperation”: via Joint Operation Coordination Points 2021, Frontex has deployed “EU experts” and members of the standing corps at border crossing points outside the EU, including in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia and Ukraine.

These reports on the increase of new arrivals also correspond to what the Klikaktiv team has witnessed providing services in the field: an increase in number of the people on the move in the northern border area of the country in each of the squats we regularly visited, formation of new squats and in increase of vulnerable people sleeping rough (women, children, women traveling alone, unaccompanied minors and the elderly). More details about each of the points can be found in the following text under the section “Overview of squats and the border areas”.

At the same time as we witnessed an increase of people on the move in need of social protection, the humanitarian response and resources in the field are depleting with insufficient support from the government institutions and donors. This happens to a backdrop of rightwing politics with an example of [the president of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić giving a medal to Viktor Orban](#), the president of Hungary notorious for his right wing policies and antimigrant narrative. In the reporting period, the Ombudsman also [reported on a forced deportation of a woman from Sierra Leone from Serbia](#).

Increased violence and brutality of Hungarian police towards people on the move

“The Hungarian police beats everyone, women and children too, they don’t stop to look who they are beating! They kicked me in the head with a baton, I thought I was going to faint from the pain.”

(a 16 year old girl from Tunisia, September 2022)

Hungary remained the most popular option for people on the move who tried to enter the EU from Serbia, as was the case since April, 2022. Hence, the majority of squat locations as well as the most populated squats were located at the border between the two countries. Klikaktiv also identified **two new squats at the border with Hungary** (Odiseja, Bakin salaš).

The trend of increased intensity of Hungarian police violence towards people on the move that was noted in the beginning of 2022 continued and every refugee the Klikaktiv team spoke to in the field described having experienced a push back from Hungary which included **physical violence (including broken limbs and people on the move being torn down from the barbed wire fence leaving several cuts on their hands and arms, or Hungarian police driving into the fence with police cars so that people on the move on top of the fence would fall down from it, using police dogs to bite or frighten refugees, shooting at them with rubber bullets)**, theft or destruction of personal belongings (mobile phones, clothes, shoes, money) and sometimes psychological violence and humiliation, at least once.

“Hungarian police started beating us with police sticks at random. A few of us fell to the ground. One of the policemen came up to me while I was down and stepped on my head and then neck with his boots, and then started beating me with the baton.”

(a 65 year old man from Tunisia, September 2022.)

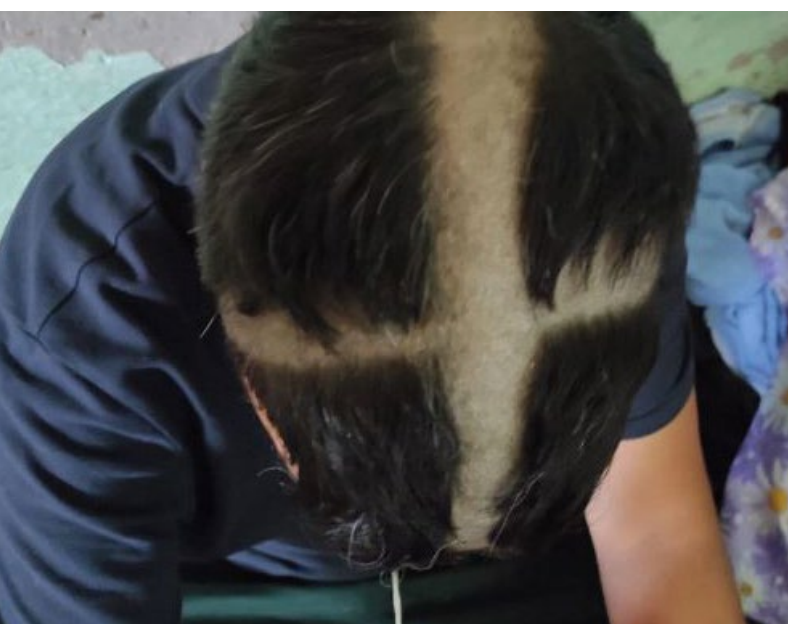
The refugees reported the **Hungarian police also used physical violence on women, children and the elderly**, including beating them with batons and kicking. Such accounts were provided to the Klikaktiv team from several refugees, including a teenage girl, a woman in her sixties, as well as two elderly men from Afghanistan who stated the Hungarian police stripped them naked, beat them with police sticks and then ordered them to walk back to Serbia naked.



Since the summer of 2022, the psychological violence also started increasing and it included, according to the accounts of people on the move: Hungarian police officers humiliating and yelling at them, pouring water or energy drinks found at the refugees' backpacks over their head and other degrading treatment.

Photo 1: A man from Afghanistan with police stick marks on his back (August 2022, Vitaminka, near the border with Hungary)

The violence reached a new level of brutality with a case of a refugee who had his head shaved in the shape of a cross, allegedly by the Hungarian police officers when he was intercepted at the Serbian - Hungarian border. In a backpack of the men who we spoke to, they found a razor machine, and decided to use it. ***"They turned the machine on, held me tightly so I couldn't move and shaved off a cross over my head. Then they started laughing while kicking me on the head. When I was finally let go, I just wanted to shave off all of my hair."*** More detailed account of the case can be found on the Klikaktiv's website [here](#).



Photos 2 and 3: A man from Afghanistan with his head shaven in a shape of cross allegedly by the Hungarian border police officers (September 2022, Vitaminka, near the border with Hungary).



Refugees reported to Klikaktiv that they had met **Austrian and German police officers at the border between Serbia and Hungary**. They stated “the first line” on the border are Hungarian police officers who use brutal physical violence and degrading treatment to deter them. If they manage to avoid the first line, the refugees might come across the Austrian and German police deeper into the Hungarian territory who allegedly do not use violence but if caught they are handed over to the Hungarian police who pushed them back to Serbia.



The push backs from Hungary to Serbia still happen through [the transit center Roszke \(ordered to be closed by the European Court of Justice\)](#) as reported for the first time in April 2022 by refugees pushed back from Hungary. There, they are handed over to the Serbian police who “ignores” them, and does not provide them with any documentation or information on their rights and duties.

In August 2022, Klikaktiv also collected a testimony of a family from Palestine who stated they had suffered **physical violence committed by Frontex officers in Hungary**, near the border with Serbia. They identified Frontex staff by the uniform they recognized on a photo presented to them and by the symbol of the European Union on their sleeves. They stated the men in the group were beaten by the Frontex staff, while the woman and the children were not. After that they were transported to the transit center Roszke and pushed back to Serbia.



“My children (boys of 2 and 4 years old) and I were standing at the side watching as Frontex beat up my husband. In our group there was also my brother and his 9 months pregnant wife. My brother was also beaten by Frontex. After we had been pushed back, the two of them went to a camp in Serbia, to receive medical care.”

(a woman from Palestine, August 2022.)



In the end of September, a group of three men from Syria also reported they had experienced physical violence at the hands of Frontex (identified in a photo by their uniform) when they entered Hungary from Serbia.

Legal counseling and psychological support to people on the move, asylum seekers and refugees

Klikaktiv continued its core program of providing direct assistance to people on the move, specifically individual and group legal counseling, legal representation, psycho-social support and NFI, both in person in the squats located in the border areas in the north of Serbia, and in Belgrade, as well as remotely via SOS phone line.

Klikaktiv has been selected to cooperate with the National Prevention Mechanism (NPM) in the next two years. Within this cooperation, Klikaktiv and NPM's team will visit, monitor and report on the condition in institutions which are designated to persons who have been deprived of their liberty. More information is available [here](#) (in Serbian).

A success in the strategic case of readmission from Hungary to Serbia: In Klikaktiv's previous [report](#) it was reported about the case of B.M., citizen of Tunisia, who was readmitted from Hungary back to Serbia based on the [Readmission Agreement between EU and Serbia](#). After he was readmitted back to Serbia, Serbian Ministry of Interior issued him the Decision on Return, ordering him to leave Serbia which also enabled him to access international protection. Klikaktiv filed an appeal to this decision and in September received the decision of the second instance which adopted the appeal and revoked the first instance decision.

Another boy lost his life in river Drina: In August this year Klikaktiv was contacted by the family members of A.A., 18 years-old boy from Afghanistan, who drowned in the river Drina – a natural border between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Klikaktiv alerted the police station, morgue and cemetery in the area on the Serbian side of the border and learned that the body was not found. At the same time, group of activists from the Bosnian side of the border was alarming the state authorities there and a few days later the body was found on the shore at the Bosnian side of the border and transported to Afghanistan where it was buried.

Over the last years, Klikaktiv constantly follows-up on the cases of people dying in the river Drina as a result of push-backs and inhuman border policies and regimes imposed by states. Some of these cases are documented in the [online database](#) but there are dozens more who have remained undocumented.

Overview of squats and border areas

What? Squats are self-organized informal settlements where people on the move gather for a period of time. They are not official reception or asylum centers. These are usually locations such as: forests, fields, abandoned buildings (houses, factories, farms) or a group of tents in the open. In the reporting period, the Klikaktiv team identified 28 squats, 22 active at the time (including two newly identified squats), with on average 120 people on the move at each location: in some squats there can be from 30 to up to 350 persons. People tend to group themselves along the lines of nationality, both by location (so one can find a squat with just Afghan or Syrian refugees) or within the same squat (such as an abandoned factory near Subotica, in the vicinity of border with Hungary where our team spoke with people on the move from: Morocco, Tunisia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Syria, Iraq, Egypt and others).

Some of the characteristic features of a squat are a lack of safety and privacy, a lack of basic facilities, no running water or electricity, etc. In each of the locations there are persons suspected to be involved in smuggling networks, posing a safety risk for all refugees, especially those from vulnerable groups at risk of gender based violence and trafficking in human beings; and they might impede refugees' access to services offered by NGO and INGO who visit the squat.



Photo 4: An example of a squat in Serbia (Radanovačka šuma, near the border with Hungary).

Where? The Klikaktiv team continued to cover **the border areas between Serbia and EU member states** (Croatia, Hungary and Romania). In the reporting period, Klikaktiv regularly visited 16 of the 22 squats including the most populated ones with 300–350 individuals per location. Majority of people on the move still tried to continue their journey from Serbia through **Hungary**, and this is the border where the majority of squats were located, including the two newly identified in the reporting period. The most common prob-

lems that people on the move in squats referred to remain: **safety risks and violence** (by smugglers and local police officers), **broken limbs** (due to police violence or jumping over the fence at the Serbian – Hungarian border), skin diseases (mostly scabies) and infections due to untreated skin conditions, lack of sanitary facilities and ways to maintain personal hygiene, **no access to health care and no access to safe drinking water**.

Why? Although on the move for a while, the majority of the refugees had no information about asylum and other relevant procedures in EU and in Serbia, their rights and duties, access to services (especially on access to health care, asylum procedure and accommodation). They usually made decisions about their final destination and their journey based on incomplete, invalid or completely false information provided by the diaspora, the smugglers or rumors from other refugees they had heard while on the move. This is why the Klikaktiv team made an effort to reach out and provide legal aid information and answer questions for specific cases, so that the refugees can make informed decisions on their safety and wellbeing.

The Klikaktiv team provided individual and group legal counseling, psycho-social support, NFI (tents, blankets, hygiene items), food and water, and a station for mobile phone charging. We particularly focused on gathering testimonies of people on the move of violent push backs from EU member states and barriers they had encountered to accessing the legal and social protection system in Serbia.



Photos 5 and 6: Klikaktiv's work in the squats (summer 2022, near the border with Hungary).

More detailed description of each of the squats, including the newly identified will follow in the text below.

HUNGARY

Majority of squats near the Serbian – Hungarian border are located in the vicinity of the cities of Subotica and Sombor. Refugees are not present in the city centers and bus/train stations, but tend to hide in squats in suburban areas, due to fear of the police and locals. Antimigrant sentiment and hostile activities towards people on the move and NGOs providing services, by some of the local community members are notably increasing in the area, with some of them denying NGOs access to squats.

Near **Sombor**, Klikaktiv regularly visited one of the largest squats in the border area, who at the time of a visit in September accommodated approximately 400 people on the move, in an abandoned factory facility. Previously, in July 2022, refugees at the squat reported regular police raids at the location during which the Serbian police detained them, used physical violence and destroyed their personal belongings (tents, backpacks, mobile phones etc.). In August the raids ceased, according to the refugees' testimonies. In September however, the increased number of people and tents in several of the factories' buildings was notable, as well as a significant proportion of **young unaccompanied boys from Syria (7-14 years old)**.



Photo 7: A collection of facilities in an abandoned factory Sunce, near the border with Hungary



Photo 8: Tents outside the official reception center in Sombor (near the border with Hungary)

The increase of number of people on the move in the area is also indicated by a significantly higher number of tents in the field in front of the official reception center, as well as by formation of **two new squats near Sombor** which Klikaktiv visited for the first time in August, 2022. Both of the new squats are located in abandoned restaurants, which provided basic shelter from the walls and roof, yet hygienic conditions remain a problem for refugees staying there. There were people on the move from Syria, Morocco, Tunisia, Iraq, and there was a significant proportion of families sleeping rough at the location.

The second issue is lack of medical care as many have broken or injured limbs, injuries they stated had been inflicted on them by Greek or Bulgarian border police officers. Smugglers are present and in control at both of the squats, which indicates exacerbated safety risks for all staying there, especially unaccompanied minors and women.

"I have to work for 3 months for the smugglers, so I can pay off to continue my journey."

(a man from Palestine, in a squat, September 2022.)



Photo 9: A new squat in an abandoned restaurant, near the border with Hungary

Lastly, people at the two locations complained about the treatment they had at the hands of Serbian police which prevented refugees from going to the city center and raided the squats and transferred the people staying there to a nearby reception center in Kikinda. During one of such raids in September 2022, approximately 150 people were transferred to the reception center. The Klikaktiv team spoke to them the day after the raid, when some 30 of them had returned from the center to the squat, due to its overcrowdedness which resulted in unhygienic conditions in the camp, lack of food and space for sleep which left some of them sleeping on the floor. They also stated the local taxi drivers abused their lack of options and charged them 100 euros on average for an hour's drive. Some of the refugees interviewed here stated they had been **pushed back by the Serbian police back to North Macedonia**, with no physical violence committed during the push back.

Our team collected similar accounts of **police raids** in a squat at an abandoned farm near **Horgoš, Subotica** when in August police organized a raid and transferred people on the move to the same reception center in Kikinda. The day after the raid when Klikaktiv visited the squat some 100 of those who had been forcibly transferred had already returned to the squat. They stated the police officers used physical violence, destroyed their tents and cut their electricity out. These raids continued throughout August and September, sometimes in the form as described and sometimes the police would just visit and tell refugees staying there they ought to move. Generally, the practice has made refugees' stay at the squat harder, due to worsening material conditions and increasing fear of the police. Majority of people on the move at this particular squat come from Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

According to refugees' testimonies, the camp they are transferred to by the police during the raids is the reception center in Kikinda, which is a single men only accommodation center. The camp is significantly overcrowded and in September, there was a big tent in front of it in which some 250 – 300 people were accommodated. Due to the overcrowdedness, the hygienic conditions are bad. Refugees also stated the police does not allow them to walk in the Kikinda city center and that local taxi drivers charge high amounts of money to take them from the center back to the squats.



Currently the second populated squat in the north of Serbia, alongside Sunce near Sombor, is Vitaminka, an abandoned factory in an area between Subotica and the Serbian – Hungarian border. The squat consists of several buildings and people in them are grouped based on nationality: Afghanistan, Syria, Morocco, Iraq, Egypt, India. Klikaktiv visited the squat for the first time in April 2022, and since then there has been constant presence of families, as well as single women and women traveling alone with their children. Yet, even though in the period April – June the refugees at the squat reported no presence of Serbian police, in the period July – September the police allegedly started raiding the squat – beating the people staying there and ordering them to leave.

Photo 10: A 2 year old girl in the squat in Vitaminka, near the border with Hungary (July, 2022)

In the reporting period, Klikaktiv met dozens of people on the move at the squat with broken or injured limbs, bruises and cuts acquired during their attempts to cross Serbian – Hungarian border, either by falling from heights or more commonly at the hands of Hungarian border police. These accounts included police violence committed on the refugee women and children too.

Klikaktiv also provided services to a woman and a man from Tunisia, both of whom had their legs broken when they tried to cross the border. They stated they were injured when they fell off the barbed wire fence at the Hungarian border with Serbia. **According to the testimonies Klikaktiv collected, it is common for the Hungarian police to drive their cars into the fence, making people on the fence fall down or jump down, previously having been taken away their ladders. After they fall from the ladder, they endure beatings and other forms of physical violence from the police.**

Both the woman and the man from Tunisia later received urgent medical care in a hospital in Subotica. The man was in need of surgical operation which he was denied given that he was not an asylum seeker at the moment and hence did not have health insurance. He stated he was not provided information on asylum procedure, and according rights and obligations by either of the officials in Serbia he had met.



Photo 11: The woman from Tunisia who had her leg broken on an attempt to enter Hungary (August, 2022).

ROMANIA

The second border the Klikaktiv team covered during its regular field visits is the one between Serbia and Romania, with the largest squat in the area being located in an abandoned milk factory in the village of **Majdan**. In the reporting period, the number of people on the move in the factory and in tents erected around it increased significantly, with a portion of families, women and children staying there too.



Photos 12 and 13: the squat in the abandoned milk factory in Majdan, near the border with Romania (September 2022).

Majority of people on the move in the area stated they preferred to continue their journey via Hungary instead and had either failed to do so or will try to enter the country as soon as they reached Romania (and will not go deeper into the Romanian territory). Almost all of refugees the Klikaktiv team spoke to had experienced push backs which involved physical violence at the hand of the Romanian police, as well as taking away their money, mobile phones and other personal belongings (including shoes, as stated by a man from Egypt who said he was made t walk back to Serbia barefoot). Yet, those who had tried to enter Hungary before and were now trying to continue their journey via Romania as well, stated that the “Romanian police is less violent than the Hungarian one” even though they also use physical violence. Women and children interviewed stated they were exempt from the violence, which is not the case at the Hungarian border with Serbia.

Refugees staying in Majdan are quite isolated from the local community and in the reporting period they did not disclose any incidents with the locals or Serbian police (who regularly monitor the squat but do not engage with the people staying there). In September, a local initiative had some basic facilities put up in the squat: 2 garbage containers, 2 solar panels (which were not working at the time of Klikaktiv’s visit) and an improvised water tap. This was reported in the media as a local intervention to prevent refugees from going to the village for the facilities.



Photo 14: One of the “facilities” installed at the squat in order to deter the refugees from going to the nearby village.

CROATIA

The border between Serbia and Croatia was the least popular one in the reporting period, but the two squats in the area: **Batrovci and Kuzmin**, had also seen an increase in number of people on the move, particularly unaccompanied boys from Afghanistan. Majority of them stated they had been in Serbia shorter than 20 days and that the fluctuation of people in the squat is high. Unlike those trying to enter Hungary and Romania on foot, majority of the people on the move try to enter Croatia hidden in trucks, and that they are most commonly caught by the police on the scanners at the official border crossings. The refugees Klikaktiv spoke to stated that the Croatian and Serbian police were not violent during the push backs, nor did they take away their money and personal belongings.

People on the move in these squats had not been in an official reception center in Serbia before, and hence remain invisible to the official statistics. They stated the reason why they chose to sleep rough is that the nearby camp is overcrowded, with insufficient food and some sleeping on the floor, while they were reluctant to go to a remote reception center in the south of Serbia, hoping to cross the border as soon as possible.



Photo 15: The squat in Kuzmin, near the border with Croatia (September, 2022)

BELGRADE

In the reporting period, the Klikaktiv team increased the number of field visits in the capital as well, as we have seen an increase in the number of new arrivals staying around the main bus station. Majority of the new arrivals came from Afghanistan and stated they had entered Serbia via Bulgaria. They complained about the ill treatment they had been subjected to at the hands of the Bulgarian police on the border between Bulgaria and Turkey: beatings, theft and humiliation. They also said they had decided to continue their journey as Turkey had started deporting them to Afghanistan. When they crossed the Serbian – Bulgarian border, they had not seen either Serbian police nor Frontex, yet they had heard experiences of other refugees who were detained by Serbian police in the area.



Photo 16: Refugees at a park in downtown Belgrade (September, 2022).

In the end of September, the Klikaktiv team spoke to a group of four men from Morocco who stated they had been **pushed back to Bulgaria by the Serbian police** on the green border near the city of Pirot: the police did not issue them with any documentation or provided information on asylum procedure, but allegedly had beat them, took away their personal belongings (3 mobile phones and 350 euros) and made them walk back to Bulgaria. They manage to enter Serbia on another try. At the moment of the interview, they had been sleeping rough on the bus station in Belgrade for 5 days and were in poor physical and mental state. They were planning to go to the north of the country and continue their journey to France.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Klikaktiv calls for joint efforts of the humanitarian community and political actors to bring accountability of the Hungarian border police violent push back practice, including an investigation of involvement of the Frontex officers in the practice.

Secondly, we call on Serbia's Ministry of Interior to cease indiscriminate police raids of people on the move, and instead coordinate with SCRM, Ministry of Social Welfare and relevant local and international humanitarian organizations in order to continue pursuit of organized criminal groups of smugglers without violating human rights of other people on the move.

Lastly, as the colder months approach, it is safe to assume that the needs of people on the move sleeping rough in the border area between EU external borders and Serbia will increase and become more complex, which calls for a joint and coordinated humanitarian response of all relevant actors.



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