

A photograph of a person sitting on a metal rail in a field of tall grass and gravel. The person is wearing dark shorts, white socks, and black sneakers. They are holding a blue smartphone in their hands. The ground is covered in gravel and some dry grass. There is some litter, including a cigarette butt, on the ground.

Year of Covid-19 for the people on the
move in Serbia

klikAktiv

center for development of social policies

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1. Introduction

This report is the outcome of the project “Free legal aid and social support for people on the move in Serbia” and although the project itself lasted from July 2020 until December 2020, this report also explains the context and legal background of the whole year 2020, with special focus on the state of emergency and Covid-19 outbreak in Serbia.

Within this project, KlikAktiv’s team has been providing free legal aid and social support to people on the move, asylum seekers and refugees in Belgrade and on the external borders of the European Union. We established regular filed visits since the beginning of July which included visits to squats and other unofficial places where people on the move and asylum seekers are residing in Serbia.

We tried to adapt our work to the needs on the ground. Majority of the people on the move in Serbia do not have legal residency nor do they have access to asylum procedure. They are forced to live in overcrowded camps, very often without basic needs for survival (food, clothes, medical assistance), or they can stay in one of the squats on the Serbian western and northern borders. This was even more visible when Serbian government declared the state of emergency on 15th of March due to the Covid-19 outbreak and ordered complete lock-down of all camps. For the following three months camps were severely overcrowded with very bad conditions within the camps.

During the summer 2020 the situation also got worse at the Serbian exiting borders, with several new squats popping-up and with the establishment of the new route which leads through Romania. For comparison, in 2019 there were 3 active squats while in 2020 the number of squats alongside the border area was more than 12. In city Sid, at the Croatian border, several smaller squats were established after the big squat in the old factory “Grafosrem” was demolished at the end of 2019 by the local police and the local far-right group. City Sombor, at the Hungarian border, became an active transiting city for people on the move. The official refugee camp in Sombor quickly became overcrowded so people were forced to create “camp outside of the camp” - settlement made out of improvised tents and shelters on the field and in the woods just next to the official camp. Also, another squat was made in the train station where people are sleeping in the old trains which are left on the side train tracks. In Subotica, also at the Hungarian border, new squats were also established and the number of people who are residing in the old ones has drastically increased. As mentioned, during summer 2020 the new route on the Balkan refugee route was created – from Serbia to Romania and then through Hungary further to Western Europe. This resulted with many more unofficial squats alongside the Romanian border, especially in villages Majdan and Rabe, at the border triangle of Serbia, Hungary and Romania.

Just for clarification, the term “squat” is used to describe unofficial and self-organized settlements or locations where people on the move are residing. People on the move who are residing in these places don’t have any support from the government in terms of food, clothes, medical assistance or any other support and protection. Squats are usually created in the abandoned buildings on the outskirts of the city, old and empty factories or houses, old train stations or simply in the specific location deep in the forest where people on the move live in tents. Some people spend months in these locations before they manage to cross the EU border and continue their trip towards the safety. Very few (if any) NGOs and support groups visit squats alongside the borders of the EU so people on the move are mostly isolated there and left on their own.

Another relevant novelty when it comes to changes in the Balkan refugee route in 2020 is the creation of the squat at the Bosnian border and push-backs done by the Bosnian police forces. The old train station in Banja Koviljaca, which used to serve as a short-stop squat was turned into the squat where people were spending days or weeks before they managed to cross into Bosnia and Herzegovina (BaH). Before summer 2020 it was relatively easy to cross the border between Serbia and BaH as there were not so many police officers alongside the border and illegal crossings were silently tolerated. However, in summer 2020 BaH police increased the number of police officers alongside the border and they were obviously instructed to follow the policies of other surrounding countries and to illegally push people back to Serbian soil. The problem is that these push-backs were happening across river Drina – natural border between two countries, which resulted in several deaths. People would cross the river in boats but the BaH police officers would seize the boat and force people to swim back to the Serbian shore. KlikAktiv learned of 11 people who have lost their life in the river Drina during these push-backs during summer 2020, but the number of these cases is probably much higher.

Besides the field visits to the western and northern borders, KlikAktiv's team also worked with people on the move and asylum seekers in Belgrade, mostly in the so-called Afghani park¹ but also in its office and other places in accordance with the needs. During the year 2020, the Afghani park became a place where people on the move were easily targeted both by police raids and by attacks of far right groups.

KlikAktiv's work during the field visits was to provide people on the move with basic legal information as well as with the first-aid psychosocial support. During each field visit we reached between 50 and 100 people, depending on the location. In the period between July and December, we have reached more than 5.000 people with legal advising and psychosocial support in total. Besides providing basic legal and social counseling, KlikAktiv's lawyer represented people in different procedures before the public authorities and strategic cases while the social worker assisted people with integration and provided in-depth social counseling. Some of those cases are also represented in this report.

Besides legal and social support, KlikAktiv's team also collected testimonies on the illegal and violent push-backs from the EU countries and Bosnia. Also, we collected several testimonies on the push-backs from the Serbian territory as well during the November. Although the push-backs are common thing on the whole Balkan route the massive number of push-backs from Serbia into Macedonia and Bulgaria are novelty. Analysis of the collected testimonies and parts of the testimonies will be published in the separate report.

Finally, Klikaktiv was committed to fight against the criminalization of solidarity which was on the raise in the reporting period. Not only that the informal far right groups were on the rise but the official government's policies toward the refugees and people supporting them has changed drastically. Cases of the criminalization of solidarity are also covered in this report.

¹ The official name of the Afghani park is Park Luke Colovica and is located in the centre of Belgrade, next to the Faculty of Economics. This was a meeting point for refugees and people on the move since 2015 when many NGOs opened their offices and hubs in this area. That is why people on the move started calling it Afghani park.

2. Position of Serbia on the Balkan refugee route during the year 2020

Serbia is located on the Balkan peninsula as the final non-EU country on the Balkan refugee route with three EU external borders – with Croatia, Hungary and Romania. During the year 2020 all these borders were very active with dozens of crossings on a daily basis.² Besides these three borders another very active border during the summer 2020 was Serbian-Bosnian border, since many refugees were trying to cross into Croatia from the Bosnian territory.

When it comes to the entering points into the Serbian territory, majority of people that Klikaktiv interviewed entered Serbia from the Macedonian territory and in some smaller percent from the Bulgarian territory. The route which leads from Greece, through Albania and then Montenegro or Kosovo also became more active during the late summer of 2020. Significant change during the reported time period is that people on the move have reported the push-backs from the Serbian territory in much higher numbers compared to the previous years. Most of these push-backs were happening at the Serbian-Macedonian border.

According to the collected testimonies, in most cases people were apprehended at the very border where they were stopped from entering into the Serbian territory and seeking protection. In two such cases people on the move reported violence during the push-backs. In one case, two men from Afghanistan reported that their group of 8 people tried to enter Serbia in the mid of July 2020 when they were stopped by the Serbian police at the border with Macedonia. Serbian police first threatened to use the violence and then they released dogs on them. One of the men the Klikaktiv interviewed had visible bruises on his leg which, as he claims, are from the dog bite. Another group of 12 people reported violence by the Serbian police during the push-back which took place in April 2020. Klikaktiv interviewed one of the men from the group in November 2020 when he managed to enter Serbia again. According to his testimony, they tried to enter the Serbian territory while the state of emergency due to Covid19 was imposed in Serbia. They claimed asylum before the Serbian police officers but the police officers told them: “No asylum. Corona. You go back to Macedonia”. They refused to go but then the police officers swing their batons at a couple of people from the group so eventually they all went back to Macedonia. Few hours after the push-back from Serbia to Macedonia they were apprehended by the Macedonian police officers who then pushed them back to Greece. They spent several months in Greece before they managed to successfully enter Serbia again. It is important to emphasize that these two reported cases are the ones where the Serbian police officers used violence but they are not the only cases of push-backs. According to the collected testimonies, dozens of people on the move were denied access to the territory and asylum procedure by the Serbian police officers. In all those cases, Serbian police officers apprehended refugees at the very border line with Macedonia and denied them from entering into the Serbian territory.

When it comes to the situation at the Serbian exiting borders the situation has drastically worsen during the year 2020. The number of squats alongside the Serbian exiting border has significantly increased. Compared with the 2019 when there was only one big squat in Sid (in the abandoned factory of the former company “Grafosrem”) and two others in Subotica and Horgos during the year 2020 there were more than 12 squats³ alongside the Serbian exiting borders that Klikaktiv regularly visited.

² More on the history and development of the Balkan refugee route is written in our previous report.

³ These squats are located in cities Banja Koviljaca (Bosnian border), Sid and 3 nearby villages (Croatian border), Sombor, Subotica and Horgos (Hungarian border), Majdan and Rabe (Romanian border). More on each location is in the following part of the report.

The most significant novelty and change during the year 2020 is the establishment of a new route through Romania. Although this is not the completely new route, as it was used before 2020 as well, but it became massively used as of June 2020. After the state of emergency due to Covid19 was revoked in May and when people on the move were allowed to leave refugee camps, the “rumors” on the new route through Romania emerged. Klikaktiv started monitoring and visiting this location on a regular basis. At the beginning, this route was used only by the people of Arabic origin – mostly Syrian families and the success rate was quite high. At this time, Arabs would enter Serbia and go directly to one of the two villages, Majdan or Rabe, at the Romanian border where they would stay in one of the abandoned houses in the villages. They would manage to enter Romania in one of the first three attempts at most, which means that their stay in Serbia lasted few days or 2-3 weeks the most. However, during the summer Romanian police increased its presence at the border which made crossing into the Romania much harder than before. The number of push-backs has drastically increased and very quickly Romanian police started using same tactics like other border police officers at the EU external borders. People on the move were beaten, robbed and humiliated during the push-backs. This led to shifts in the migration movements. During the September 2020 people from Arabic countries slowly started going to other locations, especially in city Sombor and village Horgos at the Hungarian border. Also, this affected the time they spend in Serbia which very quickly went from few days in June to few months in December. Eventually, in December 2020 the route through Romania was equally used by people from other countries as well, including Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan and other countries.



Another novelty in 2020 are the push-backs by the Bosnian police during the summer which led to several death cases. Bosnia and Herzegovina became very active on the Balkan refugee route since 2016 and the closure of the humanitarian corridor of the “official” Balkan route. People on the move where traveling back and forward from Serbia to Bosnia while trying to cross into the EU

from both of these countries. And although they had to cross Serbian-Bosnian border illegally it was relatively easy for them to cross from one country to another since the police patrols at the border where not as active as they were in 2020. However, during the summer 2020 this has changed and the Bosnian police increased its presence at the border and started pushing people back to Serbian territory. The biggest problem is this was done through the river Drina, which is a natural border line between Bosnia and Serbia. Drina is a mountain river, very fast and dangerous even for the most experience swimmers.

People would cross the Drina river from Serbian side to the Bosnian side in the boat but if they would get caught by the Bosnian police, very often the police would confiscate the boat and force them to swim back to the Serbian shore. KlikAktiv was contacted in two cases when 4 people on the move – two from Afghanistan, one from Pakistan and one from Syria – drowned while they were trying to swim back. In the first case, when one man from Afghanistan and one from Pakistan, lost their lives in Drina it was an accident. They decided on their own to go back to Serbia, but unfortunately the river was too fast and deep so they couldn't manage to reach the shore. In the other case, when one man from Afghanistan and one from Syria lost their lives it was because they were pushed-back and forced to go into the water by the Bosnian police. KlikAktiv alarmed all cities and villages on both sides of the river in the proximity of the place where they were last seen. Bodies of all these men were found at the end and the

families were able to organize funerals in accordance with their wishes. What is troubling is the fact that while we were searching for their bodies, we learned that another 7 bodies of unidentified men were found on the shores of Drina. This is a total of 11 bodies in just few days. Apparently, Drina is becoming a very deadly border but this is not something that is spoken about in the wider public.

The situation hasn't changed much on other EU external border compared to the previous period. Push-backs and police violence were still happening on a daily basis. Similar practice was continued on the Croatian border. Testimonies on the broken hips, legs or arms became common. One of the men KlikAktiv spoke to was severely beaten by the Croatian police on two occasions. First time he was beaten by the batons, after which he was not able to move his leg nor his hip properly. He feared that his leg might be broken but he didn't have access to medical treatment in Serbia, despite the fact that he was accommodated in the camp. Few weeks later, when he tried again to cross the border, he was beaten even harder. Police officers were beating him so hard that he fainted on the spot and his sculp cracked open. His friend had to carry him back to the camp close to Sid.

The only place where the situation has slightly changed is the Hungarian border. After the transit centers at the border between Serbia and Hungary were closed the Hungarian police has decreased the level of violence during the push-backs, at least according to the testimonies that we have collected. The push-backs were still common and a large number of people were pushed-back but they state that the Hungarian police did not use violence nor excessive force. This was



one of the reasons why a large number of people shifted and tried to cross this border and probably why the squat in Sombor became very active in addition to the one in Subotica.

3. People on the move – their profile and numbers

In the period between 1st of July and 31st of December 2020 KlikAktiv conducted regular field visits to the informal squats at the border area, but we also monitored the situation in Belgrade while providing assistance to people on the move in the “Luke Colovica” park also known as “Afghani” park. Outreach field visits were conducted at all “exiting” borders of Serbia – with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary and Romania. There are more than 12 informal squats in the villages/cities close to these borders in which people on the move are residing. Each squat hosts between 30 and 170 people. Outreach work in Belgrade it was mostly done in the so-called Afghani park– a common meeting point for refugees. This park is always full of refugees – both the newcomers, the ones who are staying in two large camps on the outskirts of Belgrade and those who are sleeping rough on the Belgrade's streets and squats.

Majority of people we reached were from Afghanistan, followed by Syria, Iraq, Pakistan and then in significantly smaller numbers from Sudan, Algeria, Morocco, Somalia, Burundi, Turkey and Iran. When it comes to beneficiaries from Afghanistan, majority of them were single men but also with high percentage of unaccompanied minors, some of whom were only 9 years old. People from Afghanistan are usually staying in the squats at the border with Croatia

and Hungary. On the other side, people from Arabic countries are usually just taking the route through Romania so the squats at the Romanian border are mostly settled by the Syrians and Iraqis. But during the autumn 2020 they also inhabitant the squats at the Hungarian border. There is also a significant number of families with children among Arabic population of refugees. When it comes to the squats at the Bosnian border and in Belgrade's park, it is difficult to establish a pattern since these places host people from all countries and of all ages.

It is important to state that majority of the people KlikAktiv reaches are not visible to the Serbian state system nor to the public institutions. They don't have access to asylum procedure nor do they get any other protection from the competent authorities. These people are staying in an informal settlements ("squats") and are exposed to the police brutality, violence by the local groups but also to different types of exploitation by smuggling and criminal groups such as human trafficking, work exploitation and other types of mistreatment.

Also, in December 2020 KlikAktiv's team took up three cases of official asylum seekers - two cases of single men and one case of family with small children, all from Burundi. KlikAktiv's lawyer acts as their legal representative in the asylum procedure while the KlikAktiv's social worker helps them with integration and provides psychosocial counseling. These cases showed us that access to asylum procedure in Serbia is more limited than ever. Asylum Office stopped visiting asylum camps and organizing interviews with people who have expressed their intention to seek asylum. This means that people are forced to submit asylum application in writing, in Serbian language, in a very short timeframe from the moment when they have expressed their intention to seek asylum. Clearly, it is impossible for people on the move to do this without the assistance of a lawyer. All these cases are currently pending in front of the Asylum Office, waiting for an asylum interview to be scheduled. In the meantime, KlikAktiv's social worker assisted in all three cases and helped people with integration and psychosocial counseling. This included organizing language classes which are held by the group of local volunteers, connecting them with another local group which provides free food to people in need as well as with professional psychotherapists who provide free psychotherapy sessions to asylum seekers, and assisting them in other day-to-day struggles.

4. State of emergency due to Covid-19 pandemic and lock down of camps

On 8th of March the Serbian authorities disclosed to the public that the first patient was tested positive for Covid-19 virus. Only few days later, on 15th of March, Serbian President together with the Prime Minister and the Chairperson of the Parliament declared the state of emergency on the whole territory of Serbia⁴.

During the state of emergency, the Serbian government limited the right to free movement to all citizens by introducing the so-called "police curfew". People were not allowed to leave their homes first after 8 PM and then after 5 PM. Later on, the curfew was imposed for the whole weekends also. Non-food shops, restaurants and other non-essential services were closed off during this period.

However, people on the move and refugees in Serbia were hit by the state of emergency much harder than Serbian citizens. Serbian government immediately adopted the decision⁵ to

⁴ Decision on the declaration of the state of emergency ("Official Gazette RS" No. 29/2020)

⁵ Decision on the temporary limitation of movement of asylum seekers and irregular migrants accommodated in centres for asylum and accommodation centres in Republic of Serbia ("Official Gazette RS" No. 32/2020)

completely limit free movement of the people on the move in Serbia. This measure was adopted despite the fact that there were no confirmed cases of Covid19 among refugee population. All camps in Serbia were under the complete lock-down. In practice, none of the refugees were allowed to leave the camp under any circumstances.

Government's decision stated that *"due to the protection against the spread of Covid-19 in the Republic of Serbia as well as uncontrolled movement of persons who might be carriers of Covid-19 virus and in order to prevent them from leaving the centers on their own will, all asylum and accommodation centers are being placed under the enhanced security measures, while the movement of asylum seekers and irregular migrants is being temporary limited. Asylum seekers and irregular migrants, in exceptional cases (visits to a doctor or other justified reasons) will be allowed to leave the center with the special permit issued by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, which shall be timely limited."*

Immediately after this decision was adopted the police patrols evicted all known squats in Belgrade and in the border area and placed people on the move in the camps. Same happened with dozens of people who were accommodated in the hostels in Belgrade and other cities. Hostels were temporarily closed and all people on the move forcibly taken to camps. During the state of emergency there were around 9.000 people on the move accommodated in 19 camps across Serbia which is 3.000⁶ more than the total accommodation capacities.

Police and army forces were hired to guard the camps during the whole time of the state of emergency. The presence of the army was particularly visible in the camps at the Croatian border and in Belgrade. None of the NGOs or other service providers were allowed to visit any of the camps during the state of emergency so people didn't have access to legal or any other services provided by the NGOs.

According to the testimonies⁷ of the people on the move the situation was even harsher than what we expected. Despite the fact that the Government's decision stated that people can leave the camp in exceptional cases this was not the case. According to the testimonies, people were never allowed to leave the camp even if they needed medical assistance. Also, conditions in the camps did not fulfil the basic conditions for the accommodation. Since majority of camps were overcrowded, people were forced to sleep on the floor, there were no conditions for basic hygiene in the camp and they did not have access to basic protective gear (face masks, gloves, sanitizers, etc).

Also, some of the people reported that the police used force against them while they were in the camp. According to the testimonies, these cases happened in camp in Krnjaca, Obrenovac and Adasevci. In most cases, people did not understand why these measures were imposed against them so they tried to leave the camp. According to them, as soon as they would approach the gate of the camp, trying to jump over it, the police would start to hit and beat them and force them to go back to the camp.

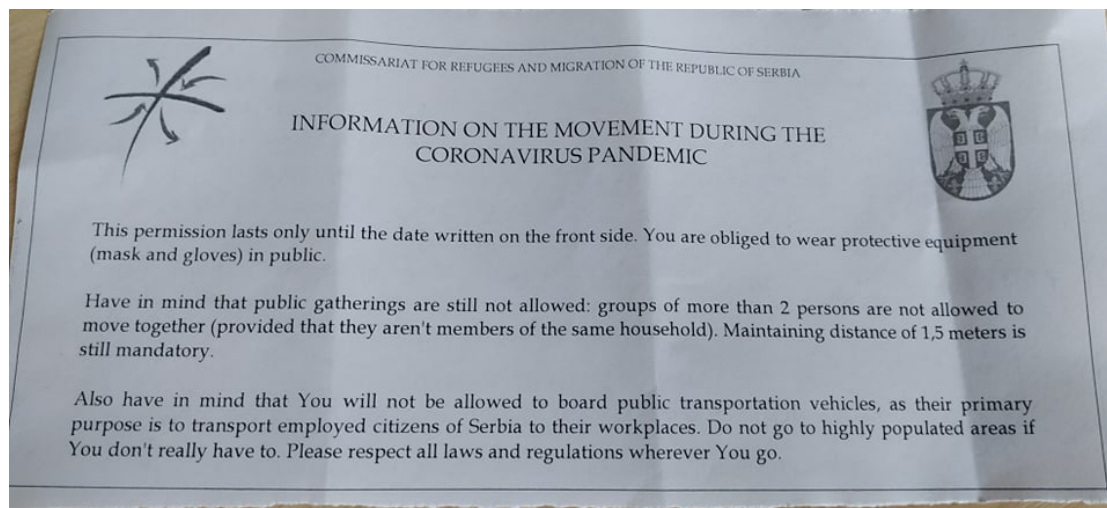
The state of emergency due to the Covid 19 pandemic was revoked on 6th May 2020. However, people on the move and refugees were still not allowed to leave the camps. The next day after the state of emergency was revoked the Government adopted new *Order on the limitation of*

⁶ According to the UNHCR Serbian camps can accommodate up to 5.890 people in the shelters that are according to the international standards.

⁷ Klikaktiv continued with its activities in July 2020, after the state of emergency was revoked and people on the move were again allowed to move outside of the camps. However, we collected testimonies on their experience during the state of emergency. People that we talked to were under the lock down in camps in Belgrade (Obrenovac and Krnjaca) and at the Croatian border (Adasevci, Principovac and family camp in Sid).

movement in the open space and proximity of accommodation facilities for migrants and asylum seekers (“Official Gazette RS” No. 66/2020) which prolonged the limitation of free movement for people on the move and refugees. According to this Order no one was allowed to be in the proximity of the asylum and accommodation camps and people who were accommodated inside were not allowed to leave these facilities. This Order was placed out of order on 14th May 2020. After this Order was placed out of order there were no other legal grounds based on which the movements of people on the move and refugees would be limited.

However, the situation on the ground was different. In practice, people on the move were still under the lock-down and they were allowed out only with the special permits issued by the camp management. These permits are not proclaimed by the law, they were *ad hoc* product of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration made for the purpose to limit the free movement of people on the move and to keep them within the camps. Prohibiting people to leave camps and issuance of these permits is completely against the Serbian Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection.



Picture of the back-side permit issued by the CRM. Information on the back is false – none of these rules have ever applied.

The permit states the name of the person to whom it is issued and for how long is he/she allowed to stay outside of the camp. Many of the permits that KlikAktiv’s team saw among people on the move were issued only for the period of 2 or 3 hours. On the back side of the permit (the picture above) the Commissariat stated several “information on the movement during the Corona virus pandemic”, which were not correct and which have never applied. For instance, the rule that “groups of more than 2 persons are not allowed to move together” was never imposed. Also, it is not true that people on the move are not allowed to board public transportation vehicles since their primary purpose is to transport employed citizens of Serbia to their workplace. These “rules” were never adopted nor imposed by the Government of Serbia. Apparently, these fake information were served to keep people on the move away from the public eye and sight of the local population, which served the far groups that become more organized and on the raise during the Covid19 pandemic.

The Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection guarantees the freedom of movement for all asylum seekers and refugees on the territory of Serbia. This freedom can be limited only in the individual cases and by the decision of the competent authority – Ministry of Interior or authorized courts. Commissariat for Refugees and Migration does not have the legal power to

limit the movement of people within the camps nor is it allowed to issue any kind of permits that would limit their movements.

This is why KlikAktiv submitted an official request to the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration asking for an explanation on which legal grounds are these permits issued and on which legal ground do they prohibit people from leaving the camp. In its official response number 019-4176/1-2020 dated from 9th October 2020 the CRM replied, quote: *“Regarding your statement that Commissariat for Refugees and Migration prohibits people who are accommodated in centers for asylum and accommodation center to leave them we inform you that this is not true.”*

However, despite the fact that CRM denied issuing these permits and prohibiting people from leaving the camp without them, KlikAktiv’s team constantly saw these permits among people on the ground. Permits were issued in camps in Krnjaca, Vranje, Adasevci, Principovac, Sid, Subotica, Kikinda, etc. Some of the permits were issued for one day and some were limited only to a couple of hours.

As a consequences of the limitation of free movement, other fundamental rights of people on the move were in jeopardy as well. In one case, in September 2020 a man from Afghanistan came to a camp in Adasevci after he was injured in the car accident which resulted with the broken leg. He spent 6 days in the camp without access to a doctor and medical treatment, despite the fact that his leg got swollen more and more as the days went by. The men managed to get in contact with the volunteers from the local organization and ask for help, but when the volunteer came in front of the camp to take the man to the hospital the volunteer was attacked by the employees of CRM. This case was the reason why KlikAktiv addressed the official complaint to the headquarters of the CRM against their employees in camp Adasevci and why we requested the official reply on which grounds do they prohibit people from leaving the camp. Positive outcome was that the man was taken to the hospital by the employees of the CRM on the same day when KlikAktiv sent the complaint and his broken leg was taken care of. However, the reply of the CRM in which they claim that the people on the move are allowed to move freely was not true. The practice of issuing these permits persisted by the end of 2020 and after.

Another worrying practice that was established during the lock-down and persisted later on is from the camp Obrenovac on the outskirts of Belgrade. This is the only all-male camp in Serbia and it has capacities of a 1.000 people. KlikAktiv collected several testimonies of men who were accommodated in this camp in the period between March and July and who have reported on the so called “24 hours room” or “isolation room”. All testimonies were the same. The so called “24 hours room” is isolated room in the camp which has 15 beds, but it often accommodates up to 70 people. Although this room was established during the Covid-19 pandemic it seems like it is not related to the pandemic nor did it serve as a quarantine for newcomers. People said that there were no rules on who will be placed in this rooms nor for how will they stay in it before they would get a proper bed in the camp. Some people stated that they have spent only one night in this room while others stated they spent up locked inside for up to 4-5 days without ever going out. One man from Afghanistan told us he spent one night there and that he was told that he has to clean the yard of the camp if he wants to get the proper bed in the camp. He agreed to this condition, so the next day he was moved to a regular room. Another man from Afghanistan had a different experience. He was kept in this “24 hours” room for 3 days. He said the police picked him up on the street together with three other friends and took them all in camp in Obrenovac but he was the only one who was placed in the “24 hours room”. He stated that for 3 days he was not allowed to leave this room, he slept on the floor since there were around 40 people in the room at the same time and they all used one toilet.

After these 3 days he was moved to a regular room. All people that we spoke to had a feeling that they were randomly chosen to go in this room and there were no rules as to how long they would stay there.

5. Eviction of the squats and situation on the filed in 2020

As already stated, people on the move in Serbia were evicted from all squats in March 2020 when the Serbian Government declared the state of emergency on the whole territory of Serbia due to the Covid 19 pandemic. However, during June and July people on the move started to return to the illegal squats at the border area. Living in the squats, instead in the official camps, allowed them the free movement and chances of trying to cross the EU borders. People returned to the same squats in city Subotica, at the Hungarian border. In this area there is one big squat in the village Horgos, outside of Subotica and just at the very border with Hungary and there were a couple of smaller squats along the railway in the city Subotica. KlikAktiv's team visited all of these places.



However, at the Croatian border the situation was different since the Government of Serbia and President of Serbia, decided to keep army forces only in this area. President of Serbia justified this decision due to “small thefts and petty crimes done by the migrants”. During the whole summer people on the move were leaving in several small squats in the area, but the police and army were constantly evicting them, while destroying the tents and other

belongings of people and then they would forcibly take people on the move to one of the three camps in the area. This practice continued during the autumn as well, which forced people on the move to constantly change the locations of squats.

As mentioned before, one of the new squat was the one in Banja Koviljaca at the Bosnian border. This squat is located in the abandoned train station and is one of the biggest squats in Serbia as it hosts between 120 and 170 people. This is the transit squat since people don't stay longer than few days in it as it is relatively easy for them to cross the border with Bosnia. This squat hosts both single men and families, and people from all countries.

When it comes to Majdan, it is a small village at the border triangle of Hungary, Romania and Serbia. For decades this village has been mostly deserted as the local population migrated towards the big cities or abroad. This site is used as a transit spot by people who are trying to cross the border into Romania. It was



mostly people from Arabic countries at first but later it was populated with people from other countries also. At first, they moved into abandoned houses across the village but in November they were pushed by the local authorities into the abandoned milk factory just outside the village. These actions of the police came after the continuous complaints of the locals who were complaining that their safety was endangered since the number of refugees in their village is on the raise. The milk factory in Majdan accommodates usually around 90 people, including families with small children. In addition, there is always around 30-50 people who are still sleeping in the village's abandoned houses. Living conditions, both in the factory and in the houses, are very poor – there is no running water, no electricity and not a proper shelter from wind, rain or cold.



Abandoned houses in Majdan,

The squat in Sombor was established in the proximity of the train station. People on the move are sleeping in the old trains which are parked on the railroad parallel to the station. This squat accommodates usually just single men, mostly from Afghanistan and Pakistan. There is also a significant number of unaccompanied minors on this location who are not getting any kind of protection. This squat usually counts between 100 and 150 people.



Squat in Sombor

Also, the situation has drastically changed during the year for people on the move compared to the situation before March 2020. The pressures from the local authorities as well as from the

local population has increased drastically. Squats were destroyed and evicted. It started with the squat at the train station in Subotica which was evicted at the end of July 2020. The abandoned house at the train station, which was used by the refugees was sealed off and people were forced to move to a different spot.



Evicted and sealed off squat in Subotica

Similar things happened in other squats as well, especially during the autumn 2020 when the Ministry of Interior organized the “action of finding illegal migrants”. During these actions special forces of police evicted squats in Sid, Sombor, Subotica and Majdan. KlikAktiv criticized these actions of the Ministry of Interior and publicly expressed its solidarity with the people on the move. In the public statement, that we cosigned with two other organizations – Transbalkan Solidarity and ERIM, we wanted to focus on the legal aspect of this action (or to be more precise – on its illegality) and the general portraying of refugees and people on the move in the public eye. The text of the statement can be found [here](#).

6. Raise of the far-right groups and criminalization of solidarity

Another worrying thing that was following the eviction of the squats and state’s changed politics toward refugees was the significant raise of the far-right groups and anti-migrant rhetoric in Serbia. One of the Facebook groups entitled “Stop the settlement of migrants”⁸ counts more than 320.000 members. In addition, several far-right local groups organized “National Patrols” which were “patrolling” the city and harassing the refugees on the streets.

On the 25th October these far-right groups announced they will “clean the park in front of the Faculty of Economics from the garbage”. This park is also known as “Afghani park” among the refugees since this is the place where refugees spend their time during the day. The call of far-right groups to “clean the park” was in fact the call for violence and in their rhetoric the “garbage” are refugees. KlikAktiv reacted and pressed criminal charges against people who are behind this group as they were calling upon violence and for spreading racial and religious hate but to our knowledge there is still no reaction from the state authorities. We also reported this event to the police and requested them to provide necessary protection to people on the move. In addition, KlikAktiv co-hosted with left-oriented organizations and activists groups a

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/512775282720731>

counter protest as a way of showing solidarity with people on the move in Serbia. Event was called “Solidarity tea”⁹ and idea was to prepare and share tea to refugees in the same park.



However, police were present in the park the whole day and none of the refugees were allowed to stay in the park or in its proximity. Despite the fact that there were no refugees in the park, both groups gathered in the park and held their protest but were divided by the heavy police forces. Far-right groups were chanting anti-migrant slogans while, on the other side, KlikAktiv and other people who gathered showed their support with people on the move. Over the

past year there was a sharp change in the public rhetoric when it comes to refugees and people on the move. In the media, social networks and other public places people on the move are called “illegal migrants” and there is a flood of fake news which presents people on the move as criminals.

Besides the raise of the far-right groups the Serbian government has significantly changed its policies toward the refugees and humanitarian workers on the field. As stated, the people on the move are being constantly evicted from squats, taken to camps which often serve as *de facto* detention centers, but very often they are also suffering psychical violence and are victims of illegal push-backs.



Since October 2020 there is a sharp rise of cases of the criminalization of solidarity in Serbia. This is especially visible in the border area. In the second half of 2020 total of 11 foreign activists were expelled and banned from Serbia for conducting “illegal actions” i.e. providing the people on the move with essentials for survival. Although the Serbian legislation doesn’t impose any limitation for providing humanitarian aid to people in need, the police officers from police stations in Sid and Kanjiza are systematically prosecuting and criminalizing all people who are active and willing to help people on the move in Serbia. In all 11 cases, activists were illegally detained in police stations, without access to legal help and interpretation and in some cases they were intimidated or even physically assaulted by the police officers.

KlikAktiv interfered in all these cases and filled 11 appeals in all cases. In addition, total of 4 complaints to the Internal Control Department within the Ministry of Interior were filled

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/events/373947367385013/>

against police officers who have breached their authorization during the procedure. These cases are currently pending for a final decision.

In the city Sid the mayor was also very vocal against refugees and activists of the NGO No Name Kitchen. Sid had local elections in 2020 and the new mayor was appointed at the end of summer 2020. He publicly supported the anti-migrant protests which were also organized in this city by far-right groups and he issued the public statement on the official website¹⁰ of the municipality Sid in which he claimed that the local government has “tried to defend local population from the vandalism and terrorism of the illegal migrants.” In the same public statement the mayor also stated that “behind the organization No Name Kitchen there are foreign elements who wish to destabilize the legal order of Serbia”. Together with the No Name Kitchen we tried to raise awareness on this problem so KlikAktiv gave statement to several media including Radio Free Europe ([here](#) and [here](#)), N1 ([here](#)) and Lupiga ([here](#)).

KlikAktiv has also experienced pressures from the police officers and employees of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migrations while working on the field. Despite the fact that KlikAktiv is registered as free legal aid provider to people on the move and refugees on the territory of Serbia and that it conducts its work fully in compliance with the national regulation, our work was interrupted on several occasions. These incidents happened twice during the field visit in Majdan, at the Romanian border – first time we were “advised” by the police officers not to continue with our activities on this site, while the second time we were told that we are not allowed to continue our work. This type of behavior has a goal to isolate people on the move completely and to restrict them from even the basic legal and psychosocial support. The continuation of our work and solidarity with people on the move was crucial at that time as we were not willing to leave dozens of people without the possibility to fulfil their basic human rights. Also, we learned later on from the refugees in Majdan that in November 2020 the police started coming more often to this site, they place people on the buses and take them to the camp Presevo on the very south of the country or directly to the border with Macedonia and push them back to the Macedonian territory. This became a regular practice in other locations as well. Police would come with several buses, dozen police officers and police dogs to “collect illegal migrants” and drive them to camp in Presevo at the Macedonian border. These police actions were often reported in the news and media as a proactive action of the Ministry of Interior and their effort to keep local population safe.

7. Significant individual cases

Although the work of the project was mostly focused on reaching to the people on the move who are isolated and who don't have access to basic services and providing them with legal information and first aid psychosocial support, KlikAktiv also had several important individual cases in this period.

First ever citizenship request for a person with the refugee status – follow up

In July 2019 KlikAktiv filled first ever citizenship request for a person with the refugee status. It is a case of a single Libyan man who was granted refugee status in Serbia back in the 2012 and he lives in the Serbia ever since, without passport (national nor refugee passport). We already wrote about this case in our previous report. However, in 2020 we received the negative

¹⁰ Available on the this link: <https://sid.rs/saopstenje-za-javnost/>

decision, as we predicted. After several hearings his request was rejected with an explanation that people with refugee status are not entitled to Serbian citizenship. Klikaktiv filled the lawsuit against the decision of the Ministry of Interior and this case is currently at the Administrative court.

This case will be a mile stone case for all other people with refugee status in Serbia and who have been residing here for more than 5 years. KlikAktiv was already contacted by another 4 people with the refugee status who are staying in Serbia between 5 and 6 years and who also want to apply for a citizenship.

Case of potential human trafficking

In July KlikAktiv was contacted by a 34-year old single Syrian woman who claimed to be in Bosnia and Serbia for three years, after she accidentally got separated from the rest of her family. She urged for help and stated that she is a victim of labor exploitation in a hostel in Sombor where she works and cleans up to 12 hours per day just to cover the food and accommodation in this hostel. Together with this email she also sent screenshots of the messages in which an unknown man was threatening to kill her. We tried to establish direct contact with her, but this was not successful. KlikAktiv managed to talk to her on the phone only twice and both time only for just a couple of minutes since both times her phone was taken by an unidentified Serbian woman. Later on, we lost every contact with her and couldn't reach her. But as soon as we received her initial email and after the first failed phone conversation, we filled the report on the potential human trafficking case both to the special department of the Ministry of Interior which fights against the human trafficking and to the Center for the Combating Human Trafficking within the Ministry of labor and social protection.

This case is significant as it shows the level of danger the people on the move are facing daily on the Balkan refugee route. KlikAktiv expresses great concern of the numbers of human trafficking victims who are not being recognized nor protected as such.

In relevance with this case, we should also state that there has been high raise in the number of people who were residing in private accommodations or hostel which are mostly run by smugglers. Extremely poor conditions in camps, limited access to camps and police brutality forced people to turn to this type of accommodation while they are in Serbia. These people usually don't have access to any service providers in Serbia, they can not access legal or any other protection and assistance if needed.

Two unaccompanied 12-year old boys with broken legs

Another concerning case was a case of a 12 year old unaccompanied minor with the broken leg who was residing in the squat in Sombor, close to the Hungarian border. KlikAktiv met him during one of the firsts visits to Sombor. We learned that he broke his leg while he was trying to jump over the Hungarian border fence. Hungarian border police found him and took him to the nearest hospital where they put cast on his broken leg (broken foot, to be more precise). On the same day, the Hungarian police pushed him back to the territory of Serbia. With the help of friends he managed to come to the squat in Sombor where he stayed for a couple of days before our visit. We immediately informed the local Center for Social Welfare on his case and requested them to provide the boy medical assistance and proper

accommodation. However, local Center for Social welfare at first ignored the request sent by KlikAktiv and refused to go out to the field. Only after two written urgencies and several phone calls done by KlikAktiv did the Center for Social Welfare engaged in this case and provided the boy with proper accommodation and medical treatment.

Similar case, also a 12 year old unaccompanied minor, was residing in the squat in Horgos, near the Hungarian border, in October 2020. He also injured his leg while he was trying to jump over the fence. Unlike the previous boy, he was not taken to the hospital by the Hungarian police, but instead he was immediately pushed back to the Serbian territory. KlikAktiv followed up on his case together with activists of Collective Aid, pressured local hospital in Subotica to provide him with medical treatment despite the fact that he is not registered as asylum seekers and also pressured CRM to take him to the local camp, although they were reluctant at first.



As already stated, there is a significant number of unaccompanied children living in the informal squats in Serbia and they are not getting proper (or any) protection from the competent authorities. Two younger minors, kids who are just 12 years old, were not provided with basic needs, but instead would have been left without accommodation and urgent medical treatment if there was not pressure and official requests done by KlikAktiv.

Integration of asylum seekers and refugees - transgender woman, lesbian woman and man fighting for custody

Another important aspect of our work during 2020 was integration of refugees and asylum seekers. Most significant cases were one transgender woman, lesbian single mom and man who is fighting for the custody of his new born baby.

Except from the regular counselling, our goal was to make broad supporting network for them. In that purpose we linked them to organizations which can provide support and work in their best interest. Also, we managed to connect all of them to local initiatives which are providing help to homeless people in Belgrade like “Solidarity kitchen”, a collective in which all activists are working on preparing and serving food to homeless and people in need in Belgrade ever since the state of emergency was introduced in Serbia. In that collective there are some foreigners which are being helpful to our beneficiaries just by sharing an experience of being a strangers in Serbia, but there is also a lot of people from Serbia which are well aware and very sensitive of problems which refugees have on road, so it really meant a lot to all the asylum seekers to be in an environment which is full of understanding and not judgmental towards them.

Complaint against the discrimination of people on the move in the public transportation

People from Obrenovac camp (outskirt of Belgrade) complained to KlikAktiv that the drivers of public buses often refuse to stop at the bus stop close to the camp and pick them up so they have to walk, but also that drivers are charging them with higher prices for tickets or that they are often being kicked out from the bus. They complained on this type of behavior during July and August so KlikAktiv referred these complaints to the city's public company that conduct public transportation in this part of the city.

In the response that we got it was stated that the company conducts public transport without any prejudices based on appearances, ethnic origin or other personal characteristics and that they did not establish any irregularities in the work of their drivers. This is the response that we expected from them since we didn't have one isolated case with evidence but instead we just wanted to act on behalf of refugees who were constantly complaining on this and to show them that we are supporting them.

ANNEX – Stories from the field

During the 2020 Klikaktiv was writing a diary from the filed visits. This diary is supposed to be a testimony on the harsh situation the refugees are facing and the developments in Serbia alongside the EU external borders. We have extracted several relevant stories from the diary and included them in this report.

18. 06. 2020., Belgrade, Afghani park

Our first field visit to Belgrade. We were in Park Luka Ćelović and in the park across the street from the bus station. Park Luka Ćelović is generally almost unknown by that name. People mostly refer to it as “Park at Economic Faculty” or as “Pussy’s park” due to few decades’ long activities of sexual workers in that park. But since the beginning of refuge crisis among refugees, people and organizations which are included in work with the refugees this park is also known as “Afghan park”. Park across the bus station is officially called “Bristol hotel park”, but as it is case with Park Luka Ćelović that name is not in use. It is commonly known by different name: “Bus station park”. That park doesn’t have so many different names as Afghan park, but it suffered much more structural changes than its neighbor in recent years. Arrival platform of bus station and the whole quart of buildings including the building of “SIMPO” department store has been destroyed and removed, which gives the sense of much larger space and depth to park compared to previous times when it clearly limited by big buildings. The only building left standing nearby is Hotel Bristol, which is also covered with signs: “Beware! Work in progress. Get on the other side of the street”. From that same hotel, just few months before dozens of families of war veterans were evicted by force. After that event veterans were protesting for months in front of the building.

In Afghan park there is not so many people. It’s very hot, so people are mostly in the park across the street which is rich with big trees that cover a lot of green grass surfaces with strong and pleasant shade. We are crossing the street and starting the conversation with around ten guys from Afghanistan. Soon after, many more people are joining the group and our conversation and in one moment we are speaking to more than 50 people. We are talking and answering to questions about asylum procedure in Serbia and in E.U., about Dublin agreement, possible new quarantine because of Covid-19 pandemic, and also about their experience with border police and violence.

One boy of 18-19 years in one moment just includes himself in the conversation and on fluent Serbian language says: "Mi dođemo na granicu, policija zajebava. Ja stalno idem, policija zajebava. Ne znam kako dalje. Dođeš ovamo ne može. Odeš onamo - ne može. Samo zajebavaju." (We go to the border, police fuck us up. I am going all the time and all the time police is fucking me up. I don’t know what to do next and how to continue my journey. You come at one place - you can’t pass. You go to another place - you can’t pass. They are just fucking us up.). Everyone from the group starts laughing to the amount of surprise which they can see on our faces. We are stunned by his knowledge of Serbian language, and we are laughing too. He is also laughing discreetly. He’s been in Serbia for five years. He is having fresh haircut and is wearing Hawaiian shirt. All of that including a sudden Serbian language is completely matching his charisma which is felt by everyone in the group. After we spoke with him for a while, I saw him few more times on different places in the crowd which was standing around us, and then one boy which was passing the street shouted something to him in Pashto language, they hugged each other as old friends which haven’t seen each other for a long time and then they went somewhere to speak in private.

Once again, the park looks to me as it has gotten bigger since there is no arrival station and buildings which were surrounding it. In the park besides of people from Afghanistan there is a lot of people from Maghreb countries. Arabic people. There is also a lot of people from their groups who are English speakers which are coming to us to ask about various topics, about the help that we can or cannot provide to them, current situation in our country, asylum procedure, fingerprints left in Serbia or some other country and many other things that they are interested in. Vast majority of them is lying and sitting on the grass without anything beneath them and they are not complaining about that at all. Under every other tree there is a group of people. After the explanation of asylum procedure in Serbia and what they can expect when they reach E.U. some of them wanted to fill in anonymous questionnaire about push backs and violence they have suffered on the borders with Hungary and Croatia. Besides free legal aid and psycho-social support one of our main activities is gathering information about the treatment to which refugees were exposed from border police or military (of Serbia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Croatia) while they were trying to cross the borders. According to the information we have gathered until now refugees have most often been beaten by Croatian police, right behind them there is Hungarian police, while for Serbian police they mainly say that the treatment depends on which patrol they cross the path with. The purpose of filling these questionnaires is in gathering a large number of testimonies after which would we as an organization be able to publish the results of the questionnaires and to try to influence the change the relation of certain countries governments towards the refugees.

July 2020, Sid, Croatian border

A visit to Šid, the town on the border with Croatia. It is an hour-long drive from Belgrade. When we got there, we met few refugees that we were in contact from before. There were two of them. We met on the shores of a small lake called Sot lake, near the village with the same name: Sot. The lake shore is completely surrounded with birch trees so there is a lot of yellow leaves in the water. One of the refugees was severely injured. He is underaged and Croatian police beat him brutally. He is having a lot of pain in his left hip and right shoulder, and he claims that he can not go any further until his wounds are healed. That is very rare situation because people are trying to get to their desired destinations no matter what and when someone is telling you that he is willing to stay in Serbia for one or two years if it's going to heal his wounds then you know that he is in a serious problem.

Another problem is that kids who left Afghanistan are never telling to their parents or relatives that they have some trouble on the journey. That is the case with our friend. He wants to stay in Serbia to get better but he didn't tell his parents anything about his injuries because they would be worried and they can't understand why he wants to stay in Serbia and "lose" two years of his life, when he has already spent 4 years on the road. So now he is in a very unpleasant situation. We advised him to tell his parents about the injuries because only then will they understand. He said he will think about it, but he repeatedly says that he can't go anywhere further with those injuries. We made an agreement that he will inform us in a next couple of weeks about his decision and if he decides to stay in Serbia, we will help him to get the access to the camp and health care that he needs.

While we were sitting on the shores of a small lake one man who was swimming in the lake approached us because his car was parked nearby and asked us how are we in a very pleasant way. We chat a bit with him about the water and asked if it is good for swimming. He told us that water is great but that he is not going far from the beach because he can not swim. It was a bit funny. A man in his fifties, two meters tall and probably 150 kilos heavy he looked in the



lake like a giant that is having a best time of his life and after that he is telling us that he doesn't know how to swim. Unfortunately, not everyone is so kind to refugees as it is a non-swimming giant.

Refugees in Šid have to be very careful because there is a lot of anti-migrant groups in the area. Also, refugees told us that they especially have problems with a group of men from a local village. When they are being pushed back by the Croatian police near this village, they

practically start to hunt them and chase after them with guns and knives. That is the story that eight guys are telling us in the woods near the river Bosut. They are a part of a 30-man group and they have told us that there is another four or five small groups of people from Afghanistan. According to their story Serbian police was good to them before corona virus quarantine, but then during quarantine police changed their behavior towards them and become more violent, and now after quarantine police is starting to be good to them again. In the group of eight young males were three underaged boys. One of them told me that he is only fourteen years old and another one sounded so proud and mystical when he told me: "I was a small kid, but the woods made me grow up very fast."

In Serbia through whole this year anti-migration movements are getting louder and stronger day by day and they have no understanding and tolerance for anything that is not known to them. That is especially shown in border areas where refugees have to be very careful where they are going and how long they are staying in any place.

23. 07. 2020., Subotica, Hungarian border - unpleasant surprise

Today we again went to Subotica where unpleasant surprise was waiting for us. Main entrances to two buildings in which refugees were living, as well as all windows, have been completely sealed up with bricks so that no one can enter those buildings any more. Graffiti which used to say "Afghanistan and Serbia" is now destroyed and on the wall you can only read "and Serbia". Besides that, on one of the building now there is graffiti: GET-OUT-OF-SERBIA.



According to refugees which are now sleeping between railroads, everything happened four days ago when police came to their squat, throw them out and allowed some people to seal and cement all entrances and windows of the buildings. Some of persons which were cementing the place also wrote an anti-migrant parole. Refugees are telling us that now they don't have where to go, that police are forbidding them to cook in front of those buildings, and that they also destroy all of their food whenever they try to cook something.

This is one of the saddest moments which I have experienced as a field worker. To hate and endanger someone just because they don't have same skin color, language, culture and religion should be a thing of the past (as far as mainstream medias and our government can say), but there are always these kind of situations to remind us that some refugees will always be looked up on as they are less human beings than "us", the local population, just because they are coming from cultures and religions which we don't want to understand and which we are not finding attractive and exotic enough to tolerate and accept it.

September 2020, Majdan and Rabe, Romanian border

During our last visit to Majdan, village at the border triangle of Serbia, Hungary and Romania, we met young man from Morocco who complained on the pain in his arm which was troubling him for months now. He showed us scars on his left arm and explained that the pain is from the pieces of shrapnel from the bullet when he was shot while he tried to cross from Turkey into Greece. He tried to cross the border on land in a group of 30 other men, when the Greek police started shooting at them. They were still on the territory of Turkey when Greek police (or other military formation on the Greek side of the border fence) started shooting at them.

The man we met was shot in two places - his left hip and left arm. He was immediately transferred to a local hospital and doctors were able to remove bullet from his hip (he also showed us the scar on his hip) but they were not able to completely remove bullet from his arm which destroyed majority of soft tissue. He was discharged from the hospital in Turkey after surgery and few days of recovery and after it he never had access to medical aid which is why he decided to go for another try across the Greece border, hoping that he will reach safety. He also told us that two men from Syria were also shot on the same occasion but them, unfortunately, did not survive.

Border fences and presenting refugees as a threat to national security (we constantly hear stories how European countries are "defending their borders and territories from migrants" as if the enemy army is in-front of their borders and not refugees searching safety) only supports these and similar actions of the police forces. Two men were murdered and one was injured and nobody will ever be held responsible for these crimes. They were at the Greek border only because they believed that they are heading to a country that respects its national laws and international obligations and which will provide necessary protection to refugees. However, it turns out they have survived the war in their home country but they did not survive the "defense of European borders".

16.09.2020. Banja Koviljača (Drina river border) - "Every week river eats at least five people"

On an abandoned train station in Banja Koviljača there is less people compared to the last time we were there. On that morning, few hours before our arrival, one group of young man was pushed back into Drina river by Bosnian police where two people lost their lives few moments later. A guy which survived that torture told us that he saw from the water how policemen were laughing at the guys that were lost in the fast flow of the river. He can't understand what kind of people those policemen are and how can they act like that? Earlier that morning all of them were supposed to be transferred back to Serbia over the bridge, but in the last seconds police decided to force few of them to swim back to the Serbian shore. Everyone that we talked to on the train station were very upset because of this. One of the men from the group told us that few nights before police caught him in Bosnia and also wanted to push him back in the water, but then he told them that they can shoot him in the face if they want to kill him but he will not get in the water. After that police pushed him back over the bridge to Serbia. "Every week river eats at least five people" he was repetitively saying to us...



There are no people from Bangladesh, India and Sudan like there were last time. Now it is mainly people from Afghanistan and Maghreb countries. They are all again talking how they don't have any problems with Serbian police and local population, how they cross the river with boats from Serbian side, but then on the other side police is beating them, stealing money and mobile phones from them, breaking bones and getting them back into water but this time without boats. One guy allowed us to take a picture of his broken tooth. They became used to the violence they are suffering and their only

goal is to reach safety which is why they are still at the train station in Banja Koviljaca, hoping they will eventually reach their destination countries.

30.09.2020.. Horgos, Hungarian border – Food production

Bread production in squats is a very interesting process. Ten days ago we were present in one squat on the border between Serbia and Hungary in the middle of preparing for the lunch.

In the beginning, there would be nothing without a stove/oven. The improvised stove is made of an old barrel, turned to the ground along its entire length. A mixture of lime and salt is spread on the surface of the barrel, which is then baked and which also serves as a surface on which bread is baked. The barrel is open on one side only, while it is closed on the other side in order to keep the heat in the barrel for as long as possible. Everyone's sleeves are rolled up and raised to the elbows.

In the first step, two men mix flour and salt with very little water in a huge blue basin. Knead the flour that comes in contact with water and make the first lumps of dough. After they knead a rough dough, on which their fingerprints can be seen, they add it to the other two people who shape it into spherical lumps ready for further processing. These balls of dough stand next to each other and so raw, with their appearance, cause a feeling of hunger in the one who looks at them.



The balls are then added to the team, which gently stretches them with rolling pins on an improvised table. After the former flour and water have become an irregular lump of dough, even a ball, as well as a slightly stretched dough in the hands of a master with a rolling pin, that slightly stretched dough comes into contact with the skilled hands of the last person to be processed before being placed on an improvised bread oven. In his hands, by transferring from one forearm to another ten times the dough that was so small and thick becomes a thin and very long dough, almost as long as one tent wing. After doing his mesmerizing dance with the dough and moving it on his hands to the desired length, he puts the stretched dough on the improvised oven. Two guys next to the oven are constantly monitoring what was baked and what needs more time, and they put all the baked bread in a large bowl behind them. They made over 80 buns that day.

11.10.2020.. Horgos and Subotica, Hungarian border

In squat near Horgos refugees have made a awning from the 50-meter-long tent material we gave to them two weeks earlier. They also covered the floors of several rooms where they sleep and made a shower. Craftsmanship which they have is worth every admiring. There are about 100 people there - they take care of each other, help each other, cook and play cricket on the improvised field. They say that they have no problems with the police and that the police stop by from time to time and just watch from a distance what is happening. "We have no problems, I think they are even satisfied because we made an awning and a shower. They like when they see us tidying up the place where we live, like now, which we would do even more regularly if we had the conditions." - a guy who knows English tells me.

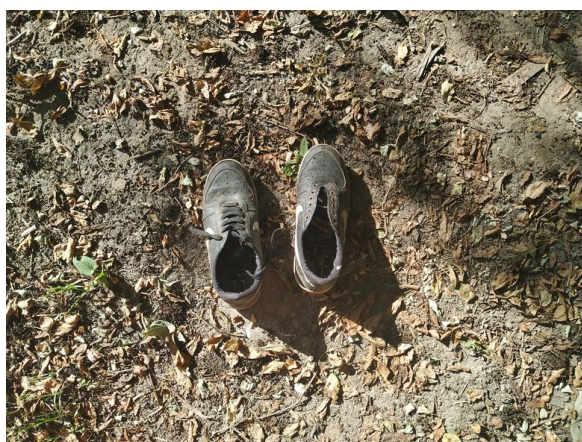
However, the situation is not the same in Subotica. There, several people claimed to have been beaten by police both in squats and in the city itself. They ask if there is a way to stop this? However, despite those difficult things, many still claim that Serbia is a great place in relation to what they have experienced in some other countries.

In addition, a group of guys from Afghanistan told us about a situation when they were attacked by a dozen locals - mostly younger guys - who were carrying baseball bats. They first attacked two refugees who were walking alone in front of the rest of the group, but they stopped attacking them when they saw more people coming behind them. It is sad that extremist groups are now appearing in such large numbers and harassing refugees only because they can and that none of the authorities is reacting to that ...

On that day, we saw more than 150 people and from their stories, we can only conclude that Serbia, which was one of the most hospitable countries since the beginning of the refugee crisis, has now become another place where refugees encounter mostly problems and misunderstandings.

November 2020., Majdan, Romanian border

During yesterday's visit to Majdan, a place on the border triangle of Serbia, Romania and Hungary, our team was hindered in carrying out its activities and providing support to refugees in that place. Refugees are mostly found in abandoned houses in Majdan, but recently they are also in the so-called "Factory", a former milk factory where the police takes them so that they would not stay in abandoned houses in the village. There are around fifty of them in the village, while there are 90 of them in the Factory and they do not have electricity, drinking water, they do not receive blankets, sleeping bags or tents, or any other humanitarian aid. Also, they do not have access to medical and legal assistance, which they urgently need. The police patrol, which is now constantly in the village, told us, after they checked our identity and ID cards, that they have an order from their police station to tell us that we are not allowed to carry out our activities independently, but that we should first contact the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of Serbia (CRMS) and to carry out activities together with them only in camps which are run by CRMS. We emphasize that the Law on Asylum stipulates that legal aid is provided exclusively by non-governmental organizations, while CRMS is given the authority only to provide material conditions for reception, which means that CRMS is not competent to carry out the activities and assistance that we, as an NGO, provide.



As an organization, we are registered with the Ministry of Justice as providers of free legal aid on the territory of the Republic of Serbia. According to the Law on Asylum, refugees have the right to free legal aid, and therefore we as an organization have the right to work everywhere on the territory of the Republic of Serbia to provide free legal aid. This is not the first such event for us in Maidan. A month ago, the police also checked our ID cards in Maidan, but then the policeman, after consultations with the PS Kikinda, said "that he recommends that we first contact CRMS and that we carry out our activity in refugee camps together with them later on." A police officer was much more careful in giving a statement at that time, telling us that he "recommended" us, which is the only thing he can do, considering that neither then, just like yesterday, we did not break any law. Of course, we continued our work back then, but yesterday, regardless of the fact that the police officers behaved correctly while interacting with us, after our lawyer explained that according to the Law on Asylum and the Law on Providing Free Legal Support, we have the right to continue with our activities, the policeman who received the order from his superiors only said that he knows nothing about the laws, but that he was just told to pass this warning to us.

After this incident with the police, it was impossible for us to establish normal contact with the refugees because they were scared of the police presence all the time, since the police officers followed every step we made. When we went to the "Factory" a little later, which is located outside the village, ten minutes after us, an employee of the Commissariat for Refugees arrived

again, and soon after him, an intervention unit of the police. After that, we left because we were worried that if we insist on continuing our work it might create further problems for the refugees with the police. Police officers on the ground, regardless of their correctness in conversation with us, showed that they have no knowledge of the law and with their rhetoric created almost impossible working conditions for us. This is a clear example of criminalization (even if it was involuntary and caused by ignorance) of humanitarian work, but we as an organization will not give up and will continue to provide legal and psychosocial support to all refugees who are on the territory of Serbia.

December 2020.

While working with refugees, we noticed that some of the most common injuries they encounter when trying to cross borders are leg injuries. These injuries happen to them while jumping the fence - when they are in a hurry, they are in fear or they are being chased by the police, so they do not have enough time to go down the fence more or less carefully.

However, there is another reason why fractures and sprains of the legs, feet and ankles are so common. To make the whole story more understandable, we give you a brief insight into what a part of the border crossing between Serbia and Hungary looks like. In front of the fence itself, there is a barbed wire on the ground through which the refugees break through crawling, covered with blankets or sleeping bags, so that the wire would not cut them. After being dragged through the several meters long barbed wire trap as soldiers in the movies, two fences await them. Both are about four meters high and are also wrapped in layers of barbed wire at the top. The distance between the two fences - the patrol zone - is so large that only two police jeeps can pass in the passage.



In order to cross those two fences, people pay the smugglers large amounts of money so that they can set the ladder for them to cross one and the other fence at the right time. Many people from the refugee population set out on a journey with a very limited amount of money and very often do not have the money to pay for crossing the entire fence or are saving money for the further journey. In that case, they decide to pay money to cross the first fence and to climb to the top of the second fence, from which they will then jump in the hope that they will be able to land on the ground without major injuries. There are whole groups of people who get ladders for climbing and descending from the first fence from the smugglers, while only one ladder for climbing is set for the second fence, and there is no ladder for descending, because they are not paid. Then there is a jump awaiting for all of them. This causes severe injuries that will follow most people throughout their lives, because they are usually not treated in time and, above all, not treated well enough medically.

EDITORIAL NOTES

All names mentioned in this report have been changed in order to protect the identity of asylum seekers who have been interviewed.

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