



# The Third Quarterly Report in 2023

(July – August – September 2023)





# ABOUT KLIKAKTIV

**Klikaktiv - Center for Development of Social Policies** is a non-profit civil society organization that 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 trends observed in the field during our team's visits to the informal settlements at the EU's external borders with Serbia during July, August and September 2023, including testimonies and quotes of refugees, as well as the photos of the living conditions. The report also provides information on the context, including important legal framework and political trends regarding migration management in the country. We particularly shed light on push backs to and from Serbia, violence by the Serbian police and deaths of refugees on the route. We also wrote about recent shootings in the northern area of the country and smuggling networks suspected to be behind them.

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

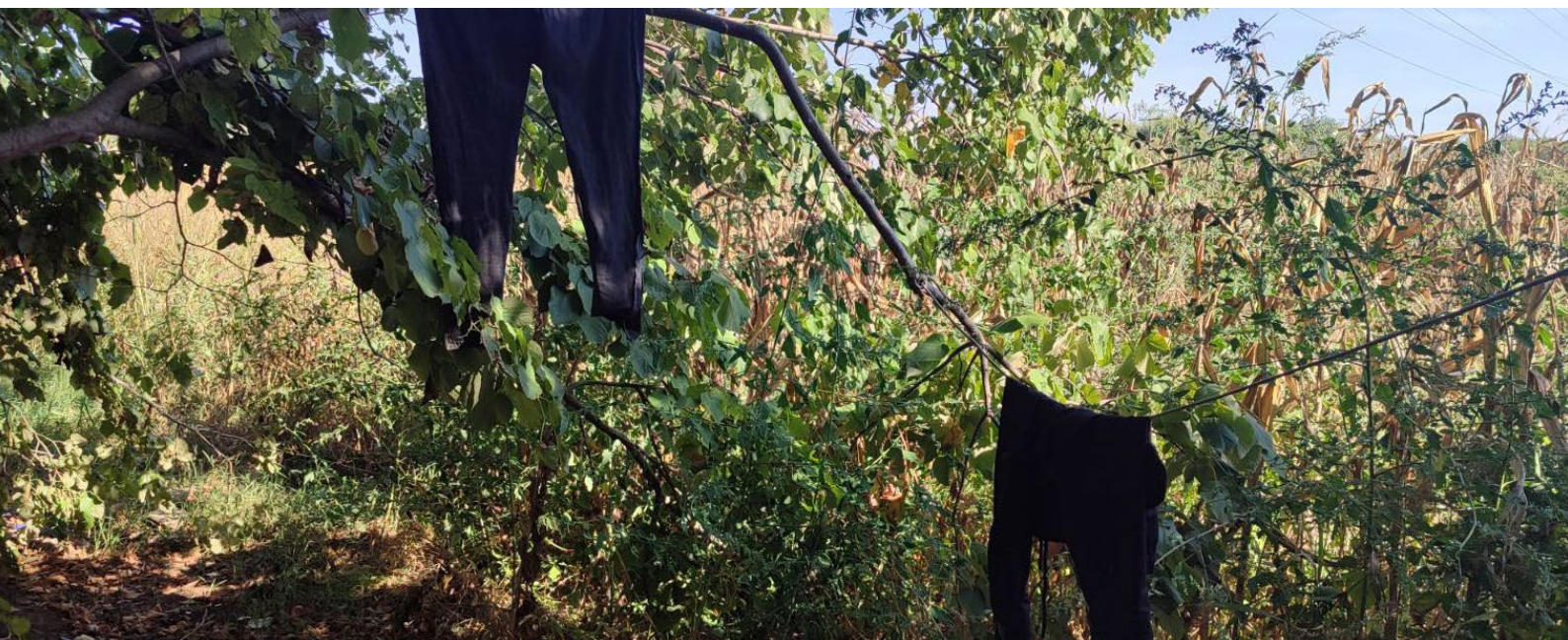
For any additional information, comments or suggestions, feel free to contact us: [info@klikaktiv.org](mailto:info@klikaktiv.org).





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## KEY TRENDS (IN JULY, AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER 2023.)

- A vast majority of all Klikaktiv's beneficiaries in the informal settlements were refugees from **Syria and Afghanistan (94% combined)**. This trend has been present throughout 2022 and 2023. Most of the newly arrived stated they had entered Serbia through **Bulgaria**, though in September there was an increase in the number of people on the move who stated they had entered the country through North Macedonia (app. 40%). In their attempts to leave Serbia and continue their journey, most people on the move tried to do so via **Hungary** or **Bosnia and Herzegovina**.
- **Push backs from the EU Member States** have continued in the reporting period - majority of which happened from Hungary to Serbia. In July, refugees reported a practice in which the Serbian police organized buses at the official border crossings in which they collected those pushed back by the Hungarian police and drove them allegedly to the reception center in Preševo. The practice was not reported in the latter months<sup>1</sup>.
- **Push backs by the Serbian police** were reported by people on the move on the border with Bulgaria in joint operation with **Austrian police**, and on the border with North Macedonia together with **German police**.
- Klikaktiv continued to note a significant number of **unaccompanied boys in informal settlements in the border area**, particularly those younger than 14 years old, mostly from Syria. There is no access to social protection services for these children nor a functioning referral pathway to social workers mandated for child protection in Serbia.
- Although in smaller numbers compared to refugees from Syria and Afghanistan, we continued to meet **Turkish citizens** who came to Serbia legally and tried to continue to the EU irregularly. Most of them are not in the squats at the borders for a longer period of time, but are accommodated in private arrangements and hostels and go to the squats only immediately before a "game".



<sup>1</sup> The practice was also mentioned in a local newspaper article available [here](#) (in Serbian).



# SNAPSHOT OF KLIKAKTIV'S WORK IN THE THIRD QUARTER OF 2023:



Klikaktiv provided legal and psychosocial **6332 services to 3114 unique beneficiaries** in the reporting period. The number of new beneficiaries is similar to the number of people on the move reached with services in the second quarter, and 14% higher than the number of new beneficiaries in the same quarter the previous year.



Percentage of **women and children** (including unaccompanied boys and girls) among Klikaktiv's beneficiaries in the border area is **6%**.



**Countries of origin:** majority of people on the move<sup>2</sup> came from: **Syria (68%) and Afghanistan (26%)**. Refugees from the two countries with dire humanitarian situations and ongoing conflict comprised<sup>3</sup> **94%** of all people in the border area that Klikaktiv provided services to. The Klikaktiv's team also served people from: Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, India, Turkey (Turkish and Kurdish), Turkmenistan, Iraq (Arab not Kurdish), Pakistan, the African continent<sup>4</sup>, and Ukraine (all combined approximately **6%**).



Number of **field visits** in the reporting period: **24**  
Number of different **squats** visited: **24**  
(no new squats identified in the reporting period)  
Estimated number of active squats in the border area, in the reporting period: more than **28**  
Estimated number of people on the move in the squats in the reporting period: **4500**



Borders covered:  
**EU external borders (Hungary, Croatia, Romania),** border with **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, and Serbia's southern border with **North Macedonia**



Additionally:

- **3** asylum seekers represented before relevant public authorities and supported by the Klikaktiv's legal counselor through the asylum procedure.
- **5** humanitarian workers, volunteers and activists provided legal information and training
- **20** media interviews, guest lectures, interviews with researchers and participation at conferences and other migration-related events.



<sup>2</sup> The numbers refer to Klikaktiv's beneficiaries in the border areas. The demographics might vary in official asylum and reception centers.

<sup>3</sup> One of the examples is that the the UN urged Afghanistan's Taliban government to stop torture and protect the rights of detainees in its recent report available [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> They did not want to specify their country of origin.



## **CONTEXT (general situation of people on the move, including important events that significantly influenced the migration situation in the country)**

**Official data:** In mid-September, the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration reported<sup>5</sup> that there were 3203 persons in 18 reception centers that this government body manages, which have a total capacity of 5 755 persons. The majority of these persons accommodated in the SCRM's centers were from Afghanistan, Syria, Morocco and Pakistan. The Commissariat did not note a significant increase in the number of people on the move compared to the previous year of 2022. At the same time, Frontex reported<sup>6</sup> that: "During January–August period, the Western Balkan route, the second most active route with more than 70 550 detections, saw a decline of 19%, in large part due to tighter visa policies." With half of all recorded entries to the EU being through the Mediterranean sea, the Western Balkan route remains the second most active route for refugees and migrants who are trying to reach the EU.

**SERBIA'S (NON)ALIGNMENT WITH EU VISA POLICY:** Over the period of 5 years, Serbia was heavily criticized by the EU officials for non-aligning with EU visa policies and introducing/maintaining visa-free regime with countries such as Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, Cuba, Burundi and India<sup>7</sup>. In the [Non-paper](#) from May 2023, EU praised Serbia for introducing visas for the citizens of these countries, saying that Serbia's previous visa-free regime led to "irregular movements of these nationals across Europe".

Although, Serbia did (re)introduce visas for the citizens of the listed countries, only to again digress from the EU visa policy by introducing visa-free travel regime for citizens of Venezuela and Azerbaijan. On 14th July in Belgrade, Serbian and Venezuelan Ministers of Foreign Affairs [signed](#) the agreement on introducing a visa-free travel regime between the two countries. The Serbian Minister stated on this occasion that Serbia wants to develop "close and traditionally friendly" relations with Venezuela and that a visa-free regime will open many possibilities for cooperation. Also, on 6th September, Serbian Parliament [ratified](#) the Agreement between Serbia and Azerbaijan on introducing [visa-free regime](#) between the two countries. This Agreement is particularly relevant in light of the current Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Serbia also has a visa-free travel regime with Armenia, whose citizens can stay in Serbia up to 90 days within 180 days.

Klikaktiv expects that citizens of both countries may seek refugee in Serbia in the future period and calls for Serbian institutions to secure them effective access to asylum procedures, in particular at Belgrade's airport. **It is of most importance that both Serbian Border Police and Frontex, who are present at Belgrade's airport, pay particular attention and sensitive approach to citizens of both countries who are entering the Serbian territory and to suspend any potential forced returns of these citizens.**

**CHANGES ON THE NATIONAL LAW ON FOREIGNERS AND LAW ON THE EMPLOYMENT OF FOREIGNERS** - In July 2023, Serbian Parliament adopted changes in the Law on the Employment of Foreigners, which grants asylum seekers the right to work after 6 months from the moment they applied for asylum (previously this period was 9 months). Also, people who are granted asylum will be able to work without being issued an official working permission which currently requires a long and expensive administrative

<sup>5</sup> The Commissair shared the data during a TV appearance in the national media reported [here](#), in Serbian.

<sup>6</sup> The report is available [here](#) and an accompanying map [here](#).

<sup>7</sup> Klikaktiv shared its view on the issue in a text available [here](#).



procedure. Changes of the Law on Foreigners introduced an important novelty – **people who are granted refugee status can apply for permanent residence after 3 years.**

On the other side, **the minimum fines for the misdemeanors acts of illegal entry and illegal residency on the territory of Serbia, are drastically raised – from 5.000 RSD to 50.000 RSD.** And also, despite the fact that **Serbia’s forced removal procedure is not in line with EU legislation and international standards**, no changes were made in this regard. Primarily, foreigners who are detained in detention centers (and potentially are in forced removal procedure) are still not entitled to free legal aid. Klikaktiv published a detailed analysis and comparison of Serbia’s legislation and EU legislation when it comes to deportation procedure in its report “On the situation of refugees in Serbia, Legal analysis and Field report”, available on Klikaktiv’s website and this [link](#).

**RIGHT TO REFUGEE PASSPORT:** The case [S.E. v Serbia](#) concerns the refusal of the Serbian state authorities to issue travel document to a Syrian refugee, owing to a failure by the Minister of Interior to enact, since 2008 (when Serbia adopted its first Law on Asylum) any regulations, as subsidiary legislation, governing the content and design of the travel document for refugees, despite being required to do so both by the Law on Asylum from 2008 and by the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection from 2018. In its verdict from July 2023, “the Court considers that the State authorities, by their refusal to issue the applicant with a travel document for refugees for seven years due to the absence of appropriate regulations to implement the Asylum Act, curtailed his right to leave Serbia freely to such an extent as to impair its very essence and deprive it of its effectiveness”. Klikaktiv hopes that this verdict will accelerate necessary changes in the asylum legislation and that the Serbian Ministry of Interior will start issuing refugee passports to people who are granted refugee status by the end of the year.

**FORCED REMOVALS AND READMISSION PROCEDURES:** The [Non-paper](#) from May 2023, praises Serbia for effectively applying the [Readmission Agreement](#) in the previous period, but it also states it is “required to improve the readmission of third country nationals who have illegally entered the EU through Serbia”.

The Ombudsman published its [Yearly Report](#) regarding the activities of the NPM for the year 2022. As the biggest shortcoming of the forced removal procedure, the NPM stated that often **foreigners do not have the opportunity to indicate the facts that are considered to be obstacles for their forced removal to a certain country, nor is the existence of these facts established, which can lead to the violation of Article 3. of the Convention against torture.** Therefore, the respect of the *non-refoulement* principle is necessary as no-one can be returned back to the country where there is a doubt that (s)he can be subjected to torture, inhuman and/or degrading treatment. During the 2022, NPM supervised five forced removals during which 23 foreigners (mostly citizens of India – 11 of them) were removed from the territory of Serbia. In three cases, foreigners were removed from the Detention center in [Padinska skela](#) and in two cases from the Detention center in [Dimitrovgrad](#).

In the reporting period, between July and September 2023, NPM [monitored](#) the forced removal of two foreigners – citizen of India and citizen of Pakistan. They were detained in Detention center in Padinska skela for a few weeks before they were removed via the airport “Nikola Tesla” in Belgrade.



# BALKAN DEATH ROUTE

Many people on the move lost their lives while trying to reach the EU, and one of the deadliest borders on the Balkan route is the Serbian–Bosnian border where the river Drina poses as a natural border between the two states. People on the move are forced to cross the river on their way towards Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and they usually try to cross it between cities [Loznica](#) and [Ljubovija](#), by using rubber boats or swimming across the river.

Klikaktiv located and visited two cemeteries in Serbia where people on the move are being buried – one in city Loznica (near the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the other one in Šid (near the border with Croatia). There are 9 graves in the cemetery in Loznica and almost all of them, except one, are unmarked graves, with only “NN” marking and the year of death. According to the unofficial information that Klikaktiv gathered, all nine people who are buried here are males and only one person died of natural causes while others drowned and their bodies were found on the banks of the river Drina.



*Photos 1 and 2. Cemetery in Loznica, near the Serbian – Bosnian border (August, 2023).*

In the reporting period, Klikaktiv gathered information of at least 11 bodies that were found on the river banks, but the actual number of people who have lost their lives on this site is suspected to be much higher. Klikaktiv was also directly involved in reporting cases of people who have gone missing on the river Drina to the state institutions. However, state institutions were not very keen to act upon such reports nor to provide any information to family members. Instead, bodies are buried in a very short period of time, often without the autopsy and without taking DNA samples for future comparison and potential identification of the person. More on the dire situation between Serbia and Bosnia can be found in the article [“Death at the border”](#).

Klikaktiv's team also located and visited the cemetery in city Šid, at the Croatian border, where another 9 people are buried. Among them is also the grave of [Madina Hussiny](#), a 6-years old girl from Afghanistan, who was killed by a train after her family was pushed-back from Croatia and forced to walk on train tracks back to Serbia.



*Photo 3. Cemetery in Šid, near the Serbian - Croatian border (August, 2023.)*

Besides the border between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, another deadly border is the border between Bulgaria and Serbia. According to Dejan Tosić, Chief of Police Administration in Pirot, a total of 13 people on the move have died on the territory of this police administration. He [stated](#) that one person was killed in a direct conflict while others have died due to exhaustion.

***“It’s so difficult in Bulgaria. I saw dead bodies in the mountain while we were passing by. It’s so difficult to cross the mountain when you have to stay away from the main roads and hide from the police and locals. I stayed there for three days without any food.”***

*(11-years old unaccompanied boy from Syria, in a squat near the Serbian - Hungarian border, August 2023.)*




## PUSH-BACKS TO AND FROM SERBIA


Push-backs remained a common practice on all borders alongside the Balkan refugee route in the reporting period. **Between July and September 2023, 252 of Klikaktiv's beneficiaries reported that they were pushed-back to Serbia at least once.** Most of the Klikaktiv's beneficiaries have entered Serbia from Bulgaria and almost all of them have reported violent push-backs from the Bulgarian border back to Turkey. On average, people on the move were able to access Bulgarian territory only on their 6th try.

**A new trend noted in the reporting period is that more people are also reporting push-backs from the Serbian territory. Klikaktiv collected two testimonies of Austrian and German police participating in push-backs from the Serbian territory back into Bulgaria and N. Macedonia.** Most people are trying to cross from Serbia to Hungary and this is still where most people on the move are experiencing push-backs and violence from the Hungarian police - physical and psychological violence, rubber bullets and dog bites are just some of the examples. Another factor that leads to the increased number of push-backs is reintroducing police checkpoints on the internal borders within the Schengen area. Slovakia and Slovenia were among the first countries who have reintroduced police checkpoints on their borders with Hungary and Croatia, but are most likely to be followed by other countries on the Balkan refugee route as well.

## SERBIA – HUNGARY BORDER



*"Firstly, the Hungarian police officers were beating us with the police batons, and then they took our belongings - my phone and some cash. They ordered us to take off our shoes so we did. They threw away our shoes in the bushes and we had to walk back to Serbia barefoot. My feet are all bloody and covered with wounds. See how my friend and I have the same snickers now? We got them here, so that we are not barefoot anymore."*



*(a man from Afghanistan, a squat near the Serbian – Hungarian border, August 2023.)*

According to a [Schengen Visa Info](#) article, the Hungarian state authorities have prevented one million migrants from crossing the Hungarian south border since 2015 until September 2023. The Hungarian Prime Minister's Chief Security advisor stated that the number of irregular entries has been increasing throughout the 2023, with Hungarian authorities apprehending 27,600 individuals in the first quarter, 36,490 in the second quarter, and 43,300 in the third quarter of the year. Most of those people are of Syrian nationality, followed by Afghans, Turkish and Pakistani nationals, according to the Hungarian officials. Having in mind the controversial legislation and practices of the Hungarian police it is safe to assume that all those individuals were pushed-back to Serbia, without the access to asylum and international protection.

**People on the move were reporting push-backs and violence by the Hungarian police on the same level of intensity throughout the whole reporting period.** People on the move reported

that Hungarian police were beating them mostly with police batons, but police officers were also kicking them, slapping them and releasing dogs on them. Different forms of humiliation and inhuman treatment were also used by the Hungarian police – people on the move were stripped naked, their personal belongings were taken or destroyed before their eyes. People also reported that Hungarian police shot at them with rubber bullets.




***“The Hungarian police officer slapped me across the face so hard that my left ear was sore and painful for days! My ear was literally ringing!”***




*(a 16 year old unaccompanied boy from Afghanistan, in an informal settlement near Serbian – Hungarian border, August 2023.)*

During the reporting period, many people on the move were planning to use **a route via Hungary – Slovakia – the Czech Republic**, in order to avoid Austria and its checkpoints at the border with Hungary. In September 2023, Klikaktiv spoke to a family from Syria who almost reached the Slovakian territory, but they were caught by the Hungarian police just a few kilometers from the Slovakian border and pushed-back to Serbia.



***“We crossed the border between Serbia and Hungary hiding in a van. It was an ordinary, white cargo van, and a bunch of people were pushed into the cargo area. I thought I was going to suffocate, there was no air. There was no control at the border, we just drove through. We had paid a lot of money for it. But near the border with Slovakia, we were intercepted by a Hungarian police patrol. And when they opened the van and saw us, they started shouting at us and they took out the police batons. I was really scared. Then they pushed us back to Serbia and here I am again.”***



*(a woman from Syria with three underage children, in a squat near Serbian – Hungarian border, September 2023.)*

In August 2023, Klikaktiv met another family from Syria in one of the squats in the area near the Serbian – Hungarian border. An elderly woman from the family initially injured her leg while walking across the mountain called [Stara planina](#) between Bulgaria and Serbia, but sustained additional injuries while crossing the border between Serbia and Hungary. She was caught by the Hungarian police near the border and pushed-back to Serbia, without being provided the necessary medical aid although the woman was in pain and in clear need for medical attention. The Hungarian police pushed them back through the [Roszke tranzit zone](#) from where the family had to go back to the squat on their own.

**During the month of July, people on the move were reporting that Serbian police were participating and collaborating with Hungarian police during the push-backs.** Klikaktiv collected several testimonies of people on the move who claimed that Hungarian police would bring people to the Roszke transit zone and hand them over to the Serbian police officers. On the Serbian side of the border, Serbian police would force people into a bus that would be parked just on the other side of the official border crossing point. People on the move pointed [this location](#) out as the location where they were forced into the bus. From there, the Serbian police would drive them to one of the camps in Serbia, mostly to Preševo or one of the camps near Šid. A man from Afghanistan reported that he was taken to Preševo, while an unaccompanied boy stated that he was taken to a camp in [Adasevci](#)



together with other single men apprehended at the occasion. The practice of the Serbian police was confirmed on 28th June, during a [meeting](#) between locals from [Makova sedmica](#) (a village near the Serbian - Hungarian border) and government officials, in the following statement by Bojan Šoralov, the chief of police for the region: *“The Hungarian authorities are return migrants through specific transit gates on a daily basis, but until now we didn’t know how many people will they return nor when will they do it. But in the last three weeks we are aware of it and now we transport migrants to the camps in the south immediately.”* On 14th July, [CRM reported](#) that there are 1400 Serbian police officers and 75 Frontex officers at the Serbian-Hungarian border, which also raises the question of Frontex responsibility and accountability in these actions.



*“When you are caught by the Hungarian police, the most important thing is that you should not try to run and they might not beat you. When you see them, that’s it! You have to stop and raise your hands in the air. Game over.”*




*(a man from Afghanistan, near the Serbian - Hungarian border, August)*


## SERBIA’S SOUTH BORDERS

People on the move reported push-backs from Serbia’s south borders more frequently compared to the previous period. In most cases, people on the move were pushed-back to Bulgaria, since this is the most frequently used route and entry point. However, two cases stood out, one is a testimony of a **group of Afghans who were pushed back to Bulgaria by the joint police patrol of Serbian and Austrian police officers** and another one is a testimony of **two related Iraqi families who were pushed back to N. Macedonia by the joint police patrol of Serbian and German police officers**. Klikaktiv already reported details of the testimony of Afghan nationals who were pushed-back by the joint patrol of Austrian and Serbian police, which is available on [Klikaktiv’s website](#) and [Klikaktiv’s Facebook page](#).

At the beginning of September, Klikaktiv met two families from Iraq - a married couple with 3 underaged children and husband’s wife with her 4 underaged children. According to their testimony, they were pushed back to North Macedonia by the joint patrol of Serbian and German police officers in mid August, after they were caught near the village [Miratovac](#) on the Serbian side of the border.



*“It was two Serbian police officers and two German police officers. I know they were from Germany because I saw a German flag on their uniform. And because they spoke in English with Serbian police officers. They told us that we have to go back to Macedonia, that we can not go further. My daughter fell and cut her leg while we were in Turkey and that cut still hasn’t healed, see (shows the cut on the girl’s leg), I am afraid it is infected. I tried telling police officers this, but they didn’t care. They just said: “Go back!””, the woman with 4 children explained to the Klikaktiv team.*



## TURKEY – BULGARIA BORDER

Almost all people on the move who have passed through Bulgaria have reported push-backs on the Turkey–Bulgaria border as well as violence by the Bulgarian police. The violence usually happens on the border with Turkey and is followed-up by the violent push-backs, while the second most common point where people on the move experience violence by the Bulgarian police is in the capital Sofia. And although there is an increase in the [number of asylum seekers](#) in Bulgaria of almost 100% in 2022 compared to the year before, most people on the move have reported that they did not have access to asylum in Bulgaria. Any contact with Bulgarian police close to the Turkish border results in a push-back, while on the opposite side of the country, people on the move are being pushed-forward towards the Serbian border, but in both cases without the possibility to apply for asylum and be registered in Bulgaria. According to the [AIDA's](#) data, in the previous year an estimated 5,268 pushbacks were conducted by Bulgarian police which affected 87,647 persons.




***“Anyone who sets on this journey knows that he will be beaten by the Bulgarian police. They beat us, release dogs on us, they take our phones and valuables. They even take our shoes off from our feet! We have video recordings of this violence, we publish it on social media for Europe to see...but nobody cares, it keeps on happening.”***




*(a man from Afghanistan, in Belgrade, August 2023)*

In July 2023, Bulgarian police conducted an anti-smuggling operation, resulting in the arrest of 15 individuals suspected of smuggling, as reported by [Schengen Visa Info](#). During the same police operation, more than 300 migrants were detained in Bulgarian detention centers, instead of being provided protection and effective access to the asylum procedure. The police action happened at the same time when the EU Parliament passed a [resolution](#) that urges the EU Council to prioritize Schengen accession of Bulgaria and Romania by the end of this year.



***“I am traveling alone with 4 kids – three boys and a girl. The youngest boy, who is 6 years old, is my son and the others are children of my two brothers. Bulgaria was so difficult. We tried 3 times to cross the border but each time the Bulgarian police would send us back to Turkey. They beat us, all of us. They don't care that those are children, they beat everyone, they simply don't care.”***



*(a man from Syria, in an informal settlement near the Serbian – Hungarian border, September 2023)*

Many people on the move have reported that they got separated from their family members in Bulgaria due to the actions of the Bulgarian police. In September, Klikaktiv met a 10-year old unaccompanied boy from Syria who was separated from his uncle in Bulgaria by the Bulgarian police. To his knowledge, his uncle was pushed-back to Turkey so the boy had to continue towards Serbia on his own.





*A woman from Syria also reported that she was separated from her 17-year old brother when they were spotted by the Bulgarian police in a forest near Sofia. According to her testimony, the Bulgarian police started shooting in the air causing her brother to “freeze” on the spot while she started running away after hearing the gun shots. **“He is in some detention center, I think. We spoke on the phone a few days ago, he said he can’t leave that place for now. I can’t wait for him in Serbia, the smuggler said it’s my turn to go to the “game” in a few days. Can you look out for him? If he ever shows up in this place, please just look out for him”**, the woman said to the Klikaktiv’s team.*



## SMUGGLERS AND SHOOTINGS

### TERMINOLOGY USED IN THIS REPORT:

**PEOPLE ON THE MOVE and REFUGEES** are the terms Klikaktiv uses for its beneficiaries as they are more suitable to depict the position of people we serve.

**MIGRANTS** is a term that has been prescribed a negative connotation in the public discourse over the years, and it is often used in a manner that dehumanizes people who are already in a marginalized position and naming our beneficiaries migrants does not ameliorate their situation.

**SMUGGLERS** refers to individuals who engage in the criminal activity of transferring people from one country to another for a specific sum of money or in exchange for other services or benefits. More often than not, they pose an additional risk for the people they provide the transfer to. Most “high-ranking” smugglers come from the same countries of origin as refugees do, but also from countries that are on the refugee route. An organized criminal group of smugglers as a rule include a number of persons in a hierarchy, with the low ranking members present at each of the informal settlements in the border area, and in some of the official camps as well. They usually carry a weapon, either knives or fire arms at their side.

**TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS:** The line between smuggling and trafficking is more often than not blurred in the context of migration in Serbia specifically, particularly concerning some of the cases observed by Klikaktiv team in the informal settlements. It is not rare that a person who has ran out of money to pay the smugglers for “game” (an attempt to cross the border into the next country on the route), is exploited through forced labor or sexual services, suffer through various forms of violence, or have their families blackmailed to pay more money in order to have them released from capture. Most common victims of trafficking among the refugee population in Serbia are women, girls and unaccompanied boys, though there are also adult men who have been victims of these forms of abuse too.

The spread of trafficking and the increase of risk levels among the refugee population in the country can be ascribed to several factors: the official EU borders closure in 2016., slow inadequate and nonfunctional asylum system in countries on the route such as Bulgaria and Serbia, leaving refugees in the hands of smugglers as their only option to continue their journey and reach safety. Creating safe pathways to asylum would not eradicate trafficking in human beings completely, but would significantly lower the risks compared to the current situation in which refugees are forced to obey any ask posed by the organized group of smugglers as they are their only option<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> More information about smuggling and the background of the issue in Serbia can be found in our previous quarterly report [here](#).

The distinction in terminology is primarily made in order to combat the mainstream narrative in the Serbian public and media which depicts all migrants as perpetrators of violence, which have become a fairly regular occurrence in the north of Serbia, near the border with Hungary. Such narratives further harm the people on the move and the fact that they are often most common victims of smugglers and their conflicts is rarely if ever included in the media reports on the shootings.



Photo 4. Front cover of a weekly political magazine in Serbia, with a title stating "Migrants or armed gangs?", September 2023.

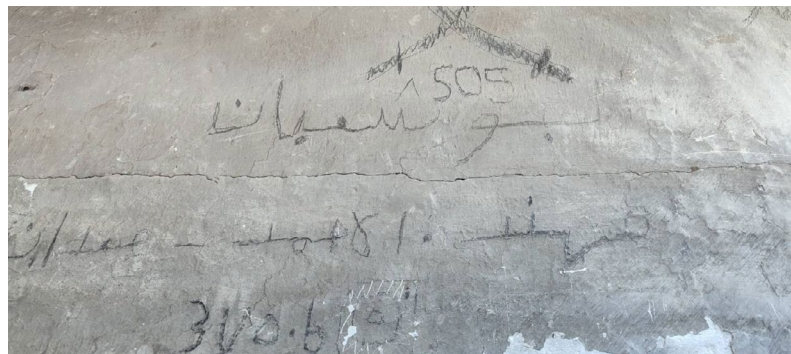
Since the first shooting that happened near Subotica in the summer of 2022, such armed conflicts had continued to be a fairly regular occurrence in the area of informal settlements in the north of Serbia, particularly near [Subotica](#) and [Sombor](#), two larger cities near the Serbian - Hungarian border. According to data gathered by the Klikaktiv team through the Ministry of Interior's official statements and the media, **there had been 5 shootings in the reporting period, in which two persons were reported killed and more than three injured.**

The first shooting in the reporting period happened near Subotica and it was reported in a statement by the MoI [here](#) (in Serbian), while the information on the incident in English is available [here](#). In the shooting a man from Afghanistan was reported killed and two other persons injured. After two days there was a mass police raid in the area in which 250 refugees are said to be transferred to a reception center. The following day Subotica's mayor was reported appealing to citizens "not to provide logistical support to migrants, so they would realize they were not welcome in this area and would finally stop coming in such large numbers." The statement was reported in the Serbian media [here](#). These series of events are an example of the government's management of the issue of armed conflicts between organized groups of smugglers: there is no distinction being made between the perpetrators and the rest of the people on the move, and the official statements from the authorities often include an anti-migrant element highlighting "safety of the locals first".



The next incident in the reporting period, in which a man from Iraq was reported<sup>9</sup> injured on August 3rd, was a precedent because the attack happened in an area densely populated by locals, unlike previous attacks which usually happened in secluded areas away from the local community. This sparked a new wave of angry outbursts in the local community and after a week a local was reported<sup>10</sup> in the media stating that they “self-organized to solve the problem of migrants”, explaining that a group of men from the local community regularly patrols the forest in which migrants are suspected to sleep rough. This comes after several appeals from the local community on how ineffective and futile police raids are, highlighting distrust they have in the government to address the issue properly. A right wing political party also issued an anti-migrant statement on the occasion, available [here](#) in Serbian. **With due understanding of the fear and worry of the locals after the dangerous incidents in their community, Klikaktiv strongly condemns such actions taken by the locals discriminatory and dangerous, and calls on the Mol to redirect their strategy of addressing the shootings to target and criminally prosecute perpetrators, instead of forcibly relocating all people on the move.**

Apart from the clashes in the north of Serbia, in the reporting period there were attacks and incidents noted in the south of the country as well, specifically in the town of [Pirot](#), near the Serbian - Bulgarian border. The town is the first larger settlement that the people on the move met upon entry to Serbia from Bulgaria, and on its outskirts also hosts one of the reception centers run by the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration. Since the end of 2022, the town has seen a significant increase in the number of new arrivals. On September 3rd 2023, it was reported<sup>11</sup> that “a group of migrants who had been attacking other migrants and extorting valuables from them was arrested, and that the police also confiscated three rifles and two guns upon the arrest.” On the occasion, the town’s mayor issued a statement in which he called upon the Commissariat “to consider the possibility of increasing capacities of the reception center in the area or the options to make it quicker for the people to move to Subotica or abroad”. A week later, there was [an announcement](#) of a locals’ protest near Niš, another city in the area, over rumors that an old clinic in a village in the area will be converted to a migrant center. The mayor denied this stating that the building is in such a bad shape “that it is not suitable even for migrants”.



Photos 5, 6, and 7. Suspected codes of various smuggling groups written on the walls of some of the informal settlements in the northern area of Serbia, July and August 2023.

<sup>9</sup> The media report on the incident can be found [here](#) (in Serbian).

<sup>10</sup> The statement was reported in the media [here](#) (in Serbian).

<sup>11</sup> This was reported in the Serbian media [here](#) and the mayor’s statement is available [here](#) (also in Serbian).



The worrying trend of the shootings was also analyzed and addressed in a piece by [The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime](#) which stated that: **“Increasing migratory pressures in Serbia have led to conflict between people smuggling groups and crackdowns on migration.** At least 125 000 migrants passed through Serbia in 2022, twice as many as in 2021 and the most since the 2015 migrant crisis, when 600 000 people moved through the country. As a result, armed conflicts between smuggling groups have escalated, prompting police to raid migrant gathering points. The EU has also called on the Serbian government to review its visa policy with countries such as Tunisia and Burundi, to clamp down on irregular migration into the EU<sup>12</sup>. [The article](#) analyzes human smuggling trends and increasing violence in Serbia following a resurgence in migration.”

On September 4th, a piece of investigative journalism on organized criminal groups of smugglers and their mechanisms of weapons supply was published<sup>13</sup>. The journalist points to two individuals of Albanian nationality from Kosovo as main supply sources, and also includes quotes from smugglers and alleged connections in the police forces. In the end of September, a man from Kosovo was reported killed and another one injured in [an attack](#) near the Serbian – Croatian border. It was stated that the injured person identified the alleged perpetrator as a man from Afghanistan.

On September 8th, four days after the piece on the smuggling and weapons supply was published, there was another shooting (reported [here](#) in Serbian), in the urban area of Subotica, in which a migrant was reported severely injured and hospitalized in the public hospital in the city (no information about his country of origin was published). On September 11th, three days after the shooting, [the injured man was reported to have died](#) succumbing to the injuries in the hospital. On the day the news about his death was published, there was [another shooting](#) in the same area, in which three persons were reported injured. On the following day there was a [mass police raid](#) in the area of Subotica where the two shootings happened, but also in the area of two other larger cities in the north of the country (Sombor and Kikinda). In the raid (depicted in a video [here](#)) 371 persons were allegedly transferred to reception centers. Two days after the raid, [the Commissar stated in a TV appearance](#) at the national media station that *“the raid shows to the citizens of Serbia that the Ministry of Interior does not allow anyone to disobey Serbia’s laws, and that the Commissariat has enough capacity to accommodate in the official centers all those who sleep rough. (...) All institutions of Serbia coordinate their activities in order to ensure the safety of Serbia’s citizens”*. On the same day, there was [a meeting of the government’s task force for mixed migratory movement](#) in which the continuation of regular police raids was announced. Again, the official statements from the meeting included discriminatory references of “migrants abusing Serbia’s hospitality” and “safety of Serbia’s citizens”.

The depicted series of events show a pattern that many shootings and their aftermath follow: a clash between organized criminal groups of smugglers, a revenge, an indiscriminate forced relocation of refugees, heavily reported in the media usually with discriminatory narrative and anti-migrant populist statements by the officials. It is worth noting here that such raids do not give any long lasting effects as the relocated refugees tend to return to the same location in a matter of days. **Moreover, these measures do not address the core issue behind the shootings which are smugglers’ networks and their criminal accountability in Serbia.**

It was published in July that 62 persons suspected of smuggling Cuban nationals were arrested in a joint operation of Europol and Interpol. [The report](#) added: *“Exploiting Serbia’s lack of visa requirements, the criminals flew the individuals from Cuba to Serbia and later transported them to Greece before reaching Spain. The investigation has revealed that an estimated 5,000 Cuban citizens were successfully smuggled into the EU”*. However, the results of the state’s fight against smuggling groups are untransparent. The Ministry of Interior is the only state institution which publicly speaks about their actions and they report on the number of criminal charges. According to the [Mol’s statement](#), they pressed

<sup>12</sup> Klikaktiv issued a statement on the issue available [here](#).

<sup>13</sup> The article is available [here](#), in English.

116 criminal charges against 162 people (142 men and 20 women) in the first 6 months of this year. In the same period, Mol also confiscated 100 vehicles that were used for this criminal act. However, neither the Public Prosecutor's Office nor the Courts have communicated towards the public on how many criminal procedures have actually been initiated based on those charges, nor how many people have been detained based on the charges and how many have been convicted. Lastly, in the beginning of October there was a report in the media on [a joint operation of the Serbian police and Interpol](#) in which refugees staying in a reception center seem to be indiscriminately and involuntarily registered (photos and videos available [here](#)). The video shows that all people on the move were fingerprinted and photographed during this joint action of Mol and Interpol, but it is not clear what prompted the action and how these people's personal data will be further used and shared.

Through its direct work on the ground, Klikaktiv has met people who have been convicted for criminal act(s) and served a jail sentence, however after they were released from jail they just (re)established their connections with smuggling networks and continued their work within the informal settlements, since there is no social program for ex-convicts nor functioning return mechanisms for foreign convicts.

## SERBIAN POLICE: RAIDS, VIOLENCE, ARRESTS

In the beginning of 2023, Klikaktiv noted<sup>14</sup> for the first time testimonies of systemic police violence over people on the move at the hands of the Serbian police. In the reporting period, this violence continued both during massive police raids and during regular patrols.

**The police raids** would usually ensue after a shooting incident in the area, when the police forces would go to several informal settlements in the area, gather everyone they would find there and forcibly transfer them to a reception camp<sup>15</sup>, usually the one in [Preševo](#), a town near the Serbian - Macedonian border. People on the move would usually return to the squats at Serbia's northern borders in a matter of days, yet they would have to pay 200 euros on average per person for a taxi, as there are no direct public transportation lines from the town to Belgrade or further north. The raids are conducted by the regular police forces, together with gendarmerie and a special forces unit, as depicted in the media coverage of the raids and as identified by the refugees in their testimonies that our team had collected on the ground. In mid-September, our team also witnessed an operation run by the gendarmerie forces at a squat in Subotica's urban area. The officers stated that the people on the move apprehended at the location "will be taken to a camp". Klikaktiv noted **11 raids reported in the media in the period July - September**.

The first raid reported on 4th July was organized in Subotica after a massive shooting<sup>16</sup> was reported in the area 8 days earlier, in which machine guns could be heard near areas populated densely by the local community. This sparked a new wave of outrage in the local community and a massive police raid<sup>17</sup> ensued in which more than 800 policemen apprehended 300 refugees and transferred them to a reception center. The raid was followed live in all mainstream media, and the Minister of Interior was present at the site too. Two weeks later [the Minister of Interior and](#)

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<sup>14</sup> More information about the issue from this period can be found in our First Quarterly Report in 2023, available [here](#).

<sup>15</sup> There is a possibility that some people on the move are deported to North Macedonia during these police actions, but we do not have any viable proof or testimonies for the time being.

<sup>16</sup> A video of this was posted online [here](#).

<sup>17</sup> One of the many media coverage of the raid, which also includes video published by the Mol, is available [here](#).



[the Commissar for Refugees and Migration met with the locals](#) in the area who expressed their anger and mistrust in the government's strategy of responding to the shootings in the area. The two high-ranking officials again highlighted that "the safety of the locals comes first". In the media conference on the occasion they stated that 6.278 migrants<sup>18</sup> had been transferred from the area to reception centers in the reporting period.

Also, five days after the shooting it was announced that [the chief of police of the region was released from duty](#), which was one of the requests of the locals' protests. The newly appointed chief of police stated<sup>19</sup> in one of his statements two weeks into the new role that "Even though reinforcements from the police units of Sombor and Novi Sad<sup>20</sup> had arrived, he would still insist that the Ministry of Interior send additional reinforcements in the form of a special unit – an operational group which would be present in the area on a daily basis and help solve the migrant crisis".

**These series of events depict a pattern in which the government of Serbia managed the response to armed conflicts between organized criminal groups of smugglers: responding with mass police raids of all people on the move indiscriminately, with populist media coverage and anti-migrant statements from high-ranking officials.**

In the following period, there were several more shootings and similar police raids. After one of such raids<sup>21</sup> in the area of Sombor in mid-August, it was reported on another raid that yet again a significant police force was deployed, that firearms were apprehended and that almost 400 refugees were transferred to the reception center in the south of the country. The Klikaktiv team visited the informal settlements the day after the raid and noted a significant number of people at each of the squats, with the same individuals suspected to be involved in the organized criminal groups of smugglers still present at all of the locations.

Several days after another series of massive shootings in the urban area of Subotica in the beginning of September, there was yet another police raid (report [here](#) and video [here](#)) in which 371 refugees are reported to have been relocated to official camps in [Sjenica](#), [Tutin](#), [Krnjača](#) and [Preševo](#), as stated by the Commissar for Refugees and Migration in a TV appearance in the national media [here](#). [The chief of police stated](#) that, besides the Subotica area, the raid was conducted in the cities of [Kikinda](#), [Sombor](#), [Šabac](#), [Belgrade](#) and [Pirot](#) as well and that a total of 619 migrants were transferred to the reception centers. The populist raids followed by the national media continued and another example in which the gendarmerie visits the informal settlements followed by the national media can be seen [here](#). These reports are usually followed by statements that "the government has everything under control", that "the local's safety is a priority" and that "the migrant issue is solved effectively". It is also worth noting that the Minister of Interior stated in the media<sup>22</sup> that "the police is effectively managing actions against migrant smugglers" just a few hours before the shooting in Subotica's urban area on September 8th, in which a person from the migrant population was killed in front of a supermarket.

Besides the raids, refugees also stated that they had been experiencing violence by the Serbian police during regular patrols. In mid-August, our team met a group of men from Afghanistan who stated that the police would not allow them to go to urban areas of Subotica for grocery shopping. If caught doing so, the police would intercept them, take away their money and even the groceries they had previously bought. The same pattern of violence, theft and intimidation

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<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that the number most probably does not represent unique individuals as a number of refugees our team had spoken to stated they had been forcibly transferred to Preševo by the police three or more times.

<sup>19</sup> The statement is available in a media article [here](#), in Serbian.

<sup>20</sup> two largest cities near Subotica, where the shooting happened

<sup>21</sup> reported [here](#), in Serbian.

<sup>22</sup> His statement was reported [here](#), in Serbian.

was reported by refugees from Syria in a squat in the rural area near Sombor, and these people were afraid they might get deported if the police found them in the city area. This is why they stated they have to pay taxi drivers to bring in the groceries and food to the squats for them. **Besides people on the move in squats near Subotica and Sombor, the same forms of violence was reported in the testimonies of refugees near Horgoš, which points out to systemic use of beating, money extortion and theft by the Serbian police.**

In July, the MSF team operating in the informal settlements in the north of Serbia, witnessed another incident of Serbian police violence. [In a statement](#) on the incident they stated: “While our team was conducting regular mobile medical activities in the area of Sombor, two vans of the local police arrived. The arrival of officers created a situation of panic and chaos. One of our patients fled the mobile clinic during consultation. We then witnessed the police chasing, gathering and beating people from the informal settlement with batons. Our doctors treated a minor who reached out to our team crying and shaking after falling off the building stairs and spraining his arm while escaping out of fear. After the incident, the police collected personal items from the group, placed the people inside the van and left the location. A medical follow-up for the group is crucial. Such use of force is utterly unjustifiable and inhumane.”



## MONITORING FIELD VISIT TO SOUTHERN ENTRY POINTS: BORDER BETWEEN SERBIA AND NORTH MACEDONIA

At the end of August Klikaktiv visited the Serbian border with North Macedonia in order to monitor the situation of people on the move at the entry point, particularly the access to services and the asylum procedure available to people on the move in the area. Also, as in our previous field monitoring visit to the Bulgarian border, we were particularly interested in the presence and conduct of Frontex and foreign border police officers; and the process of building the fence which Serbia and North Macedonia are jointly building on the border crossing point. The fence has been under construction for two years now and Klikaktiv had previously followed this process and reported on it in [a report from 2021](#) and [another report in 2022](#).

**Frontex and foreign border police:** The beginning of the Frontex operation in the area was announced [here](#). Additionally, the agency also published [a report](#) on its progress in the first month of being operational at the Serbian - Macedonian border. At the time of Klikaktiv's visit to the border area, the Frontex staff did not have the mandate to act independently from the Serbian police and ought to operate in the area only in joint patrols. In [Vranje](#), the largest city in the area, our team had noted three vehicles of **Hungarian border police** as well as two white vans with a label on them that stated only "police". Given that we had already noted unmarked vehicles which were believed to be used by Frontex in [Piro](#)t, a town near the Serbian - Bulgarian border, it is possible that is the case with the two unmarked vans as well but it cannot be claimed with certainty.



*Photo 8. The Hungarian border police vehicles in Vranje, near the Serbian - Macedonian border, August 2023.*

The locals that our team had spoken to seemed to be unaware of the Frontex presence and operations in their community, but did seem used to seeing foreign police vehicles in the area, and they were aware that these foreign police officers patrolled the border area with North Macedonia together with the Serbian police.

**The border fence:** There seems to be no visible progress on the fence construction compared to the previous year. There is construction material scattered in the mountain area of the border,

but there were no apparent new segments of the fence built and it seemed that the construction work has been abolished for the time being. Below is the map of the current fence at the border, based on the data collected by the Klikaktiv team during a visit to the area in 2022, and more data can be found in a report on the visit available [here](#). As a reminder, the fence is a double wired construction 15 meters high with a road between the two parts of about 3-4 meters wide to allow for more vehicles to pass through at the same time.



*Map of the border fence construction as mapped out by Klikaktiv in summer 2022. No progress was recorded by the summer 2023.*



*Photo 9. The border fence at the Serbian - Hungarian border as photographed in August 2023.*

**People on the move in the area:** Our team noted a high number of refugees in front of the camp in [Prešev](#), and not any in the surrounding area near the Serbian - Macedonian border. The people in front of the camp were from Afghanistan, Syria, Morocco, and several countries of sub-Saharan Africa. The Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration did not approve our request to enter the camp, stating that Klikaktiv's services are not needed in the center. The locals who run business near the camp stated that once per week a bus would transfer people on the move from the squats in the north of the country to the camp. Movement around Prešev is particularly difficult as there are no public bus transportation lines running from the town and no direct train lines to Belgrade or further up north. So people on the move are forced to pay around 200 euros per person for a taxi to drive them back up north. A significant number of refugees could be seen around the town running errands.



# OVERVIEW OF SQUATS IN THE BORDER AREAS

What are squats? The 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 approximately 28 active squats, with on average 50-150 people on the move at each location (which is a higher average compared to the previous quartal). In some squats, there can be from 15 to up to 200 individuals. People in the squats tend to group themselves along the lines of nationality, either by location (so one can find a squat with just Afghan or Syrian refugees) or within the same squat. Previously, there was a smaller number of squats which accommodated a high number of refugees and migrants, with some having as many as 600 persons at a time. **However, with frequent police raids in the previous six months people on the move tend to group themselves in smaller numbers but in more locations scattered near EU's external borders with Serbia.**

**Where are the squats located?** The Klikaktiv team continued to cover **the EU's external borders with Serbia**, namely the border with **Hungary, Croatia, and Romania**. Additionally, our team did monitoring on a monthly basis to the border between Serbia and **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, as well as a yearly field visit to the border with **North Macedonia**<sup>23</sup>. In the reporting period, Klikaktiv regularly visited 24 of the estimated **28** squats in the border area, including the most populated ones with up to 400 individuals per location.

Some of the characteristic features of a squat are: lack of safety and privacy, lack of basic facilities, no running water or electricity, isolation from the local communities, impeded access to local shops, 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 (More information about the smugglers can be found in the *Context* section of this report). Some refugees and migrants stay in a squat for a few days before continuing their journey, yet others might be sleeping rough in such inhospitable and unhealthy living conditions for several months. The duration might depend on several factors, including how much money the person can afford to pay the smugglers, their age, gender, physical fitness, mental health, if they are traveling alone or with children (especially toddlers and babies), or with an elderly family member...



*Photos 10, 11 and 12. Examples of different squats and living conditions in them, all three photographs were taken near the Serbian – Hungarian border, July and August 2023.*

<sup>23</sup> Findings of the field trip to the southern border with North Macedonia, one of the two major entry points to Serbia, can be found in the section of this report titled *Monitoring Field Visit to Southern Entry Points: Border between Serbia and North Macedonia* on the [page 21](#).





Since mid-2022, Serbian police organized regular raids of the squats, especially after a shooting between the organized criminal groups of smugglers. These raids continued throughout 2023, posing another threat to those sleeping rough in squats and prompting many refugees to hide in smaller groups in fear of being detained by the police, forcibly transferred to the south of the country or possibly deported. According to the refugees' testimonies, the police would raid the squats in early morning hours, and sometimes use physical force to detain people on the move, often destroying people's personal belongings and stealing any money found on them. Some refugees stated foreign border police officers visited the squats a few hours before a police raid would ensue, they monitored the area and did a headcount, but apparently were not present during the raids. Some of the interviewed people in the squats stated Serbian police officers extorted money from them threatening them with deportation. More information on the raids and their background can be found in the *Context* section of this report.



Photos 13 and 14. A squat in Radanovačka šuma, a forest near the Serbian - Hungarian border, after a police raid, July and September 2023.

In the reporting period, the majority of people on the move still tried to continue their journey from Serbia through Hungary and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The biggest problems that people on the move in squats referred to remain police violence at the hands of Serbian, Hungarian and foreign police officers, with other common problems being 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. In the reporting period, the smugglers exerted a high level of control not seen before, both on the access of service providers to the squats, and on the refugees and migrants being accommodated there. **There is a trend of a particular concern which indicates higher rates of trafficking in human beings in the squats.** Most often the suspected victims are women, unaccompanied boys and girls and some men, with suspected perpetrators being involved in the organized criminal groups of smugglers.

**Why do people on the move choose to stay in a squat?** The reasons stated by the people on the move interviewed by the Klikaktiv's team are: requests and control by smugglers (they are required to be in the squat expecting the smugglers' call to go for a "game"), lack of food and hygienic conditions in the official camps (mostly due to overcrowdedness of the camps in the northern area of the country), fear of detention and deportation by the Serbian police if intercepted in the urban area and others.

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, accommodation, education and legal work). 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. Some of the common myths circulating among the people on the move are: that in Italy in 6 months they can obtain "documents" (unspecified) with which they can travel within EU; that one does not have to apply for asylum to be able to live and work in France, Belgium or Germany; that if they have their fingerprints taken in Slovakia, this will not be taken into consideration during their asylum application process in Germany; that certain countries are "better" (more favorable acceptance and access to work) for certain nationalities (i.e. it is easier for Afghan persons to legalize their stay in Belgium, or for Syrian refugees in Austria etc.).



*Photos 15 and 16. Klikaktiv's team on the ground July and August 2023.*

Following are descriptions of specific informal settlements at the EU external borders, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, that Klikaktiv had worked in, in the reporting period.



# HUNGARY

Regardless of the systemic push backs, police violence, border fence and technology used in border monitoring and control, Hungary remains the most common country that people on the move go to from Serbia. In the reporting period, the informal settlements near the Serbian – Hungarian border were the most populated ones, and these were the squats where the most incidents happened: the shootings between organized criminal groups of smugglers, frequent police raids, angry outbursts in the local community. The squats are mostly formed around two bigger towns in the area: Sombor and Subotica.

There are four major informal settlements around **Sombor** and they are mostly populated by refugees from Syria. **At all of the locations the accounts of Serbian police violence during police raids have significantly risen in number and intensity.** The raids have become frequent and regularly followed after a shooting between organized criminal groups of smugglers in the area. Also, refugees and migrants stated that they are not allowed in the urban area of Sombor and that if intercepted by **the police there, the police would beat them, take their money and usher them out of the city.** This is why at all of the squats they rely on taxis (both officially registered and “unregistered ones”) to drive their food and groceries in.

Previously the most populated squat in the area of Sombor was located in an abandoned oil factory called **Sunce** in which there were up to 600 refugees and migrants accommodated in spring and early summer 2023. Yet, in June the police conducted a massive raid<sup>24</sup> of the squat and destroyed all the improvised structures that the refugees and migrants had previously built up. Yet as early as August the squat was reestablished with approximately 150 people on the move staying there. **Among them there were more than 15 unaccompanied boys from Syria, younger than 14 years old. The boys were in bad condition both physically and mentally: their clothes and hygiene were in poor shape, they were quiet and avoided eye contact with anyone, they wandered around the squat alone. Our team also witnessed smugglers taking away food and NFI from the boys, yelling at them and forcing them to kiss their hands “to show respect”, while the boys clearly seemed uncomfortable and scared.** We also learned from conversation with refugees at the squat that they are unaware of any other informal settlements, which might indicate even tighter control by the smuggling network at the squat.



Photos 17 and 18. The squat in the abandoned factory Sunce, near the Serbian – Hungarian border, September 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Mol's statement on the raid is available [here](#), in Serbian.

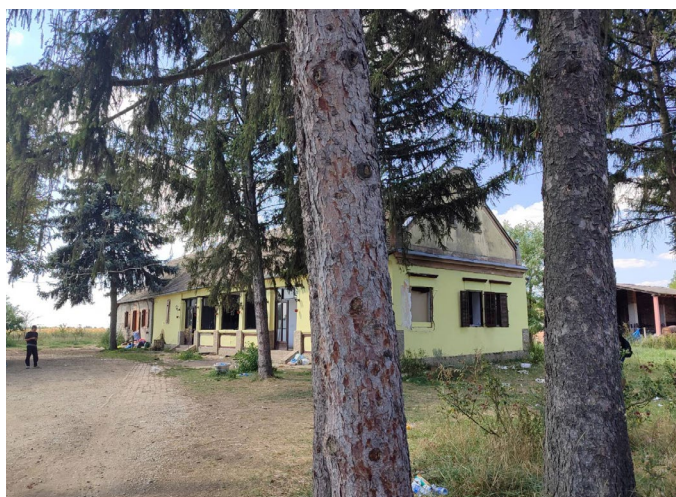
Since July, there has been a significant influx of refugees and migrants in the other three informal settlements in the area, presumably those who have relocated from Sunce or avoided it fearing more raids in the future. **So in the reporting period, there were from 50 to up to 200 people on the move accommodated at the three remaining squats each at all times. Also, in the three months our team identified a significant increase in women and children at the squats, and a significant proportion of them were traveling alone.** Furthermore, most children with the family members staying in these overpopulated squats were younger than 5 years old.

The women were usually confined to a single room and the access to them was either denied or closely guarded by people suspected to be involved in smuggling. The general conditions and relations among them point out to high risks of trafficking, although no detailed account by suspected victims was obtained in the reporting period. This is likely due to inability to have a private safe and unsupervised conversation with the women.

Besides the squat at the Sunce factory, the three other larger squats are **Odiseja**, an abandoned restaurant; **Hotel Talal**, a term among people on the move indicating a squat at an abandoned house and **Bakin Salaš** another abandoned property squatted by refugees and migrants in the area. During July, August and September, there were a minimum of 100 people on the move at each of the locations, and usually even more. During one of the field visits to Hotel Talal in early September, our team counted 400 refugees and migrants at the squat. Not all were sleeping at the informal settlement – some had left the nearby camp to meet with the smugglers at the squat and go for a “game”. There were several taxi vehicles parked in front of the squat at all times. At the end of September, we also identified 10 women at the squat (8 from Syria and two from Iraq) and four of them were traveling alone. They stated they never leave the one room where all of them were staying, that there is no running water to maintain personal hygiene and that the food is brought into the room for them and they pay for it to the “organizer” with an unknown commission.

*“I am waiting for a call from my father to tell me when I can go to “game”, he arranges it with the smuggler. I have spent two years in Istanbul. I worked there in the black market but I could not earn enough to continue my journey, so my father had to borrow the money so I could go to Europe. So I have been staying here waiting for my turn to go to the border.”*

*(an unaccompanied boy from Syria, 12 years old, in a squat near Serbian – Hungarian border, September 2023.)*



Photos 19 and 20. The squat in Bakin salaš, near the Serbian – Hungarian border, September 2023.



When referred to or asked about the camp in Sombor most refugees responded that the official camp is unsafe due to smuggling groups who are operating inside the camp. Many refugees reported that smugglers inside of the camp extorted money from them. Klikaktiv spoke to at least three men who had been previously detained in one of the detention centers in Serbia due to “public security threats and risks”, but were afterwards accommodated in an official camp in Sombor.

**Subotica** is the second larger town near the Serbian – Hungarian border with prominent migratory dynamics, with several larger and smaller squats in its area and rural parts of the municipality. Subotica was also the place where the first shooting between organized criminal groups of smugglers happened in summer 2022, in the suburban field area of **Makova sedmica**. This was also the place where the most recent shootings happened in the reporting period, during which 2 persons were reported killed and at least 3 injured. As expected, there were angry outbursts in the local community and several police raids of the squats in the area. Following are more detailed information on two largest informal settlements near Subotica, as well as four smaller ones (two in the urban area and two in forests in the municipality).

One of the oldest and largest squats in the area is located at an abandoned agricultural property in **Horgoš**, a suburban neighborhood of Subotica. It is comprised of one central dilapidated ground building with several smaller facilities and surrounding fields. People on the move who stay in this squatting area tend to sleep rough in makeshift tents hiding in the fields, as the buildings are easily accessible from the road and the police can catch them more easily there. There is no safe drinking water at the squat, and no running water whatsoever. Previously there was a DIY system which enabled the refugees to have some electricity in the squat, but the system was destroyed by the police during one of the raids, as reported by the refugees.



*Photos 21 and 22. The squat at an abandoned farm property in Horgoš, near the Serbian – Hungarian border, July 2023.*

On August 3rd, on the highway in the vicinity of this squat the Klikaktiv team witnessed a group of around 20 persons from Syria, running across the highway to the squat. There were women and toddlers in the group too. At that moment, two vehicles of **German police** were passing by, and when they saw the group, they turned on their rotation lights and started honking. The group ran away from the highway.



The second larger informal settlement in the area of Subotica is another abandoned farm called **Vitaminka**. The squat consists of several abandoned houses-like structures, and refugees and migrants from different countries are usually accommodated there: from Afghanistan, Morocco, Syria and others, usually grouped by nationality. During the period from July till the end of September, only two of the houses were occupied, with refugees from Afghanistan and Syria staying there. In mid September, these people reported **violence at the hands of Serbian police who raided the squat regularly**. They stated they are beaten if they try to run away, and if they don't the police does not use physical force, yet they are still transferred to a camp in [Preševo](#) by the police, without their consent.



Photos 23, 24 and 25. The squat at abandoned property of the Vitaminka factory, July and August 2023.



In the previous years, there were two squats in the city of Subotica itself. The first one, located at the abandoned train station, was demolished and in the reporting period there were no refugees staying at the spot.

Photo 26. The demolished building at the train station in Subotica, previously used as an informal settlement. The photo was taken on July 6th, 2023.

The second squatting location in the area is located a bit further down the tracks at an abandoned house, and this squat was active in the reporting area with primarily people on the move from Afghanistan staying there, including unaccompanied boys. They also reported frequent police raids at the squat.



**They stated that the police would also intercept them when in Subotica's urban area, take their money and tell them to go to a camp, but the nearest reception center (in Subotica) would not have them** because, as they were told, "the camp is for Arabs only". Previously, they stated they were allowed to access the camp to have a shower or see a medical



care professional, but that has been denied recently too. It is possible that the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration who manages the camps tries to avoid conflicts by segregating refugees by nationality, yet these people are not provided an alternative.

Another two smaller squats in the area of Subotica are located in the forest area of **Radanovačka šuma** and **Tavankut**. People on the move sleep in tents in the forest, usually scattered in smaller groups hiding from the police. **At this location, refugees we spoke to also reported frequent police raids during which the police destroyed the makeshift tents.** Nevertheless, the refugees keep coming to the area, albeit in smaller numbers. The smugglers' control is particularly high here, and the tensions frequently escalate, allegedly between opposing criminal groups. The situation is similar in Tavankut, yet the tents here are more adequate and despite the police raids the squat is very active with a few dozens of people on the move sleeping rough there.

The last important location at the Serbian–Hungarian border is **Srpski Krstur**, a village where there was a squat in the forest at the riverbank of Tisa, which in one of its part is a natural border between Serbia and Hungary, and people on the move did try to cross the border by boat in this area previously. However, in the reporting period the squat has been demolished and the locals our team had spoken to at the spot stated they had rearranged the area to make the riverbank accessible for the local community who wants to swim in Tisa. There was no significant migratory movement in the area for the time being, yet our team continues to monitor the situation.

## CROATIA

There are a significantly lower number of informal settlements on the border with Croatia, compared to the higher number of squats and intensity of migratory dynamics at the Serbian – Hungarian border. The only two locations with some significant activity are a squat at an abandoned building in the village of **Kuzmin**, and an informal settlement which consists of several makeshift tents in a forest in the village of **Batrovci**, both villages in the municipality of the city Šid. At both locations there are usually people on the move from Afghanistan. Some of them stay at a local's house in Batrovci, at the edge of the forest where the tent squat is located, and the local lets them use the property and the well in the yard.



*Photos 27 and 28. Taken near the squat in Batrovci, used as a transitory squat in the reporting period, near the Serbian – Croatian border, August, 2023.*

The local was recently the subject of hate speech in a popular mainstream media platform, in a text published shortly after an armed incident in the area, and is a dangerous example of public campaign against anyone who helps refugees. The text is available [here](#), in Serbian. Although the armed shootings were not as frequent here as they were on the Serbian – Hungarian border, the incident that prompted the hate speech against the local happened on 26th of September, and it presumably happened between opposing organized criminal groups of smugglers, as is often the case in the area on the Hungarian border. In the incident (reported [here](#) in the Serbian media), one person (from Kosovo) was reported dead, and another one (also from Kosovo) injured. One of the alleged perpetrators that the injured person identified in the police station afterwards is from Afghanistan.

There were no particular incidents between people on the move and the locals reported to our team in the reporting period, and the refugees also stated that there were no mass police raids, at least not in the squat in Kuzmin.



*Photo 29. The squat in Kuzmin, near the Serbian – Croatian border, August 2023.*

At the end of August, people on the move that our team had spoken to in Kuzmin also stated that the few who do try to cross the border with Croatia mostly do so hiding in trucks, and that they are often intercepted by the police who identify them on the scanners on the official border crossing. Some of them stated that **the Croatian police use physical violence: when they discover the refugees in a truck on the scanner they beat them.** The refugees stated that they did not see any foreign border police present during these incidents, and when shown Frontex staff's uniforms specifically, they stated they did not see them. As a reminder, according to the [Non-paper for Chapters 23 and 24](#) from May 2023, Frontex is supposed to be present at the border crossings between Serbia and Croatia, and might have witnessed, if not participated in the incidents of physical violence by the Croatian border police.

## ROMANIA

In the reporting period, there was no significant migrant activity at the Serbian – Romanian border, as recorded by the Klikaktiv team. The only squat in the area, located in an abandoned and dilapidated milk factory in the village of **Majdan**, was used only as a transit squat and there were no refugees and migrants sleeping rough there on a regular basis.





Photos 30 and 31. The squat in the abandoned milk factory in the village of Majdan, August 2023.

The Romanian border was not nearly as frequented as the border with Hungary, or even the Serbian – Bosnian border. The following quote shares the arguments that our team had often heard from the people on the move on the ground.

***“No, I won’t be trying to cross to Romania, it is very difficult there. The police beat you up, they take your fingerprints and then push you back to Serbia. In Hungary, the police still beat you up and push you back to Serbia, but at least they don’t take your fingerprints so you can try again.”***

*(a man from Syria, at a squat near the Serbian – Hungarian border, August 2023.)*

## BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

The number of people on the move trying to continue their journey via Bosnia and Herzegovina has been rising since May and June 2023, and the trend continued in the reporting period. After the Serbian-Hungarian border, this was the second most popular exit point from Serbia. Nevertheless, there is a distressing trend of an increase of the number of people who drown in the river Drina, a natural border between the two countries<sup>25</sup>. As a reminder Bosnia and Herzegovina are not an EU member country, and the refugees and migrants who manage to enter the country usually continue their journey to the EU via Croatia. Since 2018 when the Bosnian route became active, the most common points of crossing from the country to Croatia were from [Bihać](#) and [Velika Kladuša](#), yet during 2023 majority of the people on the move are said to have shifted their journey via [Tuzla](#), [Kostajnica](#), [Šamac](#), [Banja Luka](#), [Gradiška](#) and on to [Slavonski Brod](#) in Croatia, the first EU member state they would encounter after Serbia and Bosnia. Although the second most popular border, there are no larger informal settlements of people on the move in the area of Serbian – Bosnian border, as identified by the Klikaktiv team in the reporting period. It is assumed that most people go to the border straight from the bus stations in nearby towns: [Loznica](#) and [Ljubovija](#), or some who can afford it stay in private accommodation arranged presumably by smugglers. There is an official camp in the area in the town of [Banja Koviljača](#), which in the reporting period was scarcely

<sup>25</sup> More information about this is available in the *Balkan Death Route* section above on [page 8](#).

populated and accepting only families and unaccompanied boys to be accommodated there. The camp was re-opened on 21st September<sup>26</sup>, after renovation work. At the time, there were 12 persons accommodated in the center of capacity of 120 persons.

In mid-August, Klikaktiv team met two unaccompanied boys from Afghanistan who were accommodated at the camp in Banja Koviljača at the time, and who had been previously pushed back from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Serbia. They stated they had crossed the river Drina in a boat. On the other side the Bosnian police intercepted them, and handed them over back to the Serbian police, who drove them to the camp in Banja Koviljača. They stated neither the Bosnian nor the Serbian police were violent at the time.

As a reminder, [a video of a violent incident](#) in which Serbian police officers are shown to hit two refugee men kneeling at the official border crossing in [Mali Zvornik](#). The Ministry of Interior stated an official inquiry into the incident had been launched, and there was no information on the outcomes of the inquiry in the reporting period.



Photos 32 and 33. The squat in Loznica, near the Serbian - Bosnian border, August, 2023.

During our field visits, the Klikaktiv team had met people on the move from Afghanistan, Morocco, and the African continent (they did not wish to specify their country of origin) in the area. We identified two smaller transit squats - places where people on the move spend up to a few hours right before the game, but no refugees sleep there for a longer period of time. One of the squats is located **at an abandoned business building near the bus station in Loznica**, while the second one is at **a dilapidated abandoned paper factory on the road from Loznica to Banja Koviljača**.



Photos 34 and 35. The squat at the abandoned paper factory Viskoza, near the Serbian - Bosnian border, August 2023.

<sup>26</sup> The Commissaire visited the camp for the opening and issued a statement on the occasion available [here](#), in Serbian.



## BELGRADE

To complement our core activities of service provision and monitoring in the informal settlements at the EU external borders in the north of Serbia, our team conducts weekly field visits in Belgrade, to monitor the situation of refugees and migrants in the capital. We have mostly met newly arrived men and unaccompanied boys from Afghanistan, and the majority of them either headed further up north to the border with Hungary, or to the Serbian – Bosnian border. The newly arrived also shared gruesome accounts of the violence they experienced at the hands of the Bulgarian police, and hardships crossing the mountains between Serbia and Bulgaria<sup>27</sup>. Some who cannot continue their journey straight ahead, either because they are too injured, or have run out of money to pay the smugglers, try to go to the nearby camp in [Obrenovac](#), a municipality in the wider Belgrade area. Those who do so shared with our team that the Commissariat staff usually allows them for a night, and then orders them to leave, presumably due to overcrowdedness.

Even though there is a significant proportion of unaccompanied children among the new arrivals in Belgrade, there is no access to social workers who are mandated for child protection case management in the Republic of Serbia. Also, a facility offering free showers and laundry for people on the move and people experiencing homelessness in the area run by [Collective Aid](#), unfortunately had to close in the reporting period. This is another example in the trend of depleting resources available to refugees and migrants in Belgrade, regardless of the continuing high number of new arrivals in the area.



Photos 36 and 37. The park in Belgrade downtown where most refugees tend to gather, the writing on the garbage bin says "The park is for Serbs". September 2023.

At the same time, the police patrols and raids of the area have continued on a regular basis in the reporting period. During one of the field visits, a police patrol approached Klikaktiv team and a policemen asked our cultural mediator to convey the message to people on the move "not to stay too long in the area because if the groups become too numerous or noticeable, we would have to inform the police brigade who would come and take them to Preševo".

Even though such raids are a regular occurrence in the squats at Serbia's northern borders, in the capital they have an additional discriminatory element as they happen in an urban area where people on the move are mixed with the local population. During these raids **the Serbian police racially profiled people in the area:** they approached anyone in the area with a darker complexion, grabbed them by the arm, dragged to a police vehicle or a designated bus, and forcibly transferred

<sup>27</sup> More information about the trends and testimonies on Bulgarian police violence can be found in the Push backs section of this report, in the sub-section *Turkey – Bulgaria* border on the [page 13](#).



them to a camp, usually the one in [Preševo](#), at Serbia's southern border with North Macedonia. The police did not check anyone's ID or other documents, but just assumed who is a refugee or a migrant, based on their skin tone. Klikaktiv's team witnessed one of such raids in the end of August, and the operation had all of the elements described.

All of these police practices further inhibit the access to international protection of people on the move, and build a picture of the police as a security threat to refugees and migrants, instead of an governmental instance they would have to approach in order to initiate asylum procedure and legalize their stay in the country, according to the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection of the Republic of Serbia.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With further externalization of EU borders in the Balkan region, together with oppressiveness and systematic violence of the Serbian police towards people on the move, we can expect them to tend to avoid contact with institutions and accommodation in official centers during their stay in Serbia. This will further inhibit their access to asylum procedure and social protection, and will push them to the hands of smugglers who are likely to exert more power over the refugee population. This is also likely to increase the risks of trafficking, particularly for the women and unaccompanied boys and girls in the squats. With the likely increase of the number of refugees sleeping rough in informal settlements and continuation and potential escalation of armed conflicts between organized criminal groups of smugglers, it is likely the protests of the local community will escalate.

In order to prevent further deterioration of the refugees' position in Serbia, we propose a further set of steps to be taken as soon as possible:

1. Establish **a functioning referral system for unaccompanied children in the squats to social workers** who would conduct an estimation of the best interest of the child and propose an individualized set of measures for its safety and wellbeing. We particularly call on the Ministry of Labour to have social workers present **during police raids** in order to ensure the unaccompanied children are protected from the forced relocations, violence and retraumatization. Specifically, the social workers ought to make sure that during these raids the children are not transferred to the same camps as adults but to have them referred to a child-friendly specialized accommodation.
2. The state-run hospitals, with the cooperation of the MoI and judicial institutions if needed, to **conduct autopsy and collect and store DNA samples** in order to have the material for potential DNA comparison with family members' samples, which is a necessary precondition for identification of the missing and dead people on the move.
3. For the Serbian government to make necessary changes in the national legislation which would grant **the right to free legal aid to foreigners who have been detained** based on the provisions of the Law of Foreigners.
4. We also call upon the government of Serbia and the Ministry of Interior in particular to stop the practice of collective expulsions of refugees from its territory and follow due procedure according to the Law on Asylum granting these people an opportunity to apply for asylum.
5. We call upon the media workers in Serbia to make a distinction between smugglers on the one hand, and migrants and refugees on the other when reporting about shootings and other violent incidents in the squats, as doing otherwise further harms the already marginalized position of people on the move.



*"I regret doing this, now that I see we are not wanted anywhere, that we are humiliated, beaten and robbed on a daily basis. I regret all of this, maybe it would be better if I had stayed in Syria and waited to get killed in the street, but now I can't do even that."*



*(a man from Syria, near border with Hungary, September 2023.)*





*The photo was taken at a squat near the Serbian - Hungarian border, in summer 2023. "Canım" in Turkish means "dear".*

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