



# From migration to criminalization – growing oppressive treatment against people on the move in Serbia

Annual report for the year 2023



# ABOUT KLIKAKTIV

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

The report covers the main activities of Klikaktiv, trends and needs observed in the field, legal obstacles for people on the move in Serbia, and legal analysis of EU and Serbia's migration policies in 2023.

There is a particular focus on monitoring and documenting violent push backs from the EU member states, but also new practices when it comes to the (mis)usage of readmission agreements. The report includes testimonies of refugees who reported increased violence by police officers both on the Serbian territory and on its borders. The coordinated police action which started at the end of October 2023, after another shooting between smuggling groups, changed the situation on the groups and forced people on the move to use alternative migration routes.

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 2023:

- Significant increase in the number of border crossings towards the European Union, marking it the “highest since 2016”. According to Frontex’s [data](#), the number of recorded border crossings at the EU external borders reached approximately 380.000, which is an increase of 17% compared to the year before. The Central Mediterranean route was the most active one, followed by the Western Balkans and lastly Eastern Mediterranean route.
- Throughout the year 2023, a total of 108.828 people on the move were accommodated in official, state-run camps in Serbia, according to the [data](#) of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of Serbia. This is a decrease of 12% compared to the previous year. The most common countries of origin, when it comes to people accommodated in official camps, were Syria, Afghanistan, Morocco, Pakistan and Turkey.
- Klikaktiv recorded an increase in the number of informal settlements and people on the move who were residing in them. In 2023 Klikaktiv reached a total of 8.438 people on the move, mostly from Syria, Afghanistan and Turkey. Klikaktiv also recorded a total of 42 informal settlements on the Serbian territory (most of whom are located on the north border with Hungary), compared to the end of 2022 when the total number of squats was 31.
- Most of the people on the move did not have access to asylum procedure in Serbia, since only 1.654 of them were registered for asylum and 196 of them actually submitted asylum application. In the year 2023, only 9 people were granted asylum in Serbia, while 59 of them received negative decisions, according to the UNHCR’s [data](#).
- Push-backs from the neighboring EU Member States continued throughout the entire year. Until the end of October, most of the push-backs happened at the Hungarian border since this was the most active route. Towards the end of the year, the route shifted towards Croatia which resulted with more push-backs from this border. Also, Croatian authorities started deporting more people back to Serbia based on the readmission agreement between two countries.
- People on the move were reporting more push-backs from the Serbian south borders, including the use of violence and humiliation. Also, there were more reports about the police violence on the Serbian territory, especially during the police action and eviction of informal settlements during the months of November and December.
- The number of people on the move who drowned in river Drina, while trying to cross the border from Serbia to Bosnia and Herzegovina significantly increased. In 2023, a total of 9 bodies were buried in the local cemetery in city Loznica (Serbia) and none of them were identified, but instead their graves are only marked as “NN” persons.



## SNAPSHOT OF KLIKAKTIV'S WORK IN 2023

Depending on the place where they currently are, whether it is in Belgrade or on some of the exit points from Serbia, refugees that Klikaktiv's team encountered in its field work had similar questions and needs. Their questions were related to the asylum and other relevant procedures in Serbia and in the EU (possible resettlement and relocation procedures, family reunifications and others), their rights and duties and access to services – especially health care, asylum procedure, accommodation, employment and education. Their needs, on the other hand, were practical and urgent, practical in terms of the lack of basic life necessities such as food, adequate shoes and clothes, clean underwear and hygiene products, and urgent in terms of health needs, bearing in mind that Klikaktiv often encountered people with serious health conditions and physical injuries caused by the harsh conditions in which they live, but also the violence they suffer during the journey, both by smugglers and the police.

The primary goal of Klikaktiv's work was focused on legal advising and providing adequate and timely information and answers in relation to the issues encountered in the field, so that the refugees can make informed decisions on their safety and wellbeing, and responding to the needs of people on the move through the distribution of adequate NFI assistance – tents, blankets, underwear and hygiene items and a station for mobile phone charging. Of great importance was also psychosocial support for those who were in vulnerable and sensitive position, especially to women and unaccompanied minors.

Klikaktiv provided its services mostly in informal settlements – squats in the border area, where people on the move are gathering before they leave Serbia. Although their first intention is to leave Serbia, and although it is the fact they are at the exit point, this doesn't mean it will happen due to multiple reasons – lack of money to continue the journey, fraud by smugglers, push-backs by the border police, physical injuries, etc. In 2023, Klikaktiv regularly visited 33 informal settlements alongside the border area. Throughout the year, these settlements accommodated between 30 and 600 people at the time. The most active informal settlements were alongside the Serbian-Hungarian border, especially around cities Sombor, Subotica and Horgos.

**Bearing in mind that a significant number of people on the move that Klikaktiv met during 2023 had encounter violent push backs from EU member states (Hungary, Croatia and Romania), but also suffered systematic violence by the Serbian police authorities that intensified especially in the northern border areas, one of Klikaktiv's main focuses was gathering the testimonies about these experiences.** Push-back is a term referring to a situation when people on the move are collectively returned from one country to the territory of another country they entered from, without due legal procedure and consideration of their individual cases, asylum claims or risks they might face in the country they are being returned to. The focus of the monitoring methodology used by Klikaktiv is collection of following types of information: was the person granted access to the territory of the EU member state and was the person allowed to claim asylum once in the country (access to asylum, accommodation, health care, legal aid, if they were detained etc.). The other segment of testimonies and information we gathered was related to questions about what services and legal options were available to the person once they were pushed back in Serbia and what were the barriers they encountered in accessing the legal and social protection system in Serbia. In 2023, a total of 1.622 Klikaktiv's beneficiaries reported to be pushed back at least once. Most of them reported push backs from the Hungarian territory, since this was the most active route. **Besides the push-backs happening on the Serbian south and north borders, many people also complained about the push-backs and extreme violence by the Bulgarian police on the Turkish-Bulgarian border.**

In 2023, Klikaktiv continued with gathering information about missing people and death cases, especially on the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the area of Drina river. Klikaktiv recorded 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. **In 2023, a total of 9 bodies were buried in the local cemetery in Loznica and none of them were identified, but instead their graves are only marked as “NN” persons. According to the unofficial information that Klikaktiv collected, it is all adult men and they all drowned in river Drina.**


Besides the core activities through the outreach work in the border areas, Klikaktiv also informs, advises and represents asylum seekers through their asylum procedure in Serbia. In 2023, 8 asylum seekers were represented before relevant public authorities and supported by Klikaktiv’s legal counselor through the asylum procedure.

Klikaktiv also organized free trainings on legal frameworks regarding the asylum and other relevant legal procedures in Serbia to other humanitarian workers, volunteers and activists.

Through its work Klikaktiv aims to provide support and assistance to all displaced people in Serbia, including those who are in more vulnerable and sensitive position such as unaccompanied and separated children, women, disabled and elderly, those who face with intersectional discrimination because of the country they came from, the color of their skin, religion, ethnicity, gender or age.



# KLIAKTIV'S WORK IN 2023: DATA

 TOTAL NUMBER OF BENEFICIARIES IN 2023: **8438**


NUMBER OF MEN: **7062 (83.69%)**

NUMBER OF WOMEN: **301 (3.57%)**


NUMBER OF CHILDREN (including UASB): **1075 (12.74%)**


NUMBER OF UASB: **726 (<14 – 200, 15-17 – 526) (8.6%)**

NUMBER OF CHILDREN WITH FAMILY MEMBERS: **349 (boys – 177, girls – 172) (4.14%)**

 NUMBER OF SERVICES (legal advising and psychosocial counseling) – **13793**  
NUMBER OF NFI AND FOOD ITEMS DISTRIBUTED: **4302**

 NUMBER OF FIELD VISITS IN 2023: **99**  
NUMBER OF VISITED SQUATS: **33**

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

 **Number of people by country of origin:**  
Syria (Arab) – **5529 (65.53%)**  
Afghanistan – **1705 (20.21%)**  
Morocco – **466 (5.52%)**  
Turkey (Turkish) – **357 (4.23%)**  
Other – Iraq (Arab), Algeria, Egypt, Turkey (Kurdish), Pakistan, Tunisia, India, Burundi, etc. – **4.51%**



Majority of people on the move came from Syria – 65.53% and from Afghanistan – 20.21%, and combined they represent 85.74% of the population of people on the move to whom Klikaktiv provided services in 2023.

The rest of the population of people on the move – 14.36% was from Morocco, Turkey, Iraq, Algeria, Egypt, Pakistan, Tunisia, India, Burundi, etc.

Although at the beginning of the year, the majority of people on the move in Serbia were from Afghanistan, there is a notable increase in the number of refugees from Syria in the second quarter of 2023. These were mostly secondary migrations, and the majority of Syrian refugees continue their journey from Turkey with the number expected to increase. There is also another secondary movement which Syrians from Lebanon take to Serbia and further on to EU member states, which is also likely to see an increase in numbers. This trend remained present until the end of the year which is visible in the number of people coming from Syria.

# SNAPSHOT OF KLIKAKTIV'S WORK IN THE FOURTH QUARTER OF 2023 (OCTOBER – DECEMBER):

Klikaktiv provided a total of 4.062 legal and psychosocial services to **2174 unique beneficiaries in the period from October until the end December 2023**. The number of new beneficiaries is significantly lower compared to the previous reporting period due to the extensive police action aimed at suppressing irregular migration, which was carried out after a conflict between smuggling groups in the vicinity of Subotica at the end of October 2023. You can read more about the action itself at page number [9](#).

**In the final three months of the year 2023, Klikaktiv reached a significantly higher number of women and children – a total of 19% of all beneficiaries were women and children (compared to the period July – September when women and children made 6% of total beneficiaries).** The main reason for this trend is an increase in the arrival of Turkish citizens in this period, with a high number of women and children. They were using the visa-free regime to arrive in Serbia from where they continued their journey towards the countries of the EU, with the help of smugglers. Turkish citizens were mostly staying in hostels and hotels in Sombor and Subotica, some of which were connected with smuggling groups in the past, but they were also passing through informal settlements on their way to the border and this is where Klikaktiv's team was able to reach them. Most of them said that they decided to leave their country after they have lost their homes and/or jobs in the [earthquake](#) from 6th February 2023.

**In the period from October until December 2023, most of the Klikaktiv's beneficiaries were from Syria (60%), Afghanistan (15%) and Turkey (15%).** Refugees from these three countries comprised 90% of all people in the border area that Klikaktiv provided services to. The Klikaktiv's team also served people from: Morocco, Egypt, Algeria, India, Cameroon, Burundi, Iraq (Arab, not Kurdish), Pakistan, and the African continent (all combined approximately 10%).

**In this period Klikaktiv had 33 field visits in which 25 different locations were visited (including two new locations in Principovac and Berkasovo at the Croatian border after this route became the dominant one towards the end of the year).** Klikaktiv visited and monitored all borders on the north of Serbia, including the border with Hungary, Croatia, Romania and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Also, in the same period, Klikaktiv represented 4 asylum seekers before relevant state authorities and provided them legal assistance through the asylum procedure. In addition, 36 humanitarian workers, volunteers and activists were provided legal information and training on the domestic legal framework when it comes to asylum and protection of people on the move. In the same period, Klikaktiv's team had 26 media interviews, guest lectures, interviews with researchers and participation at conferences and other migration-related events.





## CONTEXT

### general situation of people on the move, including important events from the final quarter of the year (October – December 2023) that significantly influenced the migration situation in the country

**Shooting between smugglers in October 2023 and police action that followed** – The year that began with recorded cases of people reporting systematic violence by the Serbian Police – mostly physical violence, threats of deportation, money extortion and stealing personal belongings of value such as mobile phones, clothes, sometimes even food, after the intensification of interneine conflicts between smuggling groups on the northern borders in October, ended with the escalation of violence and raids by the police and frequent arrests, transfers and push-backs of a larger groups of people on the move, especially those who were staying at squats in the border areas.

This event was preceded by the another one in which 516 refugees on the territory of Subotica and Sombor (in the centers as well as in the squats) were subjected to control in the international operation [Hotspot](#), which was organized by the General Secretariat of Interpol at the beginning of October. As stated by the MoI, the aim of this action was the combat against illegal migration and human trafficking, as well as the identification of illegal migrants, members of terrorist organized criminal groups engaged in smuggling and human trafficking. As shown in the pictures on the website of the MoI, fingerprints of people on the move were collected but it is not stated for which purpose nor where will they be stored and who will have access to them. Besides Interpol police officers, members of the Criminal Police Directorate, the Border Police Directorate, the Directorate of Technique, as well as the police departments of Sombor and Subotica participated in this action.

On October 27, members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Special Anti-Terrorist Units, Gendarmerie and Anti-Terrorist Group Units for the security of certain persons and facilities, carried out an extensive police action in the areas of Subotica, Sobor and Kikinda aimed at suppressing crimes related to irregular migrations. In this action, the police found 54 Turkish passports, and arrested two Albanians from Kosovo who are suspected of smuggling migrants and supplying them with weapons. Beside that, four Afghan citizens and two Turkish citizens were arrested after the clash between two groups of migrants with firearms in Horgosh, when three irregular migrants were killed and one was wounded.

The actions of the police from the end of October are not a new thing, they show a well known 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. What has changed compared to some previous periods is the expansion of the scope of action, from the northern and eastern borders and the area of Pirot, and the duration of these actions, which have been extended until the end of 2023, to a greater or lesser extent. During police raids, all refugees found in squats were transferred to some of the reception centers within the country.

On November 19, Minister of Police Bratislav Gasic visited Sombor and stated that the action of the MoIA of the Republic of Serbia regarding the suppression of irregular migration will continue until the last smuggler is arrested. On that occasion, he also said that the police forces of the Republic of Serbia had displaced 1,102 migrants during the previous night and that there would be no more migrants in Sombor, at least not in the number they were until now, as if all the others they find here would also be displaced.

During the visit to the members of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Palic, Minister Gasic reiterated once again that the police will persistently carry out the action until the problem of irregular migration is solved and the chain of people smuggling is cut completely.

In the second half on November, in this action of suppressing irregular migration, which is being carried out by the order of the Minister of the Interior, Bratislav Gasic, and led by the assistant director of the police, police general Dejan Lukovic, members of the MoIA found a total of 6,399 irregular migrants who were hiding in the border zones in the area of Sombor, Subotica, Kikinda and Pirot.

The police controlled 134,542 vehicles and 378 buildings, the largest number of which were in Subotica, while eight smugglers were arrested, and 253 people were detained for various criminal offenses. Since the beginning of the operation, hundreds of police officers have found 29 automatic rifles and 10 pistols, 3,120 pieces of ammunition of different calibers, hundreds of foreign passports and narcotics through a detailed inspection of the terrain.

During the police action many people on the move have been sentenced to jail across Serbia, but it is unclear on what grounds. Klikaktiv recorded on the ground that many people have been sentenced to jail as a misdemeanor sentence for illegal residency or illegal entry into the Serbian territory and were sentenced to 20 days in jail, on average. It seems that people were quite randomly jailed and fined by the misdemeanor courts, rather than it was a part of an organized anti-smuggling action. As reported by refugees, they never had an interpreter provided nor the access to an effective legal remedy in the misdemeanor court proceeding. Also, during this police action many people were detained in one of the administrative detention centers in Serbia.

**EU Communication on EU enlargement policy** - In November 2023, the European Commission published [the report](#) on Serbia's progress within the EU enlargement process (the Progress Report). Serbia was praised for the adoption of [Schengen Action Plan](#) in July 2023, for aligning its visa policy with the EU by (re)introducing visa requirements for 6 countries and an effective implementation of the EU-Serbia [Readmission Agreement](#).

Serbian Government adopted the [The Strategy of the integrated border management](#) for the period from 2022 until 2027 which is praised by the EU because it puts special emphasis on the "efficient registration of irregular migrants and their processing" but also on "return procedures to either the country of origin or the country of previous entry". The Strategy noted that Serbia has increased its capacity to accommodate foreigners who have illegally crossed the border (probably referring to two new detention centers in Dimitrovgrad and Plandiste) with the aim to improve the forced removal process and to improve the voluntary assisted return procedures. As stated in the Progress Report, Serbia has started the negotiations on signing the readmission agreements with Argentina, Belarus, Georgia, Turkey and Ukraine. In addition, it is expected by the EU for Serbia to start readmission negotiations with other most common countries of origin, such as Afghanistan, Algeria, Iraq, Iran, Morocco and Pakistan.

The Progress Report also provided statistics on the implementation of the EU – Serbia Readmission Agreement for the year 2022: total of 679 third-country nationals were returned from neighboring Member States (mostly Romania and Croatia), while Serbia returned only 191 individuals under the same Agreement. Klikaktiv already reported about the dangers of the readmission practise and how they are violating basic human rights, including the right to asylum, but also how they are used by the Member States to avoid their obligation to assess asylum claims. More on this topic can be found in Klikaktiv's report [Formalizing Pushbacks](#).

**NPM's report on the visit to detention center in Dimitrovgrad** - In December 2023, National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture (NPM) published the [Report](#) regarding the visit to detention center in [Dimitrovgrad](#). Klikaktiv visited this detention center as part of the NPM team. The main concern of the NPM is the lack of medical aid for foreigners who are detained in this detention center, since there is no presence of medical staff in the center. The Ministry of Health can cover only the costs of urgent medical care for people who are detained. Another main concern is that people who are detained in administrative detention are not entitled to free legal aid according to the provisions of the [Law on Free Legal Aid](#), but instead they have to cover all of the legal fees and costs. The Serbian Legal Bar Chamber has delivered the list of lawyers who have expressed interest to represent foreigners who have been detained in administrative detention and the list is available to detainees. However, the legal fees and costs are very high which is the main obstacle for people on the move to actually hire a lawyer.

**NPM's visit to the detention center in Plandiste as part:** On 18th October Klikaktiv, as part of the [NPM team](#), visited the detention center in [Plandiste](#), which is officially running since August 2022. This was NPM's first visit to this detention center. The official report about this visit will be published on the NPM's [website](#).

**Balkan death route** – As previously [reported](#), Klikaktiv visited the local cemetery in Loznica, city near the border with Bosnia, in August and located 9 graves marked as “NN”, all of whom belong to people on the move who drowned in river Drina while trying to reach Bosnian shore. On 8th of November, Klikaktiv again visited the cemetery only to discover that additional 4 bodies were buried since the last visit, making it a total of 13 unmarked graves of people who lost their lives on the Serbian–Bosnian border.

In October 2023, Klikaktiv was contacted by a family member of 25-year old Amid\* (not his real name) from Morocco who disappeared in July 2023 and the family was informed that he lost his life while trying to cross the border from Serbia to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The family is hoping to locate and transfer his body back to the home country so they can bury him there, which would also bring some closure to the family. Klikaktiv requested the information from the Police Administration Sabac whether the body which matches Amid’s description was found, and also to report him missing if the body was not found, but the Police Administration never responded to this request.



*“Pictures from the local cemetery in Loznica”*

## PUSH-BACKS ON THE SERBIAN SOUTH AND NORTH BORDERS

**Out of 8.438 Klikaktiv's beneficiaries throughout the year 2023, 1.622 of them reported to be pushed-back at least once.** Most of the push-backs were happening from the Hungarian territory back to the Serbian territory, since this was the most active border in 2023. However, people on the move continued reporting push-backs from the Croatian border and to a smaller extent also the push-backs from the Romanian border. Most of those push-backs involved severe forms of physical and psychological violence (beatings with police batons, kicks while wearing heavy police boots, slaps, dog bites, different forms of humiliation, curses, etc.). People on the move were never able to apply for asylum, even when they expressed their intention to seek asylum and were in need of international protection. When it comes to the push-backs from the Hungarian territory, most of the push-backs were happening through the [Roszke tranzit zone](#) where the Hungarian police would bring people on the move and keep them for a few hours before pushing them back to Serbia. Perpetrators of these push-backs were mostly Hungarian police officers, but people on the move also reported that foreign police officers were involved in these actions (including violence actions against people on the move) as well as Hungarian [Border hunters](#). Also, **towards the end of 2023, people on the move started reporting push-backs from the Serbian territory back to Bulgaria/North Macedonia more frequently.** In many cases, these push-backs also involved use of violence.

**In the period between October and December, 520 of people on the move reported being pushed-back from the Serbian north borders.** In October most people were pushed-back from Hungarian territory as this was still the dominant route. However, after the big police action which started at the end of October and eviction of squats and official camps in the north, most people on the move have shifted their route towards Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, so most of the people reported push-backs from the Croatian border.

In October, **Klikaktiv met a woman from Syria who was pushed-back from Hungary after her husband and herself were severely injured in a car accident in Hungary.** According to her statement, Hungarian police chased the car they were in and when the driver smuggler refused to stop, the police car hit their vehicle in order to forcibly stop it. The vehicle crashed on the side of the road and both her and her husband were injured. Her husband was taken to hospital, as he suffered a potential rib fracture, but she was pushed-back to Serbia immediately. The woman claimed that she begged Hungarian police officers to allow her to stay with her husband and to apply for asylum, which they refused. Without any contact or updates on her husband's health, she was forced to return to one of the informal settlements in city [Sombor](#), where Klikaktiv's team met her. At this time, she was the only woman in the location, which made her extremely vulnerable and put her in high risk of sexual exploitation and human trafficking.



*"I don't know if my husband is dead or alive. The last time I saw him, he was taken by the ambulance. Hungarian police didn't allow me to go with him nor to leave him a mobile phone so we could stay in touch. I don't know what to do now.", a woman from Syria who was separated from her husband in Hungary.*



Another reported push-back happened on 23rd of October 2023 when a group of men from Morocco crossed the border and entered Hungarian territory near the city [Szege](#) where they were caught by the patrol of the Hungarian police. According to their testimony, a group of 4 Hungarian police officers started beating them with batons while another 3 police officers were standing aside and filming the whole attack. **Two men from Morocco suffered severe injuries - one of them had a deep cut on his forehead and the other one had a cut on the back of his head.** Police officers were beating them for several minutes, until one police officer told them it's time to stop the beating.

The Moroccan man, who had a cut on his forehead, was the only one taken to the ambulance in Szegen where he received the urgent medical care and his wound was cleaned, and then the whole group was pushed-back to Serbia though Hungarian [transit zone Roszke](#) at the border. Both men received medical assistance in the hospital in [Subotica](#) and then went to the official [camp](#) in Subotica. Klikaktiv's team met them in front of the camp on 25th October. They complained that they did not receive any food on the previous day, nor on that day, because there was not enough food in the camp for all people who were staying there. Also, there wasn't any medical staff in the camp, which is why they had to go to the city's hospital on their own. They also stated that many people who are pushed-back during the night come to the camp and but they have to sleep rough (just in sleeping bags) in front of the camp.



*“Head injuries of two Moroccan men, sustained during the push-back and violence of Hungarian police”*

During the months of November and December the migration route shifted and most of the people on the move were trying to cross the border of Bosnia and Herzegovina or Croatia. Many refugees have reported that they were prevented by the Serbian police officers from reaching the Bosnian border in the city Loznica, which forced them to use alternative transportation methods and/or routes to the Bosnian border. Klikaktiv did not collect testimonies of the push-backs from the Bosnian territory. Until November, both of these routes were used mostly by Afghan nationals, but after November these routes were also used by Syrian refugees.

**On the other side, the number of push-backs from the Croatian border significantly increased.** Until November 2023, the route through Croatia was mostly used by Afghans, but the demography significantly changed when the informal settlements were evicted and most of the Syrian refugees started using this route as well.

In November, Klikaktiv interviewed a man from Afghanistan who tried to cross the Serbian-Croatian border hiding in a truck, but he was caught and beaten by the Serbian border police at the official border crossing "[Batrovci](#)". According to his statement, they released police dogs on him, but he was not severely injured because he was wearing a wide and thick pair of pants.



*"I got really scared when police officers released dogs on me. They release dogs on refugees as if we are not humans. I will not go on the Game to Croatia anymore. Nowadays everybody goes to Bosnia, I think I will do the same."*, man from Afghanistan.



Another man from Afghanistan reported that he also tried to cross the border hidden in the truck but he was discovered by the Croatian police officers who beat him with the police batons and also released police dogs on him. After the event, he also decided to go towards the Bosnian border.



*"Some of my friends made it to Bosnia last night and tonight they will go towards Croatia from there. I am waiting to hear from them and if they make it, I will take the same route. I know it is very dangerous to cross the river at the border with Bosnia, but I think the river is safer than the Croatian police who were beating me and released dogs on me. Yes, I will take my chances with the river."* man from Afghanistan.



During November and December, Syrians were mostly trying to cross the Croatian border on foot at the "green border", but they were also often pushed back and beaten by the Croatian police officers. Group of Syrian refugees reported that they were few kilometers deep into Croatian territory when they were caught by the Croatian police who immediately started beating them. Croatian police then put them in a police van and drove them near the official border crossing and yelled at them to go back to Serbia. Serbian police officers witnessed the incident but ignored it, according to the testimony of the group.



*"We walked across the border with Croatia but the Croatian police soon caught us. They started yelling at us and they were randomly hitting us with police batons. They hit us on the legs, arms, faces...they hit everywhere, they don't care. They returned us to Serbia near the border crossing, just down this highway. Serbian police were present but they did not do anything. We walked to this camp and here we are now."* man from Syria who was part of a group that was pushed-back from Croatia. Klikaktiv's team interviewed him near the camp in [Adasevci](#).



**In December 2023, people on the move also reported that they were pushed-back from the Serbian territory back to Bulgaria and that they were victims of police violence during these actions.** The cases of push-backs from the Serbian territory were also happening in the past but they were rarely violent.

Towards the end of December, Klikaktiv spoke to two men from Syria who claimed to be pushed-back from Serbian territory back to Bulgaria. According to their testimony, they crossed from Bulgaria to Serbia via river Timok (for the 15km of its run the River Timok is a natural border between two countries) in a rubber boat, but the Serbian police caught them and confiscated the boat. **The police officers then forced them into a freezing river and they had to swim back to the Bulgarian shore.**



***“Serbian police forced us into the river at the border between Serbia and Bulgaria, but the Romanian border was also near. They ordered us to go back to Bulgaria. The water was freezing.”*** man from Syria who was pushed back from Serbia.



*“River Timok”*

Following this testimony, Klikaktiv’s team visited the region of city [Negotin](#) and villages on the Serbian side of the border with Bulgaria at the end of December. People on the move were not visible in this region, since there are no official camps nor informal settlements nearby, but Klikaktiv spoke with locals who said that they do see people on the move occasionally, usually in smaller groups. **An owner of a local restaurant told Klikaktiv that he was instructed both by the Serbian police officers and Frontex officers to immediately call them if he sees any people on the move, which he does do.** The owner said that he had called the police on several occasions when he spotted refugees alongside the local road, and the police patrol would immediately come and collect the group. He was unsure what happened with refugees after the police collected them but he believes that they were taken to official camps. He said that Frontex officers are regularly patrolling with the Serbian police officers alongside the border area.

Klikaktiv collected another testimony of a man from Syria who was pushed back and beaten on the [Balkan Mountains](#) (*Stara planina*) by the Serbian police. According to his testimony, he traveled as a part of a group of men and they almost reached the city [Dimitrovgrad](#) when the police patrol stopped them, beat them and drove them to the green border with Bulgaria. The man showed a picture of himself on his phone showing his bloody nose and forehead, but he was reluctant to share this picture with Klikaktiv, fearing the possible retaliation.



***“We almost made it to Dimitrovgrad when the Serbian police caught us. They started beating us randomly, one police officer hit me in the head with the police baton. Here, I have a picture of my bloody nose and forehead. Police told us that we have to go back to Bulgaria so they put us in a police van and drove to the forest at the border. They just yelled Go,go,go!”***, man from Syria.



## **THE CASE OF CHAINED PUSH-BACK ON THE BALKAN ROUTE – TESTIMONY OF ABBAS\* FROM SYRIA**

On 19th of October 2023, Klikaktiv interviewed a Syrian man who claimed that he was illegally pushed-back several times along the Balkan refugee route and that he was a victim of a chained push-back from Serbia to Bulgaria and then to Turkey. The chained push-back forced him to shift route on the second try and go from Turkey to Greece and Albania where he was again pushed-

back to Greece. The Syrian man presented himself as Abbas\* (not his real name) and the interview was conducted in one of the informal refugee settlements on the outskirts of city Sombor with the assistance of an Arabic interpreter.

According to his testimony, he originally entered Serbia from Bulgaria in July 2023 but he was pushed back by Serbian police officers. Together with him, a married couple from Syria was also pushed back to Bulgaria. Woman had serious health problems so they jointly went to the nearby police station in a village in Bulgaria. He could not name the village, but he says it was near the train tracks that lead from Serbia into Bulgaria. Instead of registering them as asylum seekers and providing them protection and health care, Bulgarian police placed them into a police van and illegally expelled them to Turkish territory. He was then forced to pay another smuggler to take him from Turkey to Greece and then to Albania.

Abbas\* claimed that he was illegally expelled from the Albanian territory back to Greece six days ago by the patrol made by Frontex officers. He described their uniforms, claiming that officers had "Frontex" badges on the shoulder. Subsequently, Klikaktiv team showed him a picture of Frontex uniforms and he confirmed that those were the uniforms which were worn by officers who pushed him back to Greece. According to his testimony, he entered the territory of Albania, but few kilometers into its territory he was caught by the Frontex staff, and although he expressed his intention to seek asylum, they forced him to go back to the Greek territory and ignored his asylum claim. He stayed in Greece for another day and the following day he crossed into Albanian territory and continued the journey towards Serbia.

Frontex and Albania have signed the new cooperation agreement on 15th of September 2023, giving Frontex wider executive powers. The new cooperation agreement with Frontex is one of the deliverables of the EU's Action Plan for the Western Balkans, which Klikaktiv already criticised. Also, this case is relevant in the context of the new Italy - Albania deal as it proves that Albania can not be considered as a safe third country.

## **(MIS)USAGE OF READMISSION AGREEMENT BY CROATIAN AUTHORITIES**

Most people on the move were illegally pushed back by the Croatian authorities in the period of November and December 2023, but Klikaktiv also recorded the new practice of Croatian authorities in which people on the move were deported back to Serbia based on the readmission agreement between the two countries. **This practice basically legalized push-backs and allowed Croatian authorities to deport people on the move back to Serbia instead of providing them international protection.**

Klikaktiv spoke with three young men from Syria who were deported on 7th of December 2023 from Croatia to Serbia based on the readmission agreement, despite the fact that they wanted to apply for asylum in Croatia. One of them, who will be referred as I.K. in this report, still had legal paperwork issued both by the Croatian and Serbian authorities with himself, while the other two destroyed these documents but they confirmed that they received the same documents and that they were together the whole time.

I.K. and other two men entered the Croatian territory during the night between 4th and 5th of December and they were caught by the Croatian police only a few kilometers away from the border. They tried to apply for asylum, but Croatian police officers simply responded to them: **"No asylum in Croatia!"** and took them to the police station in town [Otok](#) where they issued them a Decision on expulsion order (*Rješenje o protjerivanju*). With this decision, I.K. is banned from entering the European Economic Area for the period of one year and it is stated that he will be forcefully removed to Serbia. He received the same document translated into Arabic language, but they did not have access to legal aid nor the possibility to appeal on this decision. They were then transferred to the [detention center](#) in [Tovarnik](#), which is located just a few meters away from the border with Serbia. They spent two days in this detention center and on the 7th of December they were deported from Croatia to Serbia. Croatian authorities issued the travel document to I.K. so that he can legally cross the border from Croatia to Serbia. It is important to note that I.K. did not have any identification documents from the country of origin which would help Croatian authorities to identify him, but



instead they issued him the travel document and identified him simply based on his oral statement. This can potentially be heavily misused in the future as it could allow for the Croatian authorities to conduct collective and massive deportation back to Serbia almost automatically, without ever actually verifying people's identity and their nationality.

I.K. and other two men were handed to the Serbian police officers at the official border crossing [Bajakovo - Batrovci](#) from where the Serbian police took them directly to the [misdemeanour court](#) in Sid and they were fined with 6.000 RSD (50 EUR) each for illegally crossing the border from Serbia to Croatia on the night between 4th and 5th December. All three of them paid the fine on the spot and they were then released and went to the official camp in [Adasevci](#). I.K. still had the court's verdict (*Пресуда*) with himself and he allowed Klikaktiv's team to photograph all of his documents. Klikaktiv met these three men on 8th of December in front of the camp in Adasevci and they all stated that they are planning to try to cross the border again as soon as possible, because they don't feel safe in Serbia and are afraid of chained push-back to the south. They also stated that they tried to cross the border into Croatia in a larger group, of approximately 20 men from Syria, and that they were all deported back to Serbia. However, they don't know where the other 17 men went after they were released from the court in Sid.

Priliku prisilno udaljenje - Arapski

جمهورية كرواتيا  
وزارة الداخلية  
إدارة الشرطة  
Vukovarsko-srijemska  
Policijska postaja Otok

رقم: [REDACTED]  
(المكان و التاريخ)

صلا بفقرة 4 من المادة 193 من قانون الأجانب (الجريدة الرسمية العدد [REDACTED])

قرار الطرد من البلد

1. الاسم [REDACTED]،  
الجنسية [REDACTED]،  
تاريخ الميلاد [REDACTED]،  
SIRIJA, HASAKI  
SIRIJA

الشخص المذكور قادم في جمهورية كرواتيا بطريقة غير شرعية / على الشخص المذكور ترك منطقة الاقتصاد الأوربية.

2. يُمنح مواطن الدولة الثالثة المشار إليه في النقطة 1 من هذا القرار من دخول المنطقة الاقتصادية الأوربية والإقامة فيها لفترة [REDACTED] (jedne)

3. يُمنح قسراً مواطن البلد الثالث المشار إليه في البند 1 من هذا القرار، أو، إذا لم يكن كذلك ممكناً، في الدولة التي يحمل جنسيتها.

تنص المادة 190 من قانون الأجانب على ما يلي:

(1) "لم يعترف مواطن من بلد ثالث بـ:  
1. عدم معرفته للمنطقة الاقتصادية الأوربية أو جمهورية كرواتيا خلال المهمة الرسمية التي حددها القرار.  
2. عدم معرفته بالحدود الخارجية أو جمهورية كرواتيا أثناء عبوره المنطقة المحظوظ على الحدود والاقتراب،  
3. لا يجوز التوقف في بلد الإجماع وفقاً للفقرة 1 من المادة 185 من هذا القانون،  
(2) "يعتبر مواطن من بلد ثالث ممكناً غير القانوني غير القانوني وجوراً أو مسؤولة عبوره أو مسؤولة عبوره غير مشروع، ودون التمسك بالحدود في الفقرة 1 من هذه المادة."  
(3) "يمنح قسراً مواطن الدولة الثالثة المشار إليه في البند 1 من هذا القرار على ما يلي:  
(1) إذا لم يحدد قرار الطرد موعداً نهائياً للعودة وفقاً للمادة 185، الفترة 1 من هذا القانون، يجب أن يحدد قرار الطرد الإجماع القسري والدولة التي سيتم تحويل مواطن البلد الثالث إليها قسراً."

R SRBIJU

REPUBLIKA HRVATSKA  
MINISTARSTVO UNUTARNJIH POSLOVA  
Policijska uprava Vukovarsko-srijemska  
Policijska postaja Otok

KLASA: [REDACTED]  
URBROJ: [REDACTED]  
Otok [REDACTED]

Na temelju članka 193. stavka 4. Zakona o strancima („Narodne novine“, broj 133/20, 114/22, 151/22) donosi se:

**RJEŠENJE O PROTJERIVANJU**

1. Ime [REDACTED], prezime [REDACTED]  
ime roditelja [REDACTED], muško - žensko, datum rođenja [REDACTED]  
država i mjesto rođenja SIRIJA, HASAKI, državljanstvo SIRIJA

nezakonito boravi u Republici Hrvatskoj i dužan je napustiti Europski gospodarski prostor (EGP).

2. Državljaninu treće zemlje iz točke 1. ovoga rješenja zabranjuje se ulazak i boravak u Europskom gospodarskom prostoru u trajanju od [REDACTED] (jedne) godine, računajući od dana prisilnog udaljenja.

3. Državljanina treće zemlje iz točke 1. ovoga rješenja će se prisilno udaljiti u [REDACTED] ili, ako to nije moguće, u zemlju čiji je državljanin.

Članak 190. Zakona o strancima propisuje:  
(1) Državljanina treće zemlje će se protjerati ako:  
1. nije napustio EGP odnosno Republiku Hrvatsku u roku koji je određen rješenjem.  
2. je došao u EGP odnosno Republiku Hrvatsku prije isteka zabrane ulaska i boravka.  
3. se ne donosi rješenje o povratku sukladno članku 185. stavku 1. ovoga Zakona.  
(2) Državljanina treće zemlje može se protjerati zbog nezakonitog boravka i nezakonitog prelaska ili pokušaja prelaska vanjske granice, različitih od razloga iz stavka 1. ovoga članka."

Članak 192. stavkom 1. Zakona o strancima propisuje:  
(1) Rješenjem o protjerivanju utvrditi će se da državljanin treće zemlje nezakonito boravi u Republici Hrvatskoj ili da mu prestaje zakoniti boravak u Republici Hrvatskoj, da je dužan napustiti EGP te će se odrediti vrijeme u kojem mu je zabranjen ulazak i boravak u EGP-u."

Članak 193. stavkom 3. i 4. Zakona o strancima propisuje:  
(1) Rješenjem o protjerivanju ne određuje rok za dragovoljni odlazak sukladno članku 185.  
(3) Ako se rješenjem o protjerivanju ne određuje rok za dragovoljni odlazak sukladno članku 185. stavku 1. ovoga Zakona, rješenjem o protjerivanju odredit će se prisilno udaljenje i država u koju će se državljanina treće zemlje prisilno udaljiti."

REPUBLIKA HRVATSKA  
REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

Europska putna isprava za vraćanje državljanina trećih zemalja koji nezakonito borave  
European travel document for the return of illegally staying third country nationals

Tijelo koje je izdalo ispravu:  
Issuing authority: [REDACTED]

Broj isprave:  
Document No: [REDACTED]

Važi za jedno putovanje iz:  
Valid for one journey from:

REPUBLIKE HRVATSKE  
u:  
to: REPUBLIKU SRBIJU

Ime (na): [REDACTED]  
Name (s): [REDACTED]

Prezime (na): [REDACTED]  
Surname (s): [REDACTED]

Datum rođenja:  
Date of birth: 01.01.2005.

Spol:  
Sex: [REDACTED]

Državljanstvo (-a):  
Nationality (-ies): SIRIJA

Posebna obilježja:  
Distinguishing marks: NEMA

Adresa u zemlji vraćanja (ako je poznata):  
Address in the country of return (if known): NEPOZNATO

Izdana u:  
Issued at: [REDACTED]

Dana:  
Date: [REDACTED]

Potpis:  
Signature: [REDACTED]

РЕПУБЛИКА СРБИЈА  
ПРЕКРШАЈНИ СУД У СРЕМСКОЈ МИТРОВИЦИ  
ОДЕЉЕЊЕ СУДА У ШИДУ

У ИМЕ НАРОДА!

Прекршајни суд у Сремској Митровици - Одељење суда у Шиду, по судији [REDACTED] у прекршајном поступку покренутом против окривљеног [REDACTED] из Сирије а због прекршаја из чл. 71 ст. 1. тачка 1 Закона о граничној контроли, (Службени Гласник РС број 24/18), а основу члана 100 став 1 члан 102 став 1, члан 103 члана 246, 249 и 308) Закона о прекршајима (Службени Гласник Р. Србије број 65/13), доноси дана 07.12.2023. године следећу

**ПРЕСУДУ**

**ОКРИВЉЕНИ** [REDACTED] рођен 01.01.2005. године у Хаски, Сирија, радник, незапослен, без средстава за издржавање, није ожењен, нема деце, прекршајно у задње четири године није кажњаван, држављанин Сирије, са пребивалиштем у Хаски, Сирија

**ОДГОВОРАН ЈЕ:**

што је дана [REDACTED] часова на тачно неутврђеном месту северно од граничног прелаза Батровци прешао државну границу Републике Србије према Републици Хрватској изван одређеног граничног прелазног режури се пешаче некатегорисаним путем од села Илиши према Р. Хрватској, чиме је учинило прекршај из члана 71 став.1. тачка 1. Закона о граничној контроли, те се применом цитираног законског прописа и одреби члана 33, 39, члана 42 и применом члана 43 ст. 1. т. 1. Закона о прекршајима Републике Србије

**ОСУЂУЈЕ**

**НА НОВЧАНУ КАЗНУ У ИЗНОСУ ОД 6.000,00 (шестхиљада) ДИНАРА**  
Изречену новчану казну има се извршити одмах пре правоснажности ове релује а сходно одреби члана 308 ст. 1 тачка 1 Закона о прекршајима, што ако не уни иста ће се извршити применом чла 41 Закона о прекршајима о чему ће се ни ти решење о извршењу .

Klikaktiv collected another similar testimony towards the end of December as another Syrian man was deported from Croatia to Serbia on 13th of December 2023. He also had a copy of Decision of expulsion order from Croatia and a travel document issued by the Croatian authorities. Prior to the deportation, he spent three days in a detention center in Tovarnik. The only difference is that he was not taken to the misdemeanor court in Serbia, but instead he was immediately released by the Serbian police at the same border crossing so we walked to the official camp in Adasevci.



# OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION AT THE EU EXTERNAL BORDERS WITH SERBIA AND KLIKAKTIV'S WORK IN THE PERIOD FROM OCTOBER TO DECEMBER 2023

In 2023, the Klikaktiv team visited 33 squats out of 42 squats which were identified through the Klikaktiv's work from 2019 until the end of 2023. The number of new squats alongside the border area continued to increase, having in mind that at the end of 2022 Kliaktiv had identified 31 squats in total. The squats that Klikaktiv visited in 2023 have accommodated on average 100 people on the move at all times: in some squats there can be **from 30 to up to 600 refugees and migrants**. People on the move in the squats tend to group themselves along the lines of nationality, both by location (so one can find a squat with just Afghan or just Syrian refugees) or within the same squat (such as an abandoned factory near Subotica, in the vicinity of border with Hungary where our team spoke with people on the move from: Morocco, Tunisia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Syria, Iraq, Egypt and others).

During the month of October Klikaktiv continued with its regular activities of providing free legal and psychosocial support to people on the move who were residing in informal settlements (squats) in the north of Serbia. Most of the Syrian refugees were residing in one of the several squats in city [Sombor](#), including families and unaccompanied minors. Many Syrians were complaining that they felt unsafe in these locations and most of them were unaware of where exactly they were or that they could apply for asylum in Serbia and be accommodated in one of the official asylum centers in Serbia. At the same time, Afghans were residing in squats in [Horgos](#), mostly in dispersed, smaller groups. In this period, **Klikaktiv also reached a significantly high number of Turkish citizens, who have arrived in Serbia legally since they can travel to Serbia without any visa requirements**. Most of them were staying in hostels in Sombor and [Subotica](#), since they can legally reside in Serbia for up to 90 days. But Klikaktiv also has met Turkish citizens in informal settlements near Horgos where they spent just a few hours, before meeting with smugglers and going towards the Hungarian border.



*"Destroyed Turkish documents found in one of the squats in Horgos"*

The situation on the ground changed in November after the Serbian police started the police operation of evicting informal settlements in order to [“stand in the way of irregular migrations”](#). This police operation started after yet another shooting between two rival smuggling groups, which resulted in the death of three people while several others were injured. More on the police action and shooting between smuggling groups can be found in BalkanInsight’s [article](#). Klikaktiv’s work during this period was also affected by the intense police controls and raids, especially in November and December, when the squats on the northern borders were emptied. In this period, Klikaktiv moved more towards the camps in Adasevci and Principovac, where most of the people from the north were dislocated. This situation led to the overcrowding of the camps in that period and people’s dissatisfaction due to the bad conditions, which they often complained to. This situation also affected the changing of the route towards Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina but also the fact that these routes were cheaper compared to the one towards Hungary.

During the month of November, Serbian police evicted most of the people on the move from the informal settlements (squats) and transferred them to official camps across Serbia. However, despite the narrative of Serbian police, who claimed that this action is aimed against human traffickers and smugglers, there was no vulnerability screening nor provided protection for the victims of human traffickers and smugglers. Local Centers for Social Welfare was never present, neither during police evictions nor in camps, to assess the needs and provide adequate protection to the most vulnerable ones (primarily to women and children). Also, according to the [annual report](#) of the Center for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking (state institution in charge of providing protection to victims of human trafficking) in the year 2023, this institution hasn’t received any reports of suspected human trafficking of Syrian or Turkish nationals, despite the fact that they were most likely victims of human traffickers and smugglers. CPVHT received only one report of the suspected human trafficking of one unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan. **The fight against human smugglers and traffickers can not be done without providing proper protection to their victims.** Serbian police should have included other state institutions (especially the ones from the area of social protection) which are qualified for the vulnerability screening and identification of victims of human trafficking and who would provide the victims with adequate protection – safe accommodation, legal aid, psychological counseling, legal status and residency in Serbia. By randomly placing people on the move in the camps, without any legal protection, they were just shifted from one human smuggling group to another.

It should also be noted that the fact that hundreds of people on the move were transferred to the official, state-run camps does not mean that they had access to asylum procedure i.e. that they are registered as asylum seekers and have legalized their stay in Serbia. On the contrary. According to the UNHCR’s [official report](#) for the month of November 2023, total of 5.616 people on the move were accommodated in official camps at the end of November (while the number of new entries in the camps for this month equaled 8.532 people), but only 150 people were registered for asylum. Similar trend continued in December 2023 – according to the UNHCR’s [official report](#) in the month of December there were 5.001 new entries in government centers and only 81 people were registered for asylum.

During the police action and the eviction of informal settlements alongside the border with Hungary, quite high number of the people on the move were transferred to the state-run camps in [Adasevci](#), [Principovac](#) and [Sid](#) (all three of them are near the Croatian border), so most people on the move shifted their route toward Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the months of November and December, Klikaktiv provided legal and psychological support mostly to people who were transferred in these centers.

In the period between October and December 2023, there were no significant migratory activities on the border between Serbia and Romania. Very few people on the move have reported that they tried or are planning to try to cross this border.

In Belgrade, people on the move also became less visible, especially in the usual gathering places – parks near the Faculty of Economics and the bus station, as well as at the bus station itself. In this sense, people on the move were most visible when they were going on buses to the border points with Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, while during the rest of the time they were stranded in accommodations where Klikaktiv’s team had no access. The police in Belgrade carried out racial profiling, gathered up people if they noticed smaller or larger groups and transferred them to camps.

Also, in the period of November and December 2023, Klikaktiv was contacted by a much higher number of people whose family members have gone missing without trace in Serbia. A man from Syria was

searching for his son who spent several weeks in Sombor before disappearing without a trace during the police action in November 2023. When he contacted Klikaktiv his son was already offline for almost two weeks and he was not able to get any information from other people in the group nor from smugglers who organized his journey. Another family from Syria was searching for their cousin who was caught by the Serbian police at the toll station "[Bubanj potok](#)", taken to the police station in Belgrade's municipality [Zvezdara](#) after which they lost all communication with him.

## BORDER WITH HUNGARY

The Klikaktiv team continued to cover the border areas between Serbia and EU member states (Croatia, Hungary and Romania), with additional monitoring trips to the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. **Majority of people on the move tried to continue their journey from Serbia through Hungary during the month of October, and this was the border where the majority of squats were located, but during the months of November and December some squats on the borders with Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina become more active due to the redirection of the route.**

**One of the most active squats near the border with Hungary were four squats in city Sombor – the old farm "Bakin salas", abandoned restaurant "Odiseja", oil factory Sunce and abandoned house referred to as hotel Talal.** The hotel Talal accommodated the highest number of people on the move in this period – up to 500 at the time, all Syrians, with a high percentage of women and children. Women and children were mostly isolated in rooms inside the house and had very limited access to services, they were not able to communicate with anyone without strict supervision of men in the squat and had very limited possibility to make independent decisions on their future plans and steps. All women and children (both the ones traveling with families and unaccompanied minors) were at high risk of human trafficking.

In the reporting period, Klikaktiv provided assistance to a Syrian woman who was traveling alone with her two young teenage children (boy and a girl) and who resided in the squat in hotel Talal until she went into diabetic coma and was admitted into local hospital in Sombor for several days. During her stay in hospital, both of her children remained in the informal settlement, without the guardianship of an adult. Klikaktiv spoke with the woman after she was released from the hospital and explained her the possibility of applying for asylum in Serbia and the scope of rights she would have access to if she applies for asylum, but the woman decided to stay in the squat, hoping that she will cross the border in the following days. However, she feared that the amount of insulin she received after the release from the hospital would not be enough and that she might experience another diabetic coma in following days if she does not reach the destination country. Klikaktiv's team also explained to her children what they can do and who to alarm if their mother needs urgent medical care.



*"Children's picture of a family on the wall in one of the squats in Sombor"*

In mid October 2023, Klikaktiv spoke with two Syrian men who had arrived in hotel Talal just a couple days earlier. They were quite scared to speak with Klikaktiv's team as they insinuated that smugglers are present in the squat and that they might suffer serious consequences if they say too much. But they did complain about the conditions inside the squat, they had to pay for a bottle of water 10 EUR, they also had to pay for food, the usage of phone charger, internet, everything. Also, they were not aware where exactly they are (in which city and how far away from the populated area they are) nor that there is both an official camp in Sombor as well as 3 other informal settlements nearby. Klikaktiv shared its hotline number with them and tried to stay in contact with two men, but unsuccessfully.

***"We have a mobile phone with us, but we have to pay 20 EUR to charge it. And then we have to pay an additional 30 EUR for the internet hotspot only to use it for 10 minutes. It's crazy. We already paid a lot of money to them (smugglers). We also have to pay 10 EUR for a bottle of water...I can't speak about everything that is happening here. But it is very bad here. Very bad."*** Man from Syria about the informal settlement in hotel Talal, Sombor (October 2023)

The squat in hotel Talal was evicted by the Serbian police for the first time at the beginning of November and people were transferred to official, state-run camps. Later on (in mid November) the building was completely destroyed and burned down, with personal belongings of people scattered all over the yard. Klikaktiv did not have the chance to speak with anyone who witnessed what happened.

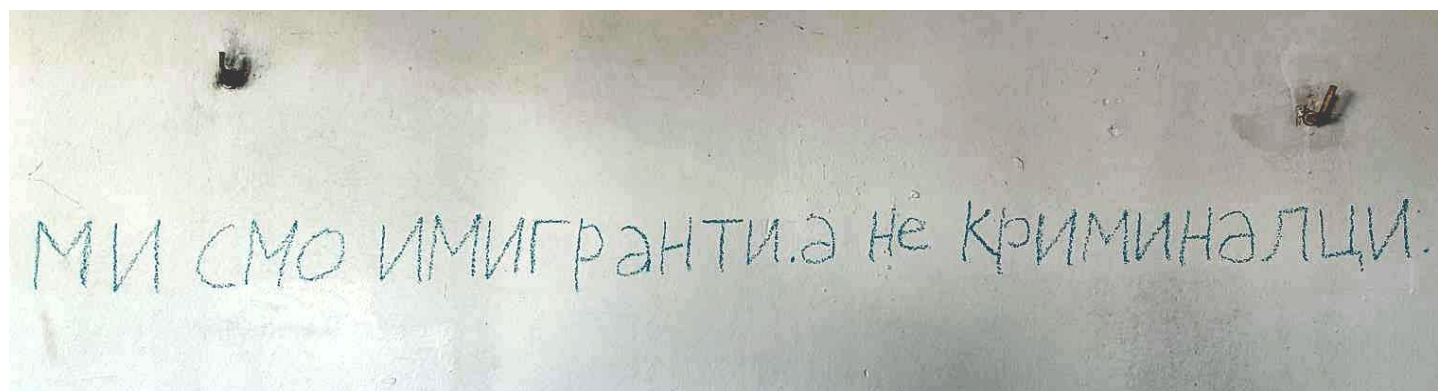


*"The building of hotel Talal, burned down in November 2023, and the back yard of the building"*

Another squat which accommodated a relatively high number of Syrian refugees in Sombor was the building of a restaurant “Odiseja”, including a high number of unaccompanied minors. This squat was also evicted during the month of November, but many people decided to stay in the building of the hotel only for a few hours during the day and they were sleeping in the woods further away from the building because they were scared of the police violence. At the beginning of November, a group of Syrians reported to Klikaktiv’s team that the Serbian police were coming to the squat for several days in a row, they would start to beat them randomly with batons and force them into the buses. This group managed to run away but they seemed very traumatized and scared. They stated that they are both hungry and thirsty but they are too scared to go to the nearest shop and buy something to eat, because Serbian police might catch and beat them.

On 9th of November, Klikaktiv’s team spoke with another three Syrian men who complained about the police violence and poor conditions inside the official camp in Sombor. They were residing in the informal settlement in the restaurant “Bakin salas” in Sombor when the police patrol came and started beating them. After a while, they stopped with the beatings, forced them in a police van and drove them to the official camp in Sombor.

*“Five police officers jumped on me and started beating me. One of them kicked me in the head, I screamed from pain, but they did not care. (...) Living conditions inside the camp in Sombor are horrible, not even animals should live like that. We are sleeping on the floor, no beds, no running water, no showers, nothing. We are all scared. They don’t allow us to leave the camp, we are all scared that we might be deported to Syria. I can’t go back to Syria, the regime will kill me immediately. What should we do? We are also humans, we are not animals, why do they treat us like this? (...) We heard that the Serbian south border is open, there are no problems with the police there. But camps in the north are already full, what will they do in one or two months when more people come? New people will come to Serbia but there will not be enough space for everyone.” man from Syria.*



*“The writing on the wall of a squat in Sombor (written in Serbian language): We are immigrants, not criminals”*

**Besides city Sombor, squats near cities Subotica and Horgos were also very active during the month of October, but they accommodated mostly Afghan nationals and Turkish nationals who used them only as a meeting point.** Also, besides squats, Klikaktiv located hostels which accommodated almost only Turkish nationals, since they are in possession of a passport and they have legal residency as tourists. Turkish nationals were traveling mostly in bigger groups but they were mostly divided - single men tried to cross the border in one group and families in another.

During the month of October, Klikaktiv learned that one man (unknown country of origin, but most likely Afghan) who was residing in the squat in Horgos potentially suffers from tuberculosis and his condition is worsening. The man refused to be hospitalized or to receive any medical aid in the local hospital. He insisted on staying in isolation from other people but to remain in the location near the border so he can continue his journey towards western Europe.



*"Squats in the region of Subotica and Horgos"*

During the months of November and December all squats close to the border with Hungary were evicted by the police and people were transferred to official, state-run camps. Also, on 8th November the official, state-run camp in Subotica was closed and people who were residing there were transferred to other camps, mostly on the south of Serbia. Bojan Sorolov, Head of North Backa's Administrative District, [stated](#) that the closure of the camp sends "clear message that Subotica is a forbidden city for migrants."

## **BORDER WITH CROATIA**

At the beginning of the police action and eviction of squats in November, a lot of people on the move were accommodated in official, state-run camps close to the border with Croatia. And even though the camp in Sid is designated for unaccompanied minors during this period also single, adult men were accommodated in this camp. People on the move quickly shifted their routes and started using the route through Croatia or Bosnia and Herzegovina instead of the route via Hungary. The shift in the route also resulted with higher number of push-backs from the Croatian territory and (mis)usage of the readmission agreement between Croatia and Serbia, as it was already stated in this report.

At first, people on the move believed that the police action is connected to the [parliamentary elections](#) which were scheduled for 17th December and that it was "just a show for locals", but that borders will be open soon after the elections. However, when the camps became more crowded and the conditions inside the camps worsened, people started exploring alternative options and new routes. This was the first time that Syrians started using the route through Bosnia and Herzegovina and they also (re)started using the route through Croatia for the first time after several years.



**Most people complained about the living conditions in the camp in Adasevci stating that the food was inadequate, hygiene poor and the camp was overcrowded at times.** Many people complained that they were infected with scabies and didn't have the possibility to treat it properly. They were also scared that they might be deported back to their country of origin or back to Bulgaria/North Macedonia so they wanted to leave Serbia towards western Europe as soon as possible.

*"I came to Adasevci with my friend 3 weeks ago. We were in Belgrade and we approached the police officers on the street and asked in which camp we could go. We already knew that we had to go to the camp first. The first week in the camp was very bad. Not enough food, no heating, no beds, I was sleeping on the floor in the big, white tent in the back. But then a lot of people left towards Croatia and then it was better." Man from Syria, November in Adasevci.*



*"Providing assistance to people in Sid's area"*

One man from Syria who was residing in the camp in Adasevci had serious health problem as it appeared that he completely lost vision on one of his eyes and he already started losing vision on the other eye. The man did not have access to any medical assistance in the camp and he couldn't comprehend the severity of the problem as he believed that his problem can be treated simply with glasses. Klikaktiv's team explained to him the scope of rights that he has when it comes to health protection and having in mind his status in Serbia. Also, Klikaktiv tried to convince him to seek further medical aid as soon as possible and not to rely just on the glasses as a solution.

The similar situation was in the camp in Principovac as well. **People there also complained about the living conditions - not enough food so they are forced to buy and prepare their own food, no heating, no clothes or shoes.** Two men from Syria stated that they were caught by the Serbian police in the city Pirot in the south of Serbia and taken to an official camp in the same city. They spent only a few days in the camp in Pirot and then the police transferred them to the camp in Principovac. They stated they haven't tried to cross any border on the north because they think it is too dangerous and they were hoping that the borders will open soon.

**Besides official camps at the Croatian border, some of the squats in the region remained partially active during the whole reporting period.** Klikaktiv learned that smaller groups of Turkish nationals were also using these locations as transiting places and that they were also trying to cross into Croatia after it became more difficult to approach the Hungarian border. Also, **Klikaktiv recorded**

that both the border with Croatia and with Bosnia and Herzegovina is also used by Chinese nationals who are also trying to reach western Europe via Serbia.

## BORDER WITH BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

The border with Bosnia and Herzegovina was active throughout the entire previous year, but it became most popular in the last two months of 2023, after the evictions alongside the Hungarian border. People on the move were choosing to go toward Bosnia and Herzegovina as it was the cheapest option. However, the situation drastically changed during the months of November and December as more people started going towards Bosnia and Herzegovina. Eventually, this trend also resulted with higher prices for crossing this border as well.

The biggest obstacle in crossing this border is river [Drina](#), which is also the natural border between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, since it is a fast, alpine river which makes it extremely unsafe for swimming. Dozens of people on the move have lost their lives while trying to swim on the other side or cross in with small, rubber boats. Klikaktiv learned that most people on the move are unaware that they have to cross such a dangerous river on their way towards Bosnia and Herzegovina. And the ones who are familiar with the terrain, in most cases don't know how they will cross the river until they arrive at the designated location and meet the smuggler who will assist them in crossing the river. During the month of November, many people on the move were crossing the border by climbing under the construction of one of the bridges and crawling on it to the other side. According to the eyewitnesses, it takes around 45 minutes for people to cross to the other side by using this method.



*"Improvised ladders under the bridge over Drina river and the inner construction of the same bridge"*

Informal settlements alongside the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina were mostly used as transit locations and people spent only a few hours there, the most. Most of the people on the move that Klikaktiv met in this region were accommodated in one of the official camps across Serbia and they came to the region only to try to cross the border. But also, most people that Klikaktiv spoke to in other places also mentioned that they are planning to go to Bosnia and Herzegovina as it is easy to cross this border. Very few were skeptical of this route.



***"Everybody goes to Bosnia now, but I don't think I will go. You pay to cross the border and you are still nowhere, you are not in Europe. Serbia or Bosnia - it's the same, no difference."*** man from Afghanistan.



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

**Klikaktiv fears that further repression, police violence and externalization of EU borders in the Balkan region, will force people on the move to be less visible and to tend to avoid every 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 order to prevent further deterioration of the refugees' position in Serbia, Klikaktiv proposes a further set of steps to be taken as soon as possible:**

- Effective vulnerability screening procedure during police evictions and raids, but also when people on the move are being admitted in the official, state-run camps.
- Protecting victims of human trafficking by providing them safe accommodation, legal and psychological support and regulating their legal status and residency in Serbia
- The government of Serbia and the Ministry of Interior in particular should 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.



# STORIES FROM THE KLIKAKTIV'S WORK ON THE GROUND IN 2023

Klikaktiv continuously reports about the situation on the ground on its [website](#) and [FB page](#) and some of the stories are also singled out in this report in order to demonstrate the situation on the ground, as well as the hectic and ruthless situation in which refugees were during 2023. Smuggling, police evictions and push-backs, right wing paramilitary forces and arrival of refugees from not so common countries of origin - those are the stories which this part of the report should put more light on.

## HOW MUCH DOES THE HUMAN SUFFERING COST? (1<sup>st</sup> of August 2023)

Migrations have lasted so long that we cannot even trace their very beginning, and they are so intensive that we cannot see the end to them in the near future. People on the move from Syria, Afghanistan, Turkey, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria are in some form of limbo for months on end, during their stay in Serbia. Living conditions in reception centers and asylum centers are often on a very low level, the asylum procedure is slow, and to acquire a work permit one needs to wait for minimum of 9 months from the moment one applies for asylum. All things considered, in addition to further fortification of EU external borders at the north of Serbia, constant presence of foreign border police forces at northern and southern borders of Serbia, as well as police raids in which police forces forcibly transfer refugees from the northern border areas to the south of Serbia on a regular basis, has led to people on the move being pushed into the hands of smugglers, organized criminal groups of a small number of people who, using networks of influences, hold power over a large number of people on the move. They charge extremely high prices to refugees for attempts to cross a border and take advantage of their situation in order to force them to physical work, recruit them into the smuggling groups, force them to unwanted sexual acts and other forms of exploitation.

We highlight that all of this would not be possible if the people were not systematically denied access by the European Union who are responsible for flourishing of many smuggling groups, or at least the smugglers' influence would be negligible.

In our conversations with local people from Sombor, we have often heard how the city has benefitted economically and that refugees bring significant amounts of money to Sombor by paying for hotels, hostels, buying clothes or food in the grocery shops etc. This is why most of the locals think that it is good that people on the move come to their city because many of their fellow citizens had found some form of employment during the refugee crises. Taxi drivers have also profited considerably and they do not deny it. For a drive from Preševo to Sombor or Subotica they charge 150 to 200 euros per person. Even the smuggling groups have started opening improvised markets and fast food restaurants in the informal settlements in which they would charge refugees 15 euros for a falafel. In short, the microeconomics of Sombor and other towns near the border area in the north is flourishing based on other people's fears and marginalization.

Refugees themselves sometimes tell us that they had spent more than 1000 euros upon their return from Preševo to the north, so they are forced to clean or do other maintenance jobs in an informal settlement, until the smugglers decide that the person has earned to have another attempt at crossing the border. People on the move are robbed by smugglers, by the border police (mostly Hungarian, but there are testimonies of the misconduct by the Serbian police too), by the local community with higher prices for accommodation or water or food in grocery shops or gas stations, and their only option is to suffer through it and push through hoping to find peace and a permanent home somewhere.

In addition to all of this, it is devastating to learn the fact we have acquired through our field work with people on the move: a single attempt to cross a Hungarian border is charged 4 to 6 thousand euros per person by smugglers. The same attempt to Bosnia is charged 500 euros, but once in Bosnia the people have not reached the EU yet and there are still more borders and police to fear at

the EU external borders. All of this continues to happen while the economies continue flourishing and people's wellbeing is being degraded due to stress and poverty, and the end to this unfortunately is nowhere to be seen.



*"The informal settlement in Sombor in the abandoned oil factory"*

**"WHEN THERE IS NO AFGHAN PEOPLE LEFT IN SERBIA, THE POLICE WILL USE VIOLENCE AGAINST LOCALS"**  
(3<sup>rd</sup> April 2023)

In the last few weeks, refugees in Serbia have started reporting experiencing violence at the hands of Serbian police in the north of the country, specifically in Subotica and surrounding areas. The violent incidents mostly occur during regular police raids (when the police forcibly transfer refugees from squats to camps), but also in the Subotica itself, mostly when refugees go groceries' shopping in the city center.

Speaking to a group of men from Afghanistan, one of them told us how the police treat refugees very differently in the south and in the north of Serbia. "The Serbian policemen at the Bulgarian border were kind to us. They gave us some water and told us where to walk to the nearest city. But the Serbian policemen at the Hungarian border treat us very badly. They take away our stuff and they beat us badly. Why would they do that, why the treatment is so different?", asked one of the man from the group. Another one added: "People in Serbia should also be worried about the way the Serbian police treats us. Because once there are no people from Afghanistan left in Serbia, the police will beat locals. The policemen have built a habit to beat people and it is a habit one does not easily get rid of. We have seen it happen in other countries."



*"Flags of Serbia and Afghanistan in one of the informal settlements in Sid, at the Croatian border"*

## BORDER HUNTERS AND REFUGEES (24<sup>th</sup> January 2023)

It was already dark as we approached the refugee squat in a van. As we stopped, the cultural mediator jells loudly that we are friends and that we are from a civil society organization. People started to slowly approach us - they thought we were the police, so they started running and hiding. As they said, our team haven't been there for a while, and no one except the police has come to this location for a long time, so they got scared.

When asked why they are afraid of the police, one man answers that the police takes them all the way back to Preševo, and that they have to pay up to 400 euros to get back to the Hungarian border. "The police officers are good, normally they don't beat us", he says, "except when they try to catch us. Then they hit us, but we have to endure it". For the umpteenth time we come across a situation where people normalize beatings and brutality and look at it as a sort of a "price" for staying on the Serbian territory.

After talking with this first group we continued toward the abandoned house, which is no bigger than 80 square meters, where we met more than forty people from Morocco and Algeria. Many were injured when they tried to jump from the wire fence at the border. We gave people crutches and other necessary things - first of all drinking water and blankets to keep them warm. During the distribution of NFIs, a Klikaktiv's team member notices that he still has a pastry from that morning and gave it to the people. Six or seven people share a pastry that may have only 200 grams.

People were wondering what is happening at the borders, why are there so many Austrian police officers in Serbia, why is the police presence near the fence constantly increasing and becoming more brutal, is there a way to seek asylum in Hungary?

Our lawyer answered all of their questions. People became more and more interested and started talking about their experiences from traveling through all the countries, staying in Serbia and trying to cross the border. Refugees often talk about the so-called "border hunters" in Hungary - a paramilitary unit formed by civilians who undergo a four-week training, after which they are allowed to "hunt" and beat refugees in the border area. Border hunters are the most ferocious in beatings, refugees tell us. Refugees are constantly saying that it is hard to keep track of who else is present at the Hungarian borders: Frontex, Serbian police, German police, Austrian and Hungarian police, as well as border hunts are all present at this border, according to their statements.

After informing people about the asylum procedure, how and whether they can request family reunification, we distributed raincoats and a few more blankets to the most vulnerable.



*"Border fence at the Hungarian border with Serbia"*



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