

# Out of Sight

# Pushing Beyond the Limits of Humanity

The First Quarterly Report in 2024  
(January - February - March 2024)



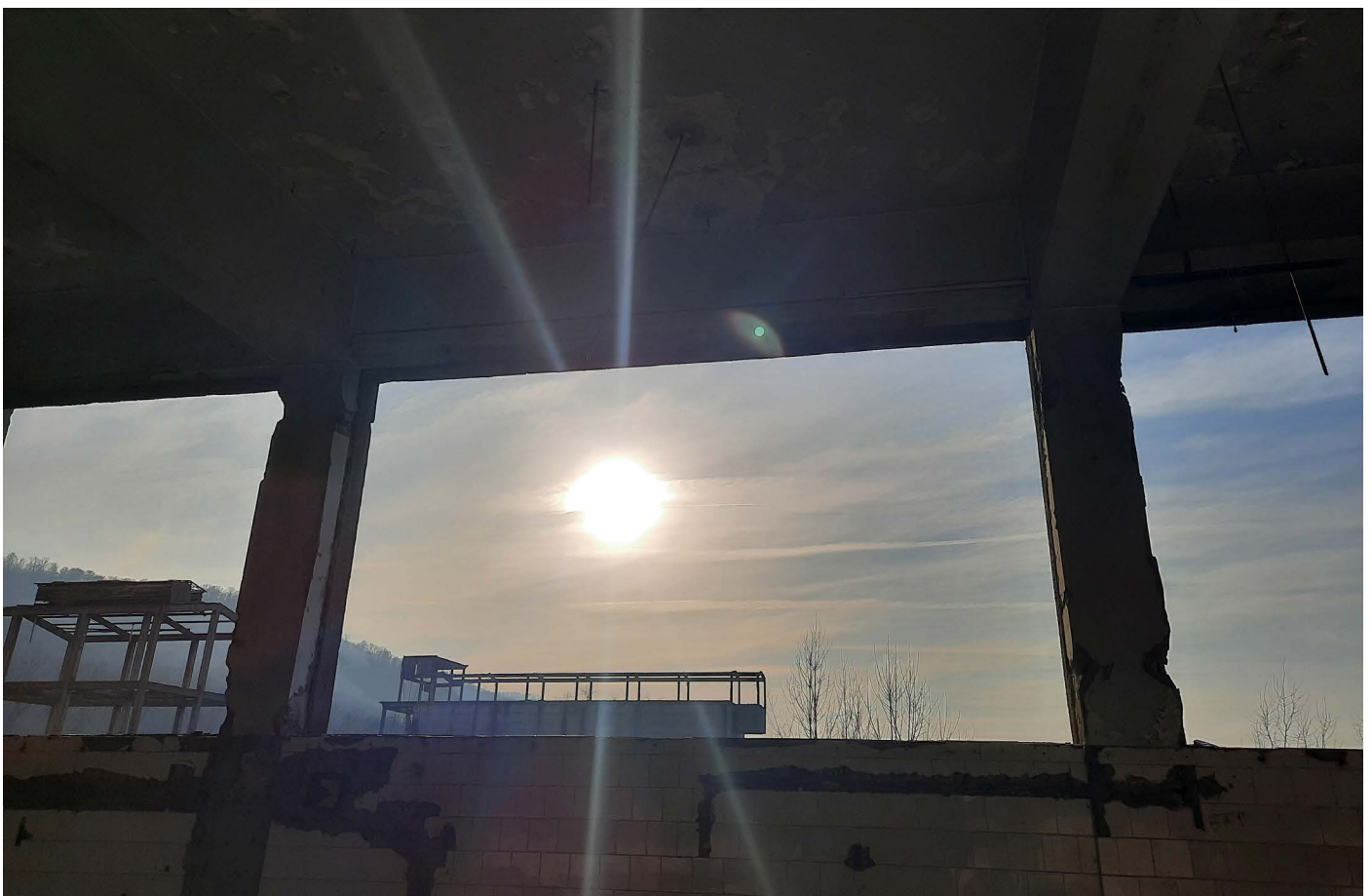
## ABOUT KLIKAKTIV

Klikaktiv – Center for Development of Social Policies is a grassroots non-profit civil society organization which provides legal counseling and psychosocial support 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 south 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 the first three months of 2024. Increased violence of the police and smuggling groups has put people on the move in grave danger of different types of exploitation (labor and sexual exploitation, human trafficking, etc) and made them even more vulnerable. The report includes testimonies of people on the move and their experiences while residing in Serbia, including detention and limited access to accommodation facilities and asylum system. This forced people on the move to be less visible both to the state authorities and NGOs on the ground and to turn to smugglers for the accommodation, transportation and other necessities. The migration route has shifted from the previously dominant route of Hungary to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia.

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


- The majority of Klikaktiv's beneficiaries come from Syria and Afghanistan (70% combined), the two countries with dire humanitarian situations and ongoing conflict. This has been the trend throughout the previous years as well, and continues to be further.
- Majority of newly arrived refugees stated they had entered Serbia through Bulgaria, although the number of those coming from North Macedonia also increased compared to the end of last year.
- Most of the people on the move tried to continue their journey from Serbia to Bosnia and Herzegovina or Croatia, and much less to Hungary, which is a change compared to the trend in the same period last year when most people were directed towards the Hungarian border.
- People on the move started reporting push-backs from Bosnia and Herzegovina at the southern part of the border with Serbia.
- The practice of police violence and push-backs from the Serbian territory continues and gets a significant media attention with the Guardian's article showing a video of striped naked men who were walking from the direction of Serbian border back towards Macedonian village Lojane.
- Increased number of people on the move were reporting that they had been detained during their stay in Serbia.





# SNAPSHOT OF KLIKAKTIV'S WORK IN THE FIRST QUARTER OF 2024 (JANUARY - MARCH)

 Total number of **services** (legal and psychosocial services, including also NFI provision) which Klikaktiv provided in the reporting period: **1752**

 Percentage of **women and children** (including unaccompanied boys and girls) among Klikaktiv's beneficiaries in the border area: **10%** (a slight increase compared to the same period last year, especially among the population of unaccompanied minors)


 **Countries of origin:** majority of people on the move came from: **Afghanistan (42%)** and **Syria (34%)**. Refugees from the two countries with dire humanitarian situations and ongoing conflict comprised **76%** of all people in the border area that Klikaktiv provided services to. These are followed by people from Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Pakistan, India, Turkey and Yemen (all combined approximately **24%**).




 Number of **field visits** the reporting period: **22**

Number of different **squats** visited: 30 (5 new squats identified in the reporting period, 2 at the border with Croatia, 2 at the southwest Serbia, and 1 on the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Klikaktiv visited Serbian south border with North Macedonia for the informal monitoring and following up the more frequent testimonies about the violence and push-backs on this border

 **Borders** covered: Hungary, Romania and Croatia (EU external borders), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia

-  Additionally:
- **18** humanitarian workers, volunteers and activists provided legal information and training
  - **31** media interviews, guest lectures, interviews with researchers and participation at conferences and other migration-related events



# LEGAL COUNSELING AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT TO PEOPLE ON THE MOVE, ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES

**Legal counseling:** Klikaktiv provided free legal support to people on the move during its field visits to the border area and Belgrade city center, in its office in Belgrade and over the SOS phone line. People on the move were mostly interested in how they can access the official camps and fulfill their basic rights (such as access to health care, education, employment, etc.) while residing in Serbia, as well as how they can access the EU asylum system (possible resettlement and relocation procedures, family reunifications and others). In the reporting period Klikaktiv also noted an increased number of people on the move who were detained in general jails for a misdemeanor act of illegal entry/residency and an increased number of people who were detained in one of the administrative detention centers. Also, more people reported that they were victims of smugglers and criminal groups, which included theft, physical harm and fraud.

Klikaktiv also made an [informative brochure](#) where it answered on most common legal questions that people on the move, asylum seekers and refugees usually ask on the field or via SOS phone line. The brochure is translated into five different languages – Arabic, Farsi, Pashto, Turkish and English. The importance of a written brochure is even higher since people on the move were less visible on the ground and Klikaktiv often had a limited time to speak with people directly, as it will be explained later in this report. Beside people on the move, the intention of this brochure is also to find its use among service providers, especially those that are working on the field and provide direct support, as well as among everyone else who is interested in this topic.

Klikaktiv continued with its activities of representing asylum seekers before the relevant authorities in the first quarter of 2024. The most noticeable fact about the asylum procedures is a long pending period for cases which are at the Administrative court. Asylum seekers are waiting for more than a year (and still pending) for an Administrative court to bring its decision on the case, which questions the effectiveness of this court.



**Psychosocial support:** Along with providing free legal support, Klikaktiv also provided psychosocial support to those people on the move who were in need of it. Bearing in mind the specific context of the work and the fact that the people Klikaktiv's team meets are in a specific position in which their basic needs are often deprived, the psychosocial support itself is primarily aimed at providing first psychological aid, alleviating current mental problems, most feelings anxiety and helplessness in which people find themselves. In addition, focusing on other support systems that they can get, primarily health facilities, is also something that has been important to Klikaktiv's work in the field, especially because the people we meet are a step away from the EU border, and in this regard, it is difficult for them to prioritize anything other than the need to continue their journey. Empowering them to deal with their physical or mental health, because it often happens that Klikaktiv's beneficiaries have serious physical injuries or certain therapy related to the mental disorders they are facing, is one of the significant segments of our work, bearing in mind all the complications that can occur if they do not react in time.





**People gone missing on a route:** From the beginning of the year until the end of this reporting period Klikaktiv noted 6 reports of missing persons, 3 of which unfortunately had a fatal epilogue (one woman from Iran and two men from Syria). All cases were reported by the family members or the relatives of the missing, and in their search Klikaktiv's team contacted and engaged all the competent state services – local police, hospitals, prisons, cemeteries, etc., as well as relevant organizations such as Family Tracing Service of the Red Cross, both from the Serbian and Bosnian side of the border, bearing in mind that although they were reduced, the most intensive crossings of people on the move were to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and that the area of the Drina river is difficult and uncertain to cross and a place where many people lost their lives.

Klikaktiv also spoke for the ["NI" television](#) and ["Vreme" article](#) about the deaths of people on the move on the Serbian south and north borders and the lack of proper procedures for identification and dignified burials. Both of these interviews were initiated after an [action](#) of local activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina in which graves of refugees, who have died in Drina river and were buried in cities alongside the Bosnian shore, were honored and marked with marble stones.



“Tombstone in cemetery in Bjeljina, Bosnia and Herzegovina”



## GENERAL CONTEXT

**Official data** - According to the [data](#) of the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration a total of 4.536 people of the move transited through Serbia in the first two months of this year, which is a decrease of 43% compared to the same period last year. According to the [data](#) of the UNHCR, in the same period only 104 people on the move were registered as asylum seekers and 53 of them have actually submitted their asylum application. This means that only 2.3% of people on the move were registered by the police as asylum seekers and had access to international protection, despite the fact that the vast majority of them are fleeing countries which are affected by war and have a high recognition rate for asylum. The same data shows that most of the people on the move who were accommodated in the official camps are from Syria and Afghanistan, followed up by people from Burundi and Morocco. Most of the people on the move were accommodated in the camps in Sjenica and Tutin, near the Serbian border with Montenegro.

**Police actions against smugglers** - In the first quarter of 2024, Serbian Ministry of Interior continued with the police action which started at the end of October 2023 after the shooting between smuggling groups on the north of Serbia (more on this can be found in [Klikaktiv's Annual report for 2023](#)). In January, the media reported on several cases (for example, [here](#) and [here](#)) of arrests related to human smuggling, mostly near the Serbian southern border with N. Macedonia. During the period of February and March 2024, Serbian Ministry of Interior reported on few more arrests including [one case](#) where a person from Subotica was arrested for organizing taxi transportation to people on the move and [another case](#) in which a Bosnian citizen was arrested after he was caught transporting 12 people on the move in a boat across the river Drina. The Serbian Ministry of Interior also reported that in the second case all 12 refugees were taken to the misdemeanor court and fined for illegal residency and for crossing the border outside the official border crossing. The second case also corresponds with Klikaktiv's observations from the ground which were showing that in the period from February 2024 most of the people on the move were trying to leave Serbia via Bosnia and Herzegovina.

However, these arrests were mainly directed against individuals who were caught while providing transport to people on the move and who are usually at the bottom of the smuggling hierarchy. The only "bigger" arrest in this period was the one of Alen Basil, an Arabic interpreter of Serbian-Syrian origin. In June 2022, [BIRN reported](#) on the local smuggling network and their ties with state institutions, where Alen Basil was named as one of the high ranking persons in this network. In January 2024, a year and a half after the BIRN's original article, Alen Basil was [arrested](#) by the Serbian police for the suspicion of criminal acts of human smuggling and illegal weapon possession. However, in the following months the public was not informed whether or not any criminal charges were actually brought by the Public Prosecutor's Office and whether the criminal procedure was initiated.

At the end of March 2024, the Ministry of Interior [reported](#) on the arrest of 4 persons (citizens of Serbia, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh) for the criminal act of kidnapping the Bangladesh citizen in Belgrade and requesting a ransom of 40.000 EUR from his family. During its field work, Klikaktiv also heard rumors that kidnappings became more frequent and were just an additional way for smugglers to gain additional money.



“Squat on the north of Serbia after the police raids”

**New Program for the Fight against Human Trafficking was adopted** – In March 2024, Serbian Government adopted the Program for the Fight against Human Trafficking for the period from 2024 until 2029 (text of the program is available [on this link](#)). People on the move are recognised as one of the most vulnerable groups and at high risk of potential human trafficking. It is stated that additional training is needed both for the state institutions and NGOs who are providing assistance and services to people on the move in the state-run camps for a more effective protection of people on the move who are victims of human trafficking. On the same note, the Center for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking held a [training](#) for the employees of [SCRM](#) on the preliminary identification of victims of human trafficking among the migrant population. Yet, in the first three months of 2024, SCRM did not report a single case of the potential human trafficking to the CPVHT, as stated in their [official statistics](#).

**NPM’s report on the visit to the detention center in Padinska Skela** – In January 2024, National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture (NPM) published the [Report](#) about its visit to detention center in [Padinska Skela](#). Klikaktiv visited this detention center in May 2023 as part of the NPM’s team. **The most significant recommendation of NPM from the report is that foreigners should not be detained in detention centers unless it is highly likely that they will actually be deported from the country.** NPM again highlighted the shortages when it comes to the access to medical aid and the need for the national legislation changes so that foreigners who are in the forced return procedure are entitled to free legal aid.



**Temporary protection for people fleeing Ukraine** – In March 2024, Serbian government [prolonged](#) the temporary protection for Ukrainian citizens for another year. According to the [data](#) of the UNHCR, in the previous year a total of 1.145 people from Ukraine were granted temporary protection and in the period from January until March 2024 a total of 93 temporary protections were granted.

**Serbia issued the first refugee passport** – In March 2024, Serbian Ministry of Interior [is-sued](#) the first refugee passport to a person who was granted a refugee status. This was a long waited positive step for the integration of refugees and fulfillment of their rights which are guaranteed under the Geneva convention. However, refugees will still need to obtain visa in order to travel to most of the European and neighbouring countries and Klikaktiv hopes for the positive practice in this area as well.

**Another traffic accident with a deadly outcome** – Three people died and 12 were injured in a [traffic accident](#) which happened on 20th February 2024 near the city Presevo in the south of Serbia. Among the people who suffered severe injuries is a 15-year old child who was transferred to a hospital in Nis. Also, among people who were hurt was a family with a small child. People with severe injuries were transferred to local hospitals, while the others were transferred to the [official camp](#) in Presevo. But this was not the only accident with a tragic outcome on the Balkan refugee route. Another traffic accident happened in January in [Croatia](#) when a car which was transporting 11 people on the move collided with another car. Two Croatian nationals and one person on the move lost their life in this accident. With the increase of police violence and push-back alongside the Balkan refugee route, people on the move completely depend on the smugglers and often can not choose the way of transportation and how they will move across the border and territory. These two tragedies are adding to the number of people on the move who have lost their lives while trying to reach the EU.





## OVERVIEW OF THE BORDER AREAS AND CITIES WHERE KLIKAKTIV WORKS

In the reporting period, the Klikaktiv team visited **30 different squats** (including five new squats identified in the reporting period, two at the border with Croatia, two at the south-west Serbia, and one on the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina). The main change compared to the previous year, after **the shootings** and **the police action** that followed at the end of **October 2023**<sup>1</sup>, is that **the squats have been emptied**, partly because of police raids and relocation of refugees to official asylum and reception centers, partly because of the fear of the refugees themselves to stay in them and gather in larger groups. In relation to what Klikaktiv has observed earlier on the field, the squats have now become places of sporadic and short stay of people on the move, diametrically opposed to the picture from before, when hundreds of refugees were staying in squats, sometimes for a few days and sometimes even for a couple of months.



The situation on the field also influenced the shift of the focus of Klikaktiv work to the asylum centers in **Sjenica** and **Tutin**, in the southwest of Serbia. During the reporting period, these centers accommodated around 700 people on the move, mostly displaced from the border areas. The number of people in these two centers made up more than a half of the refugee population that was registered in the official state centers.

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<sup>1</sup> More information on this topic can be found on Klikaktiv's annual report for 2023 which is available on Klikaktiv's website and on [this link](#).



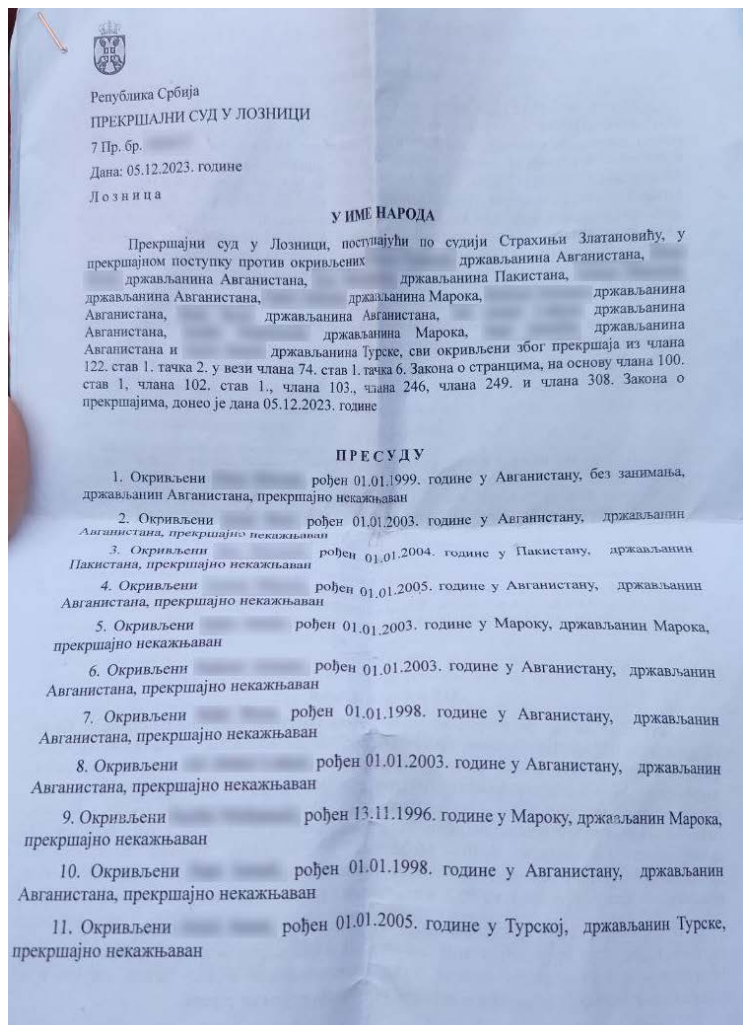


“Do people think that they would come to Europe if they could live well here? Well, we’ve already seen everything along the way. They beat us, they don’t want us, they don’t respect us, but we hope to find a place for a peaceful life somewhere.”



According to the refugees’ testimonies, the Serbian police would raid the squats or catch them while trying to cross the Croatian or Bosnian border after which they were arrested and obligated to pay the fines for trying to cross the border irregularly. **During this period, refugees were frequently sentenced to a jail sentence by the misdemeanor courts for illegal residency or illegal entry into Serbian territory and they were sentenced from 10 to 20 days in jail, on average. Also, many people were detained in one of the 3 detention centers – [Dimitrovgrad](#), [Padinska Skela](#) and [Plandiste](#), where they spent between 3 and 6 months.** None of them were provided with legal aid nor with translation into language they can understand. Police were sometimes using physical force to detain them, and some of the people on the move reported that they had encountered the situation when the Serbian police officers extorted money or other valuables from them, threatening them with deportation.

On 24th January, Klikaktiv’s team spoke to two men from Afghanistan who were both previously detained - one was in administrative detention in Padinska Skela for 6 months and the other one was in jail for 10 days due to a misdemeanor act of illegal residency proclaimed by the Article 74 of the [Law on Foreigners](#). The second man reported that he was taken to the misdemeanor court in city [Loznica](#) together with 10 other people on the move and they were all sentenced to a financial fine of 10.000 RSD (approx. 80 EUR). Since they could not pay the fine on the spot, the fine was substituted by the court with a prison sentence of 10 days. However, despite the fact that all 11 of refugees were from different countries of origin (7 of them were from Afghanistan, 2 from Morocco, 1 from Pakistan and 1 from Turkey) and spoke different languages, none of them was provided an interpreter during the court’s procedure so they were not able to defend themselves nor to properly follow the procedure. Also, each of them received a verdict only in Serbian language and did not have access to legal aid which seriously questions the existence and effectiveness of legal remedy in this case.



“The verdict of the misdemeanor court in Loznica sentencing 11 people on the move for illegal residency”

**During this reporting period, Klikaktiv's team was in correspondence and later in live interaction with a young refugee from Morocco who was a victim of police brutality in Serbia which resulted with a severe disability.** According to this testimony, he was a victim of the brutal police violence and a push-back to Bulgarian territory by the Serbian police officers, which eventually resulted with both of his legs being amputated in a local hospital in the south of Serbia. This case is probably one of the most severe cases of police violence in Serbia and Klikaktiv urges both the Ministry of Interior and the judicial authorities to conduct thorough investigation and punish the perpetrators of this crime.

**People on the move also continued to report push-backs both from the Serbian north borders as well as from the Serbian south borders.** Klikaktiv's team collected most of the testimonies about push-backs while speaking with people in one of the squats in the border areas as well as in Sjenica and Tutin, but also in Belgrade. In the reporting period, most of the people on the move were crossing from Serbia towards Bosnia and Herzegovina, but most of them reported to be pushed-back from the Croatian border. However, towards the end of March more people on the move also started reporting push-backs from the Bosnian border. Each push back included physical and psychological violence - beating, confiscation of personal belongings, stripping of clothes and humiliation as human beings.



**"I am afraid to go on the Game, there is too much violence at the borders. I think I will wait for a while, maybe soon the borders will be open."**  
15-years old unaccompanied minor from Syria



According to the refugees' testimonies, it is not a rare case that they get beaten by the police after which they are forced to walk back to Serbia via the green border. Some of them added that the Serbian police were no better if they were to be intercepted, and that they would also take away any personal belongings they find - money, mobile phones or other personal belongings of value.

**In January 2024, Klikaktiv's team collected two more testimonies of men from Afghanistan who were pushed back from the Serbian territory back to Bulgaria via river Timok in two separate incidents.** Klikaktiv already reported in its [previous report](#) about the testimonies of people on the move who were also pushed back via the river Timok and its teams' subsequent visit to the region at the end of December 2023. One man reported that he was part of a smaller group who was caught further away from the river, but the police forced them into the van and drove them for 10 minutes until they arrived at the river banks. There they were forced to swim across the river back to the Bulgarian shore, despite the freezing cold temperatures. The other man stated that he was in a group of 15 men when he was caught by the Serbian police and that they were already in the proximity of the river so the police immediately forced them into the water. According to his statement, Serbian police officers were beating them randomly before they forced them into the river and they also took their valuables. He also stated that the Bulgarian police were waiting on the other side of the river only to take them any valuables left and to beat them some more. All men from the group were then able to run away and hide in the woods on the Bulgarian territory before returning back to Serbia the next day.



On 22nd February, the Guardian published [an article](#) with a shocking video showing a group of migrants stripped of clothes in freezing temperatures while they were heading from the Serbian border towards the village [Lojane](#) in N. Macedonia. Following the article, Serbian Ministry of Interior issued [the statement](#) claiming that Serbia “respects human rights and there are no harassments of migrants on its territory”. Also, the Ministry of Interior claims that Serbian border police officers were not present on the location that was indicated by the N. Macedonian police as a place where the push-back happened and that there is no confirmation that the incident even happened on the Serbian territory. The Ministry also calls upon the fact that the monitoring of the border between Serbia and N. Macedonia is being done in the cooperation<sup>2</sup> with Hungarian and Austrian border police who did not report anything about the incident. **Klikaktiv strongly condemns practices of push-backs, humiliations and police violence against people on the move, regardless of the circumstances, and believes that the Ministry of Interior should have conducted effective internal control procedures regarding this incident.** Klikaktiv spoke about this incident and the situation on the ground for [Slobodna Evropa](#), [television Nova](#) and [television NI](#) in order to raise awareness among general public on this issue.

## **BORDER WITH HUNGARY**

Majority of squats near the Serbian – Hungarian border are located in the vicinity of the cities of [Subotica](#) and [Sombor](#). Refugees used to hide in squats in suburban areas of these cities, due to fear of the police and locals. During the reporting period, all the squats Klikaktiv’s team visited around Subotica and Sombor were mostly empty. After the [intensification of interneccine conflicts between smuggling groups in October 2023](#), 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 also intensified, especially those who were staying at squats near Hungarian border, but also in all other parts of Serbia. Increased police control in this area, but also **presence of Frontex representatives** affected the situation in a manner that refugees became “invisible” and that Klikaktiv could only follow their movement by traces they left on the places they rest for a short period before they try to cross the Hungarian border. These traces showed that mostly people who entered Serbia legally were still using the Hungarian border in order to reach western Europe, since Klikaktiv’s team found several destroyed and discarded travel documents, visas and personal belongings of citizens of Turkey, India, Azerbaijan and other countries.

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<sup>2</sup> This cooperation was established in trilateral agreement between Serbia, Hungary and Austria but the text of the cooperation arrangement was never made publicly available.



“Hungarian border fence”

## **BORDER WITH ROMANIA**

The second border the Klikaktiv’s team covered during its regular field visits is the one between Serbia and Romania, with the largest squat in the area being located in an abandoned milk factory in the village of [Majdan](#) and a few abandoned houses in the village of [Rabe](#). The border with Romania wasn’t that popular for attempts to continue the journey in the previous year and it became even more unpopular in the reporting period. The usual places that Klikaktiv visited showed no traces of recent presence of people on the move in that area. The locals we spoke with, also confirmed that they did not see any refugees recently.

## **BORDER WITH CROATIA**

In the reporting period, some of the people on the move stated that some refugees and migrants had been trying and succeeding to cross the Serbian - Croatian border, even though the majority is oriented towards the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. Also, this was the main border across which people on the move reported push-backs in the first three months of this year. Those who had tried to enter Croatia did so either on foot or by hiding in trucks, and none of them tried hiding in trains although this method was frequently used in the past. According to the testimonies of the refugees in the reporting period, the Croatian police was allegedly not as violent as before during push-backs. However, this does not mean that people on the move had access to the asylum pro-



cedure in Croatia. On the contrary, their asylum claims were ignored and people on the move were pushed back to Serbia regardless of the fact that they were in need of international protection.

The regular places that Klikaktiv visited in this area were two squats near villages of **Batrovci and Kuzmin**, both in the area of Sid city. The two squats had been active throughout the last two years and in the previous year an abandoned factory called **Grafosrem**<sup>3</sup> also became reactivated. In the beginning of 2024 and during this reporting period, all these squats were mostly empty, since police control was increased, although the fresh traces, remains of food, tents, cloths and similar things, confirmed the suspicions that these places are still used as transit places.


**The only constantly active squat in the area was the one on the outskirts of city Sid.** Klikaktiv's team did not visit this location so frequently in the previous years because very few people were staying here and the spot was often empty. However, during the reporting period this location became one of the most important locations in the region, mostly as a gathering place for people on the move and before they head on the Game. In the previous two years this location served mostly as a gathering point for single, adult men from Afghanistan but during the reporting period that has changed. More women, families with children and unaccompanied minors of all nationalities started using this location as well. Klikaktiv's team witnessed on this location the discarded diapers, menstrual hygiene pads, baby clothes, etc., which all pointed about the changes in demography of people who are transiting here.




**"Babies are problem. They cry a lot and the police can find us easily. Better not to bring babies on Game."** man from Afghanistan in Sid



**People on the move who stayed in this location reported to Klikaktiv that push-backs are frequently happening and that both single men and families are being victims of push-backs and the violence committed by the Croatian police.** Single adults were trying to cross the border both by hiding in trucks and on foot, while families with children were mostly trying to enter Croatia across the green border on foot. As they explained, the chances of crossing the border in a truck are slimmer but at least the police are less violent when they catch them on the border checks than they are when they catch them in the woods.



**"Families come here as well. They go to the Game from here. Now everybody goes towards Croatia - Syrians, Turkish people, Afghans, Pakistanis...even a group of Bangladeshis was here the other day."** man from Afghanistan in Sid



<sup>3</sup> This was one of the first formed squats on the Serbian south borders. It was evicted in late 2019 by the local police and a far-right local group. More info on this squat can be found on Klikaktiv's report for that period which is available on the website and [this link](#).



“Pictures from the squats in the area of Sid city”

**Besides the informal settlements (squats), a significant number of people on the move were residing in official, state-run camp in Sid.** Other two of the state-run, official camps<sup>4</sup> near the border with Croatia - the camp in [Adasevci](#) and the camp in [Principovac](#) - were closed and refugees residing there were transported to the camps in the south. The only active camp in the region was the camp in [Sid](#) which accommodates only unaccompanied minors.

**Unaccompanied minors who were accommodated in the state-run camp in Sid also reported to be pushed-back from the Croatian territory.** On 25th January, an unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan reported to Klikaktiv’s team that he was pushed back from Croatian territory the previous night. According to this statement, he crossed the border on foot, but a few kilometers into the Croatian territory the Croatian police officers caught him and pushed him back to the Serbian territory.



**“I entered Croatia but the police caught me. One of the policemen just told me “Go back to Serbia!” . I couldn’t apply for asylum or anything like that, absolutely nothing.”** unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan



On the same day Klikaktiv spoke with a total of 31 unaccompanied minors who were residing in an official camp in Sid and they all stated that they are planning to continue their journey towards western Europe through Croatia. Only a few of them stated that they might change their route and shift towards Bosnia and Herzegovina if they are (again) pushed-back from the Croatian territory. Also, Kliaktiv’s team spoke with minors from Egypt, who were a part of a group of 17 unaccompanied minors who traveled together from Egypt and who had just arrived in Sid on the same day. According to their

<sup>4</sup> Klikaktiv reported about the situation in these two centers in its yearly report for 2023, which is available [on this link](#).



statement, they traveled from Egypt to Turkey by airplane, with their travel documents and continued illegally through Bulgaria before entering Serbia. Serbian police spotted them on the streets of Belgrade and brought them to the official camp in Sid. When Klikaktiv's team spoke with them on 25th January they did not have any information on how they would continue their journey nor what are the options for staying in Serbia. However, during one of the following visits, Klikaktiv met one of the boys again on 8th February and he reported that the rest of the group managed to cross the border and continue the journey through Croatia in the meantime, while he was the only one pushed back by the Croatian police. The boy felt frustrated because he was the only one who did not make it through, but also he expressed concerns for his future safety since he is no longer part of the group of friends who have traveled together from the country of origin.


On 7th March, Klikaktiv's team spoke with a 12-year old unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan who was pushed-back by the Croatian police three days before. He crossed the border on foot as part of a smaller group and they were supposed to wait for a smuggler in the designated woods a few dozens kilometers away from the border. However, they ended up stranded in the woods, after they lost any contact with a smuggler, and they spent a total of 3 days hiding in the woods. When they used all the food and water suppliers they went to the police station in the nearest village and tried to apply for asylum. Instead of registering them for asylum and alarming social services, Croatian police just drove them back to the green border and pushed them back to Serbia.

Another group of 3 unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan reported to be pushed back at the beginning of March 2024. They were caught by the Croatian police a few kilometers after the border. According to their testimony, Croatian police were not violent at first so one of them tried to run away. However, one of the police officers caught him and beat him randomly with the police baton. The minor's leg was injured as a consequence of a beating and he had difficulties walking when Klikaktiv's team spoke with him.




"Unaccompanied minor with injured leg as a consequence of the Croatian police violence"

Unaccompanied minors who were accommodated in the camp in Sid occasionally complained about the hygiene inside the camp and also stated that the quantity of food they are getting is insufficient. Many minors also complained for not attending the school and they wish they could start/continue their education while they are staying in Serbia. No access to education is one of the significant factors in discouraging minors from staying in Serbia and applying for asylum. It is unclear as to why unaccompanied minors in Sid camp are not enrolled in school, since the national legislation proclaims that elementary education is mandatory for all children in Serbia.



**“I wish I could go to school, but there is no school here. We asked in the camp if we could go to school but they told us that we can’t go and that we have to wait.”** 15-year old unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan, accommodated in camp in Sid

**“One, two, three, four, five, six ... (counts in Serbian language)... I learned that from Ana<sup>5</sup>. She occasionally comes to the camp. I have been in this camp for a month already but I am not going to school.”** 10-year old unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan, accommodated in the official camp in Sid



## **BORDER WITH BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

Most of the people on the move shifted towards the Bosnian border in the reporting period since the border with Hungary was “closed”. There are many combined reasons why the migration route sifted. The Hungarian border was “closed” which means that it was difficult to even reach it because of the increased presence of the police patrols on the Serbian side of the border. Also, smuggling groups (re)established<sup>6</sup> connections on the Bosnian side of the border, which was probably one of the biggest influences for this shift. The fact that most of the refugees who were in the official camps were accommodated in Sjenica and Tutin and the closest border is the one with Bosnia and Herzegovina also played a part in these changes. And lastly, people on the move were reporting that Serbian authorities were instructing them to continue towards the Bosnian border.

People on the move continued to cross the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina on the same well-known locations, like the area of city [Loznica](#) and [Ljubovija](#) where they had to cross through the river [Drina](#) which is a natural border between the two countries. Unfortunately, many people lost their lives while trying to cross the border in these locations. But towards the end of the reporting period, people on the move also started crossing the border on the locations more towards the south and the border triangle with Montenegro. In this part of the border river Drina is not a natural border and therefore it was easier for people to cross the border itself and enter Bosnian territory. People on the move had to pay 500 EUR to smugglers to take them to Bosnia and Herzegovina and then additional 2.500 EUR from Bosnia and Herzegovina to western Europe.

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<sup>5</sup> Name has been changed due to privacy and data protection reasons.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Klikaktiv reported about the route from Serbia to Bosnia and Herzegovina in its report for the year 2020 when this was also one of the most active routes on the Balkans.





**“I am waiting for my family to send me money, I have nothing left. I have to pay 500 EUR from here to Sarajevo and then 2.500 EUR more from Sarajevo to France. That is where I want to go, to France. I think they are good to refugees in France.”** man from Syria that Klikaktiv’s team interviewed in Sjenica



Klikaktiv’s team continued to regularly visit the area of Bosnian border and monitor the developments in the border region. The villages north from Loznica showed no traces of refugee’s presence and the locals stated that there is no presence of national or foreign police forces. In the area of [Sremska raka](#) locals reported that Serbian and Bosnian police are organizing joint police patrols but that this is not a novelty but a common practice in the last years. They also stated that refugees are not visible in the region and as far as they know, refugees are mostly trying to cross the border near the city Loznica. Klikaktiv’s team visited the city Loznica as well but the squats in the city were evicted and some even locked and gated so that refugees can not access them anymore. Presumably this was done within the [police action](#) in the region which started after the Serbian police had established a [Headquarters](#) for the Suppression of Illegal Migration in [Mali Zvornik](#). The situation was similar in squats around [Banja Koviljaca](#) where the old viscose factory and the railway station also do not indicate that people stay longer in these places, but that they use them only as a transit point. Klikaktiv rounded off its visits to the Bosnian border with [Ljubovija](#), which was also one of the crossing points, but locals stated that refugees are less visible than before.



Klikaktiv also visited the local cemetery in Loznica in order to monitor potential new burials, but there are no changes compared to the previous period when we recorded 13 graves. Following the indicators that some people might have been buried in the cemetery in Mali Zvornik, Klikaktiv's team also visited both Orthodox and Muslim cemetery, but we did not find unmarked graves.

**Towards the end of the reporting period, as the crossing points moved towards the south, people on the move started reporting about the cases of push-backs from the Bosnian border.** In March 2024, two groups of Syrian men have reported to be pushed-back by the Bosnian police in two separate incidents. One group reported that the smuggler drove them near the border, but they had to cross the border on foot. They did so, but shortly after they were caught by the Bosnian police. Bosnian police did not beat them, but they took their valuables, including mobile phones and money. The other group reported the similar incident, they were also taken to the border by car and had to walk over the green border on foot. Bosnian police also caught them and took all of their belongings - their entire backpacks and everything they had in their pockets.



**“Bosnian police caught us and forced us to return back to Serbia. We were not very lucky, most people made it to Bosnia without any problems.”**  
man from Syria



## BELGRADE

In the first quarter of 2024, refugees were sporadically visible in Belgrade. It seems that Belgrade was only a stopover and the refugees did not stay long, at least not in public areas, primarily because of their fear of the police. The ones Klikaktiv's team encountered were cases of people going to the Game to Croatian border or returning to Belgrade after a push-back from Croatia. Klikaktiv also met people who were taken by the police to Sjenica, where they did not stay long, and who were going to Game towards the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina or Croatia.

Also, in this period, Klikaktiv's team started going to [Obrenovac](#), on the outskirts of Belgrade. Obrenovac hosts one of the official, state-run camps which used to accommodate only single men. However, during the reporting period state authorities started evicting and transporting people who were accommodated here to other camps in the south and only registered asylum seekers were allowed to stay in the camp in Obrenovac. This also caused many people to sleep rough in the woods next to the camp or in other locations nearby, out of fear that they will be taken by the police to the south.

During the month of January, refugees have reported that only Afghans are allowed to enter and stay in the camp in Obrenovac, while Arabs were referred to the camps in the south, in Sjenica and Tutin. But also, some Afghans reported that it seems that the decision on who will be allowed to enter the camp is completely arbitrary. On 24th January, Klikaktiv's team spoke with the group of Afghans who had traveled together from the country of origin, but only few of them were allowed into the camp while others were sleeping outside of the camp because they did not want to separate. This started to change over time and in March 2024 already it become more difficult for people who are not registered to access this camp.



# SJENICA

[Sjenica](#) is a city on the south-west of Serbia, near the border with Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The asylum center in Sjenica was originally opened in December 2013 in the private hotel "Berlin" near the city center. The local population was always welcoming towards asylum seekers who were accommodated here. However, due to the increased influx of refugees in March 2017, the capacity of 200 places in the hotel "Berlin" was expanded for an additional 250 places in the renovated facility of the former administration building of the "Vesna" factory.

Over the years, the structure of the beneficiaries has changed, and although it first received families and singles, at some point it became a center only for the reception of unaccompanied minors, and now it only accepts adult men.

Klikaktiv first visited Sjenica in February 2024 and there were close to 500 people in the camp, according to people's statements. Klikaktiv learned that refugees are commonly gathering in the building, which is located opposite of the camp and is part of a larger factory complex that seems to be abandoned, mostly so they can cook food that they say suits them better than what they get in the camp. Klikaktiv's team also [visited](#) this location during Ramadan in March 2024, when many smaller groups were preparing meals for Iftar in this building.





The refugees complained the most about the overcrowding of the camp and the poor hygienic conditions. Also, none of our interlocutors see a perspective in staying in Serbia, and it seems that they mostly have no information about the asylum procedure and in what ways they can regulate their status. Many of them have tried to go to Game several times, usually to Croatian or Bosnian border, but they state that it is now very difficult to pass, police controls have increased, they catch them and charge them fines or take them to detention where some spend more months.



**“We are now stuck in Sjenica, it is very difficult. What should we do now? We can’t go to Hungary, can’t go to Croatia, can’t go to Bosnia, so where should we go?”** man from Syria staying in camp in Sjenica



During Klikaktiv’s subsequent visits to Sjenica in this reporting period, the number of people decreased, but the conditions and circumstances in which the refugees found themselves did not change drastically.





## TUTIN

City [Tutin](#) is some 50 km away from the city Sjenica, but also near the border with Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The asylum center in Tutin received the first refugees back in June 2014. Like Sjenica, this center also changed the structure of its users and, after families who stayed there for many years, now accepts only single men. The location of the center itself has also been changed. The original asylum center was opened in the old furniture factory “Dalas” and over time the new building was constructed and the asylum center is now located far to the outskirts, in the [Velje Polje](#) settlement.

The infrastructure around the camp itself is not developed and there are only private houses and one shop in front of which a police patrol is usually on duty. The number of people is half that in Sjenica, around 200 people, and the problems they complained about during Klikaktiv’s interviews were similar: poor hygiene, lack of hot water for bathing – they only have hot water for an hour at a time, and lack of prospects for staying in Serbia. Even here, the refugees do not have full information that would allow them to make a decision regarding the further course of their journey, and everyone Klikaktiv’s team talked to during these visits is planning to continue their journey. What prevents them is a lack of money, waiting for connections with smugglers and increased control at the borders from which many of them have been returned. During Klikaktiv’s subsequent visits, the number of people dropped slightly, indicating that a few people still managed to move on.



# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Continuous repression, police violence and the externalization of the EU borders in the Balkan region greatly influence people on the move to be less visible and avoid any contact with institutions and accommodation in official centers during their stay in Serbia, but not only them, access to civil society organizations is also limited. In addition, their access to the asylum procedure and social protection is made even more difficult, which consequently pushes them into the hands of smugglers who already have great power over the refugee population. All this also increases the risk of human trafficking, especially for women and unaccompanied boys and girls.

Klikaktiv proposes the following set of recommendations 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:

- 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 and Temporary Protection and enable people on the move to seek asylum on its territory;
- Protecting victims of human trafficking from the migrant population by providing them safe accommodation, legal and psychological support and regulating their legal status and residency in Serbia;
- 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.



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