



VIOLENCE WITHIN STATE BORDER: SERBIA

This report is the product of the Border Violence Monitoring Network's (BVMN) efforts to document violence occurring against people-on-the-move (herein POM) within the borders of countries along the Balkan Route. In addition to identifying cross-border pushbacks, BVMN collects evidence of physical, material, and structural violence against PoM within Serbia. The quantitative and qualitative data included in this report was collected via questionnaire from volunteers who interacted daily with POM in cities such as Belgrade, Subotica, Majdan and Sid. Additionally, information was drawn from the testimonies of POM and from the observations of long-term volunteers and activists, which collectively illustrate the complex factors influencing the well-being of POM in Serbia.

Through analysis of data collected in the field, the first section of this report will discuss acts of physical violence against POM. The second will examine violence inflicted by law enforcement officers and members of extremist right-wing political groups, while the third will report instances of structural violence, a term that refers to the development or perpetuation of inequality by social institutions or processes. Specific examples of structural violence reported by POM and the organizations which support them include restricted access to asylum, collective expulsions, evictions, harassment, and criminalization of solidarity.



BACKGROUND

A [detailed timeline](#) of Serbia's development as a transit country and migration buffer zone for the Balkan route has been produced by BVMN. A summary of this information is included to better contextualize the subsequent reports of internal violence.

The Balkan route's popularity increased in 2011 due to the restriction of direct migration from Greece to Italy, resulting in significantly greater numbers of PoM transiting through Serbia and its neighboring states. As a response to the escalating demand for support, a state-run humanitarian corridor, through which PoM were transported in trains and buses, was established along this route in September 2015. In Serbia, beginning in November of the same year, passage through the humanitarian corridor was restricted to Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan individuals. The corridor ceased to function in March 2016 when Croatia and Slovenia closed their borders. As a result, informal settlements developed in Sid, Serbia, located along the Croatian border. Shortly thereafter, in March 2016, the European Union and Turkey signed an agreement to limit the transit of PoM from Turkey to Greece. While this accord decreased the number of PoM traveling along the Balkan route, those who attempted its transit frequently became trapped at border zones.

In 2016, Hungary authorized pushbacks for PoM discovered less than eight kilometers from its border and subsequently increased security in this region. These aggressive policies increased the length of time PoM spent in Serbia, and informal camps formed in nearby Subotica. In the same year, Serbia supplied additional police and military forces to fortify its borders with Macedonia and Bulgaria to restrict the entry of PoM.

Increased use of excessive force has been observed since 2019. Illegal and frequently violent pushbacks from Croatia and Hungary by law enforcement officials are common occurrences. As EU member states, Croatia and Hungary receive financial support for internal security, which they have used to increase their capacity for monitoring the borders crossed by PoM traveling the Balkan route.

While an emergency lockdown at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic limited the movement of PoM, migration flows resumed after its lifting in May 2020, which also permitted reception and asylum centers to reopen.

POLICE VIOLENCE

■ VIOLENCE AND CRIMINALIZATION BY RIGHT-WING GROUPS AGAINST PEOPLE-ON-THE-MOVE

People-on-the-move in Serbia are subjected to violence from far-right groups of civilians within the country. These groups seem to have grown in structure, geographical scope and membership in the past years.

This type of non-institutionalized violence can take different forms and intensities. One of them is the rise of anti-migrant messages in public spaces, including posters inside public buses or the increasing appearance of hostile graffiti such as “Migrants go home”, especially around the areas usually inhabited and transited by people-on-the-move. Though more subtle and less immediately dangerous than direct physical violence, these messages contribute to the creation of an even more hostile environment for people-on-the-move in the cities and can further impact the general public’s opinion and attitudes.

The anti-migrant rhetoric takes a particularly virulent shape on Facebook and other social media platforms, tools that have become integral to the growth and organization of these groups all around the world. On Facebook, [Narodna Patrola](#) (“People’s Patrol) and [STOP Naseljavanju migranata](#) (“STOP Settlement of migrants”), constitute two of the biggest groups each with daily posts and 1.700 and 318.100 followers, respectively. Outside of the online sphere, and as their name suggests, Narodna Patrola has become increasingly well-known for organizing patrolling vigilante groups in a growing number of cities in the country.

Born in February of 2020 in Belgrade, partly out of another group called “No Surrender of Kosovo and Metohija”, the People’s Patrol currently has 5029 followers on their main Telegram



“Migrants go home” graffiti next to the so-called “Afghan Park” in Belgrade

channel, where pictures of people-on-the-move and information on their location and movements are shared on a regular basis, according to some [media outlets](#). The vigilante actions promoted by the group have now extended from Belgrade to different cities in Serbia, mostly in the Northern region of the country.

During these actions, members of Narodna Patrola, all dressed in black clothes, chase and harass people-on-the-move on the street, as well as at the places where they usually stay. In one of their actions at the end of



Narodna Patrola logo

last year, they reportedly created and [distributed posters in the city of Sombor](#) – close to the Hungarian and Croatian borders – that included the full names of citizens in the city who rented accommodation to people on the move. They also posted their pictures on social media, under the caption “These are your neighbors who illegally rent to migrants. Because of their own profit, they participate in the accumulation of them in your city”.

[In the past, they have also shared videos of members following and giving people-on-the-move papers that said “migrants are prohibited from moving outside migrant centers from 10 to 6 p.m. in the morning and](#)

[in groups with more than three people”.](#)

[Most recently, on the 27th of March, Narodna Patrola organized another action in the town of Subotica](#) – close to the Serbian–Hungarian border, when they searched for, chased and verbally harassed migrants residing in the squats around the train tracks in the center of the city. After that, they reportedly took left-behind phones, weapons and passports and handed them over to the police, who arrived at the place shortly after the start of the action. The so-called “protest” was live-streamed on their platforms and published alongside sympathetic commentary on some local media outlets. [The action was called in response to an alleged rape of a local in Subotica, which members of the group characterised as part of a larger spike in crimes conducted against locals by migrants.](#)

Moreover, members of BVMN’s partnered organizations have recently received reports from people-on-the-move in the region of regular visits to the squats by people in civilian clothes – identified as Serbian citizens – which often include the destruction and stealing of personal belongings.



■ POLICE VIOLENCE IN BELGRADE AND COLLECTIVE EXPULSION TO PREŠEVO

Across the first three months of 2022, in Belgrade, the Serbian police authorities have continued rounding up people-on-the-move in the city before expelling them to southern Serbia — a practice that has become routine since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During these operations, police officers gather people-on-the-move from Belgrade locations that they are known to frequent, including the old Savska train station, the bus station, parks in Savamala, nearby cafes and hostels, and the Collective Aid WASH station near Zeleni Venac. Those gathered are predominantly Afghan men or Afghan unaccompanied and separated children, as well as some people on the move from other South Asian countries. According to Belgrade-based NGO Info Park, the police on average gather between 80 and 90 POM, usually at Staklenac — an abandoned building located on Gavrića Principa Street.

From there, police use passenger buses to transport the people-on-the-move to Preševo camp, a remote reception and transit center near Serbia's border with North Macedonia. People on the move almost immediately attempt to return to Belgrade, but are faced with limited options; most bus companies have suspended service between Preševo and Belgrade due to harassment by local taxi drivers who want to charge people-on-the-move an exorbitant fee for the journey. As a result, POM report paying up to 300 euros for taxi transport from Preševo to Belgrade — ten times the price of a bus ticket. Info Park reported the first expulsion of this type in 2022 on February 18, resulting in the transfer of 82 persons on the move to Preševo. This was followed by the expulsion of 82 persons on the move on February 23 and 85 persons on the move on March 18, both to Preševo. Smaller actions, including the detention of small groups — usually fewer than five — from Park Luke Čelovića or the Collective Aid WASH station, have also been reported. These operations

directly preceded the Serbian general elections on April 3, and have decreased since then. Such operations were also frequent across 2021, especially in the summer, during which they sometimes occurred as often as twice a week.

Info Park and other monitoring NGOs have reported verbal abuse and intimidation by police during these operations and in at least one instance physical violence against a minor, for which criminal charges were filed against the offending officer. Unaccompanied and separated children are often present in the groups gathered, sometimes as young as 11. In such cases, NGOs have attempted to advocate for their removal from the group in order to be properly attended by social workers and placed in age-appropriate accommodation. On occasion, police have blocked NGOs from monitoring the raids.

Many of these gathered possess valid accommodation IDs from other camps yet are removed to Preševo nonetheless, undermining trust and the likelihood that persons on the move will choose to register with [the Commissariat](#), thus leaving them more vulnerable and sleeping rough. As a result of these actions, persons on the move have started using new routes directly from southern Serbia to border crossing points in the north, Info Park says. Those who are expelled to Preševo often return to Belgrade or other northern cities within three days, highlighting the futility of the practice.



EVICTIIONS IN NORTHERN SERBIA

The police actions have occurred not just in Belgrade but also in the border area of northern Serbia. On the night of February 6th, police officers conducted raids of locations in Sombor, Subotica, and Kikinda in northern Serbia. [While exact numbers are uncertain, a feature on the Serbian Ministry of the Interior website reported that 'several hundred' migrants were taken to reception centers.](#) Specifically, the majority of people-on-the-move were taken to Preševo camp. As well as preventing people-on-the-move from continuing on their journeys by forcibly relocating them to the Serbian–North Macedonian border area, the police actions seek to further constrain mobility since Preševo is the only camp in Serbia that limits the ability of POM to leave and enter freely. However, individuals caught up in the raids and relocated to Preševo began to arrive at Collective Aid's Belgrade WASH Centre in the following days,

and expressed their intention to return to the north and resume their journeys. This pattern, which follows every large-scale police raid and relocation, highlights the futility of a law enforcement-heavy migration policy which purportedly aims to 'ensure the safety of all [and] provide humane living conditions for migrants' which also 'curb[ing] smuggling gangs' (Ministry of the Interior). As people-on-the-move returned to the north and numbers in the squats increased again towards the end of February, it is clear that only meaningful access to safe asylum and migration pathways can guarantee safe and human conditions for migrants and refugees and reduce the viability of the smuggling economy.

This large-scale raid across northern Serbia was followed by consistent police actions throughout the month

of March targeting the population sleeping rough in Subotica's town center. Several highly visible actions involved police evicting people-on-the-move from squats and forcibly detaining them in police vans in the centre of town, in some cases visibly kicking individuals to force them into the vehicles. POMs reported being told to either pay a fine or be taken to camps in the south of Serbia (presumably Presevo). In addition, individuals sustained injuries which they reported were a result of police violence in these evictions, including broken hands, bruised eyes, and so on. Police destroyed stoves previously installed by an NGO for people on the move to cook and stay warm in the squats, and also destroyed phones. On the 8th of March, a pile of 30 broken and burned mobile phones was evident outside one of the evicted squats in central Subotica.

These evictions continued throughout the month of March and into April – sometimes on a daily basis – and were frequently carried out in the early hours of the morning. They have also continued after the Serbian general election on April 3, indicating that they are part of a longer-term campaign to expel people-on-the-move from central and public spaces in Subotica. Anecdotal and off-the-record statements acquired from local police officers by local NGOs suggest that the spike in police activity was instead driven in part by a high-profile sexual assault case allegedly involving two people-on-the-move in Subotica. [Such cases have also been seized upon by a local far-right group the People's Patrol \(Narodne Patrole\) as justification for conducting their own 'protest' at the squat locations in central Subotica on the 27th of March](#) during which they searched for, chased, and verbally harassed POM, before 'recovering' left-behind phones, weapons, and passports and handing them over to the police. The police were present during this action.



VIOLENCE, INHUMANE TREATMENT AND DETENTION AT THE NIKOLA TESLA AIRPORT IN BELGRADE

A member of BVMN recently collected testimony that described the degrading conditions that people-on-the-move are often subjected to at the Nikola Tesla airport in Belgrade. According to the information gathered by different actors in the country over the past few months, this space has become an obscure place of arbitrary detention and inhumane treatment for some groups of people-on-the-move flying into the capital.

The testimony was shared by a Cuban 20 year-old woman and her 45 year-old mother, and described a pushback carried out by Serbia police officers in November of 2021. The two women flew from Russia and were denied access into the country on the claim that they did not have enough cash to support themselves, despite having documents that showed enough money in their bank accounts. Before they were forcefully returned to St. Petersburg, they were reportedly detained for several hours in a locked room somewhere inside the airport, together with tens of other people from Cuba - some of whom claimed to have been there for up to 10 days. All of them were stripped of their phones upon entering.

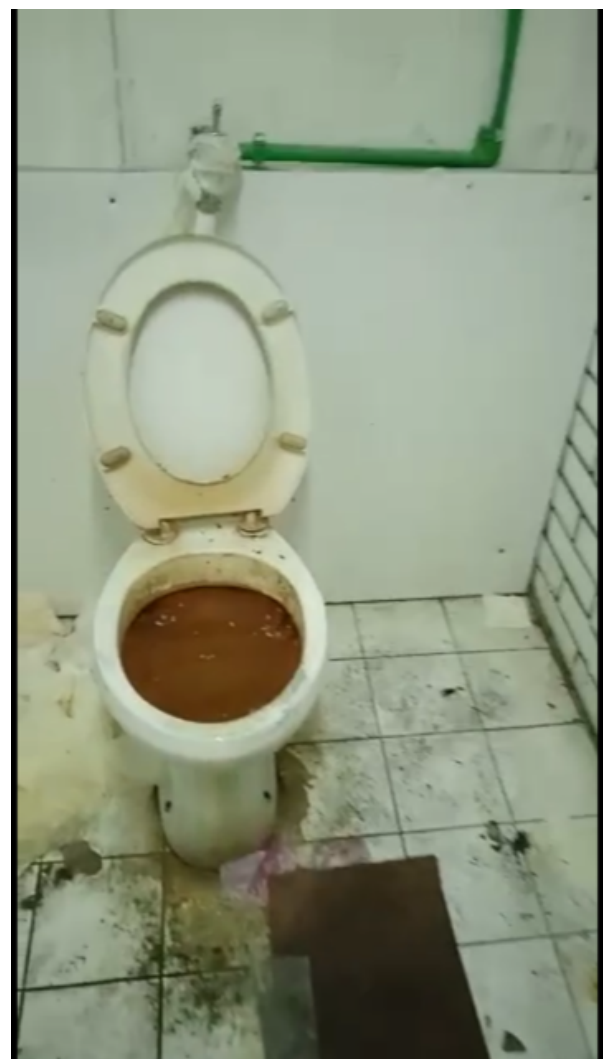
According to the respondent, there were several incidents of both physical and verbal violence perpetrated by the guards who would sometimes come into the room. This included shouting, beatings and kicking when someone did not understand an order or did not grab the food quickly enough - this reportedly consisted of bread and water. The place had no beds and was only equipped with one shared bathroom that was in terrible hygienic conditions.

While in detention, the 20 year-old woman fainted and had to be taken to the hospital, where she underwent several tests alone for hours since her mother was not allowed to enter the room. She reports that she was pregnant but lost the baby during that time and was simply told "you're no

longer pregnant" by someone in the hospital, with no further explanation or care. She was then returned to the airport detention room with her mother. They were pushed back to Moscow some hours later.

This testimony of mistreatment at Nikola Tesla Airport is not unique, and instead is representative of a pattern of abuse, intimidation, poor accommodation conditions, and deprivation of legal rights (representation, interpretation, etc) experienced by foreigners detained upon entry.

Airport officials registered few intentions to seek asylum across 2021 until the final two months of the year, when a large influx, primarily of Burundian and Cuban asylum-seekers, resulted in 88 of the airport's year total of 146 registration certificates. Beginning in September 2021, the Belgrade Center for Human



Rights (BCHR) started to record more requests for legal help from foreigners who said airport border officers ignored their asylum requests. These clients also reported that their phones were often confiscated and that they were held for days in an unheated, overcrowded, and poorly equipped transit room. Often, border police only issued registration certificates after intervention by the BCHR, or else clients were otherwise deported to their countries of origin.

In January 2022, human rights lawyer Nikola Kovačević publicized two cases of Burundian nationals detained and abused at the Nikola Tesla Airport over the course of the Christmas holidays. The first asylum-seeker,

after being held in airport detention for three days, was forcibly returned to Istanbul Airport alongside 12 other Burundian citizens on December 28. There, Turkish officials confiscated his belongings and passport; he slept on the airport floor for over a week before officials beat him and forced him onto a plane returning to Burundi via Ethiopia on January 10. Meanwhile, on January 1, border officials ignored asylum requests from a Burundian woman and placed her in detention, where — while in police custody — several Burundian detainees intervened to prevent a group of Tunisian detainees from sexually assaulting her. On the night of January 3, the woman resisted a deportation attempt by lying prostrate on the floor and wailing.

Nationals from Burundi and Cuba, among other countries, do not need visas for stays of a certain length in Serbia. Nonetheless, Serbian border police are authorized to reject individuals for certain administrative reasons or who they believe are arriving under false pretenses. In these cases, border police are obligated to issue individualized and bilingual rejection decisions. In practice, BCHR notes, this is rarely done, making it impossible for individuals to appeal their expulsion. At the same time, the principle of non-refoulement obliges Serbia to halt returns of individuals to contexts where they face death or torture. (On January 25, 2022, despite a European Court of Human Rights injunction, Serbia extradited a dissident to Bahrain who faced the death penalty there.) Additionally, persons deprived of liberty (detained) are entitled to certain rights under Serbian and international human rights law, such as the right to legal representation and outside communication — rights that are rarely respected for foreigners detained at the Belgrade Airport.



CRIMINALIZATION OF SOLIDARITY

Serbia has not only proven to be a hostile environment towards people on the move, but organizations and individuals active in Serbia also face incidents of criminalisation of solidarity (COS). While it is important to note that the criminalization of our work is not comparable to the criminalization of whole existences as faced by people-on-the-move, it is important to recognize that the former is a direct result from the latter. It has been several years that NGOs and activists report on violent incidents against their organizations and team members. These incidents can take very different forms but are mostly aimed at deteriorating and hindering the work of those that openly stand in solidarity with people-on-the-move. BVMN recently published its [report on criminalisation of solidarity in 2021](#), which highlights different forms of criminalisation, and also includes a chapter on the situation in Serbia. Here are some paragraphs from the "Accused of Solidarity" report concerning the situation of Criminalisation in Serbia:

In Serbia, BVMN's member organizations NNK and Collective Aid faced several incidents over the reporting period. NNK in Šid is regularly subject to online attacks and negative posts on social media. Especially in the Facebook group "[Omladina Šida](#)" (Youth in Šid) that openly campaigns against their work and people-on-the-move more generally. In the past, the group posted pictures of volunteers that they had taken without their consent, threatening and insulting them online. But harassment does not only happen online: NNK's volunteers reported incidents of harassment by locals on the streets. In one incident, in a local shop a customer threatened a volunteer that "if the 'Muslim hordes' invading his country did anything to this daughter, he would seek revenge against the organisation".

In addition to the verbal harassment,

NNK also reported numerous incidents of vandalism. On the 1st of January 2021, the private car of a volunteer was demolished. The windshield was damaged and on the back of the car the word "leave" was graffitied. On the night of the 6th of January 2022, the license plates of the same car were stolen. On 8th of January 2022, the license plates of the van used for distributions were stolen as well, thus making it impossible to legally drive with it. These acts of vandalism were most likely executed by some civilians that were known to the volunteers as the latter were regularly harassed by those residents on the streets of the small town.

However, the COS in Serbia does not only stem from locals, but is heavily backed up by local and national authorities as well. In Šid, NNK reports a high presence of police observing its work, and concrete instances of verbal threats or harassment by police officers, as well as excessive administrative controls targeting members of the organization. In Autumn 2021, a volunteer from NNK in Šid was arrested by the local police when assessing the situation of people on-the-move in a neighborhood village. They reported "being detained, frisked, and interrogated by special police units, their IDs and notebooks were inspected and photographed before they were driven out of town and told to never return". ([Kemp, 2021, third paragraph](#)).

Similarly, staff and volunteers of Collective Aid, based in Subotica, reported to have experienced diverse forms of offline verbal threats and harassment in different locations. The main perpetrators were local citizens and employees of the Commissariat for Refugees, as well as police officers. The organization reported that the van used for distributions was repeatedly vandalized. When contacting the police

to report the incident, their testimony was taken but it was said that issuing a written document was impossible. Due to these administrative obstacles, the organization was unable to report the incident in an effective manner. Throughout 2021, the organization was repeatedly the target of harassment in the form of excessive administrative controls or audits, such as ID checks by state actors. In March 2021, two volunteers were summoned to the police station to be questioned there; one volunteer was held and questioned for four hours.

Additionally, it was reported that intimidation tactics were used. In December 2021, two police officers in civilian clothes arrived at Collective Aid's warehouse in Subotica where they checked the IDs of all team members present at the site, as well as the organization's registration documents, and questioned them about their activities. Reportedly, they also denied the organization's right to information on the purpose of their visit. Moreover, the organisation has been obligated to inform the local police beforehand of the exact date and time of their distributions to people-on-the-move in Majdan and Rabe, near the Romanian border, during periods of high police attention.

In January 2022, the team was followed by a police car to one of their regular distribution sites and asked to stop operating there. When trying to engage in a constructive conversation, the volunteers were asked to stop their distributions in all locations but one, as "the Hungarian police will not like it". When trying to explain the background of the distribution at the location, the officer signalled that she was not interested in a conversation, started talking in an aggressive way and verbally intimidated the volunteers. As a result of the incident, the organisation has been forced to stop distributing in Rabe by the Hungarian border in order to protect its volunteers from arbitrary deportation. Additionally, in

Belgrade, where Collective Aid has another operating location, ID checks of volunteers are regular during their shifts, with police in uniform and civilian clothes checking the centre as a common occurrence. Arrests of people-on-the-move have also taken place at the door of as well as inside the centre without a warrant. The organisation also points to the increasing fear of deportation of volunteers, which is difficult to appeal because of the short notice of these acts.

Both NNK and Collective Aid report on a massive increase in police presence at their distribution sites, partly justified by the COVID-19 pandemic, and increased harassment from the local community. This is not only interfering with their daily procedures but also perceived as a threat by the CSO's team members conducting their work. These forms of informal criminalisation on the direct support side of NNK and Collective Aid's work makes it increasingly difficult to conduct vital humanitarian work, including building a relationship of trust with people-on-the-move, which remains of the highest relevance in the documentation of fundamental rights violations and related advocacy work.

INDIVIDUAL CASE OF INTERNAL VIOLENCE

Shortly before 13:30 on Thursday, December 16th, the respondent, a young man from Afghanistan, was approached at the Belgrade bus station by two police officers.

"Where are you from?" they asked him.

"Afghanistan," he replied.

He showed them his bus ticket, which they proceeded to destroy.

"The police do this often," he said. "And every time I have to buy another ticket." The officers, one of whom was a woman, took him into a room containing several Afghans, including minors.

"They beat me really badly," he said.

They held him by the collar and kned him in the stomach. They also punched him in the face. They struck him with a baton on his right arm several times.

"I have so much pain in my head," he mentioned several times during the interview. One of the other Afghans in the room, filmed the beating and called an acquaintance, who arrived a few minutes later. He told the respondent that the acquaintance was German.

"He was not wearing a uniform, but he had an ID card around his neck," the respondent said. He showed the video to the German, who said nothing could be done and promptly deleted it from his phone. In the presence of the German, the police officers began to beat the respondent again.

"The two beatings together lasted 4–5 minutes," he said. Eventually, they let him go.

NETWORK STRUCTURE AND CONTACT

B	O	R	D	E	R				
V	I	O	L	E	N	C	E		
M	O	N	I	T	O	R	I	N	G
N	E	T	W	O	R	K			

BVMN is a volunteer led endeavor, acting as an alliance of organisations in the Western Balkans and Greece. BVMN is based on the efforts of participant organizations working in the field of documentation, media, advocacy and litigation. We finance the work through charitable grants and foundations, and are not in receipt of funds from any political organisation. The expenditures cover transport subsidies for volunteers in the field and four paid positions.

To follow more from the Border Violence Monitoring Network, check out our [website](#) for the entire testimony archive, previous monthly reports and regular news pieces. To follow us on social media, find us on Twitter handle [@Border Violence](#) and on [Facebook](#). For further information regarding this report or more on how to become involved please email us at mail@borderviolence.eu. For press and media requests please contact: press@borderviolence.eu



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