

Between Transit, Repression and Push-backs: a report on the Current Situation for Refugees in Serbia

Belgrade, remaining an important transit point, proves that the so-called “Balkanroute” is still a well beaten track. There is a constant flow of people arriving and leaving the city. On a daily basis, approximately 100-200 people arrive¹. Most of them come via Bulgaria and Macedonia and stay only for a couple of days to rest, organize and prepare for further traveling. Others also stay for longer, as Serbia, which is not part of the Dublin Agreement, does not cause them any trouble for further asylum applications.

About and through Transit Zones

Almost everyone continues their travel at some point, the vast majority over Hungary. The Hungarian border is close to Subotica, a bigger city in the north of Serbia that is very well connected to the rest of the country. Therefore, the infrastructure between Subotica and Belgrade is well-established. According to the numbers of the Hungarian police, around 150 people each day get caught when crossing the border illegally. This sums up to approximately 800 people per week who arrive in Hungary and move on, as detention capacity in Hungary is limited and Serbia so far did not take back any passengers² who already crossed the border. Although the border is officially closed, there is a 150km long barbed-wired fence and the region around Subotica is under continuous military and technological surveillance, passing through Hungary is only a matter of time.

The procedure is like this: People get caught by the police and punished under migration law for illegally entering the territory. After being caught, people are officially charged with up to 6 months in detention camps, but in practice they only get detained for a couple of weeks, as the detention capacity in Hungary is limited. There is also a small legal corridor to Hungary through the border crossings Kelebia and Horgoš. Each day between 12 and 30 people at each crossing are able to enter the transit zone, apply for asylum in Hungary and are subsequently brought to an open camp. This is especially relevant for families and vulnerable people as they are prioritized in the selection of who is let in. As only a small number of NGOs are permitted to access the 'camp' in front of the transit zone and the transit zone itself, the conditions in this area are very poor³. Only very basic food and medical services are provided and NGOs are not permitted to hand out tents as Hungarian authorities suspect people of using them for illegal border crossings. Nevertheless, some people bring tents from Belgrade which are shared in solidarity among the people in the 'camp'.

The amount of time that people have to persevere in front of the fence depends on the individual cases and is at the same time very arbitrary. In general, it is mainly Syrian, Afghani and Iraqi families who can cross to the transit zones first. If there are no more families left but still capacity, other people are let in as well. This arbitrary selection method leaves everyone waiting in front of the door every morning – without ever knowing when their turn will be.

Although the situation in Serbia is relatively secure for people on the move, the increasing repression of migrants in Hungary does not remain without consequences on the Serbian territory either. Many rumours are spread in the parks where most of the passengers stay during the day and no exceptional happenings at the Hungarian border – such as on the

1 See UNHCR Reports on Serbia; online: [http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/documents.php?page=1&view=grid&Country\[\]=502](http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/documents.php?page=1&view=grid&Country[]=502); last accessed 30th of May 2016

2 Passenger is a self-designated name of many people in the two parks in Belgrade.

3 See the report of Migzol: Situation on the hungarian-serbian border; online: <http://www.migszol.com/blog/situation-on-the-hungarian-serbian-border>; last accessed 30th of May 2016

10th of May, when 10 people got an expulsion order from the containers in the transit zone and were forced to leave the zone through the door again - remain unknown. The trick behind this particular practice is that the fence is not on the actual border between Serbia and Hungary but 5 metres into the Hungarian territory. Hence, being pushed back out of the door does not officially mean crossing into Serbia. But people have to cross the border themselves.

Repression and Push-Backs in the Border Region

This incident fits into the big picture of Hungary enforcing repressive measures on passengers for months. Having hardened migration law already in the beginning of April, the Hungarian parliament will decide on yet another harshening of migration law on Monday 16th of May. The law that is still under discussion would entitle the Hungarian authorities to push back to Serbian territory⁴ everyone who crossed the fence illegally and got caught within 8 kilometres. So far, it is still unclear how effectively this law will be when it comes into practice. Nevertheless, push-backs from the Hungarian to the Serbian side already take place on a regular basis and involve extremely violent behaviour.

In an Interview with Jawed, one Afghan man, 32 years old, explains what happened to him recently:

Moving Europe: "What happened?"

J: "The Hungarian police left a dog on me. The police started beating me and they sprayed me and afterwards I fell down on razor wires."

ME: "Where was this?"

J: "In Hungary".

ME: "In Hungary? Have you already tried to go to Hungary? When was this?"

J: "Before 5 days. (...) For an hour we were just shouting because of the burning of the pepper spray and they (the police) were saying that we were not allowed to take a breath (...) after this they just pushed us back to Serbia".

ME: "The Hungarian police?"

J: "Yeah, the Hungarian police pushed us back to Serbia".

Another man, Farhad, 26 years old, from Afghanistan was part of a group of a 16 people group (men, women and children) who was beaten by the police with sticks:

F: "When the Hungarian police took us, afterwards they sent us back to Serbia".

ME: "Do you mean the Hungarian police?"

F: "Yeah, they beat us so much. After this, we went through the border gate, the Hungarian border gate, you know.

ME: "Like this transit zone?"

F: "The transit zone, yeah."

Repression and Illegal Evictions in Belgrade

4 People were brought by the Hungarian authorities from Hungary to the other side of the fence. Then the people decided to walk by foot back to Serbia.

The scenario of Hungary pushing back people on Serbian territory must be seen in the context of the current situation. Since the re-election of Aleksandar Vučić on 28 April the repression against people on the move passing through Belgrade has gotten harsher every day. Starting with the prohibition of people staying and sleeping in the parks overnight, the developments have followed a certain logic: Repression of people by oppressing their rights and the support structures. One day after the government got an absolute majority, Miksaliste, a container park hosting most of the NGOs and a central point for people passing through Belgrade, got an expulsion order and was completely emptied and demolished the day after. This happened although the project had a contract until June and followed a dubious eviction and demolition of the neighbouring building, conducted by masked men a few nights before. In the same run the No Border Hostel, a formerly abandoned house that was self-organized by migrants and activists and sheltered up to 70 people each night, got evicted and destroyed. The houses were destroyed to pave way for the controversial Belgrade Waterfront project, a large scale investment project accelerating gentrification of the central areas between the train station and the riverside.

The state operated Commisariat for refugees has also shown more and more presence in the parks bothering migrants, volunteers and independent activists. The Commisariat forces people to sleep and register in the camps. On the one hand, there is organized transport to the closest camp (but not back) – Krnjaca. The schedule misfits the food distribution times – subsequently forcing people to stay there all day or stay hungry. The buses are always overcrowded and the camp, that has a capacity of 350 people, already hosts around 600 people each night. On the other hand, in the parks in Belgrade families are forbidden to put up tents to seek shelter from rain and people who missed the bus have to walk around the city all night as they are chased by the authorities.

People will not stop moving towards Western Europe

With the changing legal landscape in Hungary, it can be anticipated that the situation in Belgrade will further degrade as the authorities attempt to control people's whereabouts and movement even more. The capacities of the camps have already reached their limit and it is questionable where people could or should stay in the centre if sleeping in the public is prohibited. The fact that the route through Serbia is still in force shows that – after the closure of the humanitarian corridor, the people will not stop moving towards western European countries. All of the people who are still crossing depend on money and the physical strength to go this long way. This unveils the contradiction of the European asylum system. On the one hand Europe presents itself as a safe haven of human rights and protection, but in reality it is the legal management of the European Border Regime that pushes people into unbearable conditions. If the passage towards Europe is barred by fences, laws and authorities, it forces people into unsafe, psychologically as well as physically threatening, often criminal routes. The only safe passage for all these people would be open borders.

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