

Bordered lives – unbound violence

On the situation of migrants¹ in Serbia in autumn 2016

This report describes the violence of the border regime erected and fortified as part of the gradual closure of the Balkan corridor since the end of 2015. A bit more than one year ago, the Hungarian government finished constructing the fences along the Serbo-Hungarian and Croatian-Hungarian border, and a bit more than 6 months ago the entrance to the Balkan corridor at the Greek-Macedonian border in Idomeni was closed completely. The logic and consequences of the closure of flight routes manifest themselves in the daily violence of the border regime and its zones of control and coercion.

The current situation is nothing new, as the walls and fences of the European border regime have always been marked by oppression and violence.² Nevertheless, the violent constellation of autumn 2016 is remarkable insofar as the area had seen a relatively safe escape route in 2015, allowing thousands of migrants to quickly and relatively safely reach their destinations. However, now everything is back to what is perceived as 'normal': As a consequence of the European closure of the relatively safe escape corridor, the routes are again reigned by repressive government policies and violence.³

a) Multiple forms of border violence

Many reports focus on the physical violence which Hungarian border guards and militias use against migrants at the Serbian-Hungarian border. But the reign of violence reaches beyond these physical attacks at the Serbian-Hungarian border: Violence is omnipresent at the routes of migration in the contested border zones of Serbia, Hungary and Croatia. Furthermore, it manifests itself not only through physical attacks - violence is also exerted psychologically as well as institutionally.

This report highlights these forms of violence by presenting observations and testimonies from the border zones:

I. Physical violence and push-backs at the Serbian-Hungarian and Serbian-Croatian border

Both borders to Hungary and Croatia display a number of similar circumstances: camps without adequate capacities, non-functioning lists supposed to ensure legal crossings, and severe police violence by Hungarian police forces (which also widely deploy dogs) and Croatian police (which adopts the same model of beatings and push-backs for an ever-increasing number of people) in the case of 'unauthorised crossings'.

The police violence is documented in official NGO reports (e.g. Amnesty International report on Hungary⁴) and has been included in reports ranging back to January 2016⁵ (Croatian police violence and push-backs on the Serbian-Croatian border). But little has changed over all these months, in fact the violence seems to worsen. However, despite the increasing obstacles, migrants continue to try to overcome their forced stay in Serbia and repeatedly attempt to cross the border to Hungary and Croatia.

1 This report uses the terms 'migrant' and 'refugee' interchangeably, seeking to contest the hierarchical divide between the terms, and emphasising the context of migratory movements based on multiple, interconnected and complex motives.

2 See, among countless evidence, our previous report on the violence at the Serbian-Croatian border <http://moving-europe.org/report-on-push-backs-and-police-violence-at-the-serbo-croatian-border-2/> and the No Border Serbia accounts on www.noborderserbia.wordpress.com

3 This report was only made possible due to a collaboration with the No Border Serbia collective

4 See amnesty's recent report here: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur27/4864/2016/en/>

5 For the case of Croatia see our report from January 2016 here: <http://moving-europe.org/report-on-push-backs-and-police-violence-at-the-serbo-croatian-border-2/>

The following testimonies⁶ were recorded in late September at refugee facilities in Belgrade, Subotica, Kelebija and Šid.

*"I tried six times to pass, one time through **Croatia** and five times through **Hungary**. Last time the police caught me and their dog bit me. It was around 10km inside Hungary. I have been waiting on the list for 2 months, even though I was number 9 in line after they had closed the border." (M. from Bangladesh)*

*"The problem is that we as Algerians and Moroccans we cannot register for the transit list [to Hungary]. We know about friends which came here via Albania and Montenegro. They were robbed and pushed back several times, but they had to chose this route because before they tried to cross **Macedonia** and they were beaten up. One of us stayed 12 hours under a truck to reach Belgrade. Others are kept by the mafia in a house until they pay an increased prize." (R. and S. from Algeria and Morocco)*

*"I walked for two days and passed four villages in **Hungary**. Then I was caught by the police and they forced me to return." (S. from Afghanistan)*

*"We tried to cross into **Croatia** during the night. We were caught by the police, taken into one big police van. Around 5 policemen started to hit and beat us and then they took us to the [Serbian] border. They hit us again and forced us to walk back to Serbia. We had no possibility to ask for asylum." (O. from Syria)*

*"Police dogs of the **Hungarian** police bit me in the arm, so I could not move it for one month. And they used teargas against us and we couldn't breathe or see anything." (N. from Algeria)*

*"I am under 18, but the **Hungarian** beat me and hit my hand, I cannot move one of my fingers anymore." (R. from Kashmir)*

*"I had to stay two month in the closed camp in Presevo with my family. Than the [Serbian] police came to push us back to Macedonia. I know this happened to many more people. Afterwards I tried several times to get back to Serbia. Now our names are on the list for the transit to **Hungary** in Kelebija. I don't want to go through Hungary, because there the police has dogs and cameras." (H. from Syria)*

*"We tried one time to cross into **Hungary**. The police caught us. We were very afraid because they used dogs and violence against us. It was horrible. The police send the dog on our child, not close enough to bite but close enough to scare her a lot." (A family from Iraq)*

*I tried six times to cross into **Croatia**. Even I made it to Zagreb one day. But the police caught me. They hit me in the face and attacked my body. They destroyed my knee." (L. from Pakistan)*

*"I tried seven times to cross into **Croatia**. One day I reached Zagreb. There in the government camp they said to me that I have to register first at the police station in order to stay. I went to the police station and they didn't ask me anything, just took me and brought me back to the Serbian border." (M. from Bangladesh)*

6 The research was supported by the group "Bridges Not Fences"

[Click here for photos which were given to us by testifying migrants who documented their own injuries. These pictures show open wounds and injuries from dog bites and truncheon attacks, which were caused by border police of Hungary and subsequently received poor medical attention in Serbia.](#)

[Click here for a video which was taken at the beginning of October 2016 and which shows the serious injuries of a group of minors caused by Croatian police before they pushed the minors back to Serbia. The video was given to Noborder Serbia as evidence of police violence.](#)

II) Institutional violence in Serbia

As government camps in Serbia are full, miserable and remote, more than one thousand migrants sleep rough in the streets of **Belgrade**. The nights are getting colder and the weather conditions are often rainy and difficult to endure, thus illnesses amongst the migrant community are increasing. Temperatures continue to drop and it is only to get worse during the upcoming winter months. Blanket provision is attempted by solidarity groups as well as MSF, but there is no provision of warmth and shelter during the nights. Self-organized solutions like sleeping in abandoned warehouses are occasionally tolerated (mostly in buildings which are set to be demolished soon to make space for the Waterfront project), but often forbidden and made impossible by Serbian authorities. Several squatted buildings, which provided a minimum of dignified shelter and sleeping space, were evicted by police during the last few months.

People are harassed by the police at various sleeping spots (squats, parks, parking lots etc) during the nights. Often up to 15 people are taken to the police station, and many end up jailed with dubious fines demanding up to 280€. Those lacking the ability to pay are imprisoned and frequently released after a few days in exchange for paying a 'discounted' fine (e.g. 20€-100€).

Furthermore, arbitrary arrests also happen in the border regions. We received several indications that dozens of migrants are arbitrarily detained in Sremska Mitrovica, close to Šid.

"When we were pushed back to Serbia, we were even arrested by Serbian authorities. We had to pay a fine for unauthorised border crossing. It was around 10 000 dinar. Those who couldn't pay had to stay in prison." (F. from Syria)

Permanently changing police orders, arbitrary jurisdictional verdicts and omnipresent police control spread insecurity, frustration and fear.

Outside Belgrade, the government facilities are overcrowded and badly equipped. For instance, several residents confirmed that the conditions in the official camp in **Subotica** (located in the North) are terrible. It is completely full, and we witnessed people camping outside the camp in order to be finally admitted. The camp is kept in an intolerable unhygienic condition by authorities and it lacks any protection against mosquitos or other animals. The camp's medical staff do not provide adequate assistance.



Entry to Subotica camp



Land road towards Subotica camp



Subotica camp from the outside



Tents around Subotica camp



Tents inside Subotica camp



Shower conditions Subotica camp

The camp in **Adaševci** at the Serbian-Croatian border is a place of despair. 1000 people, including many children, live next to a highway. The parking lot which was once established as a transit point has now turned into a dehumanising trap for all those left behind - with no contact to any friendly environment, no public transport, and no hope:

"I live already for many months now in Adaševci. This place holds nothing for us. We always have to take a taxi to the next village, there is no activities and information here. We still hope that someday the border will open. We cannot stay here." (R. from Pakistan)

"Why do we have to live like that? Because there is no war in Pakistan? That's not true! There is war in Pakistan! We already made 6500km of our journey and now it is only 500km left and we are stuck here..." (L. from Pakistan)



Adaševci camp, October 2016

III) Psychological violence

An often under-reported manifestation of the violence at Serbia's borders and bordered zones is of a psychological nature. The circumstances confronting people in official camps as well as informal shelters are marked by the frustration and distress resulting from uncertainty regarding the possibility of crossing via these lists, the confusion resulting from ever-changing policy decision, the experienced alienation and discrimination due to the changing atmosphere in Serbia regarding migrants, and last but not least the suffered traumas caused by arbitrary police violence and prolonged detention. All these factors lead to a severely damaged mental health of people who want to move on but are forced to stay. However, it is more complex and difficult to document these (mental) injuries, a problem reinforced further by the lack of medical assistance in camps as well as more generally in Belgrade.

Xenophobic/racist neighbourhood protests in the Belgrade park by the railway station, which occur daily, continue to harass migrants, activists and anyone they deem to be of another opinion regarding the 'migrant crisis'. The numbers of these protests remain low (~5-15) but their recourse to verbal and physical violence is increasing.

The ongoing fear mongering and hate-campaign against migrants is another pattern of this psychological violence. Moreover, the destruction of emergency shelters in Belgrade, arbitrary detention and legal uncertainty lead to an atmosphere of permanent fear, uncertainty, stress and desperation.

b) Resistance: Continued cross-border movement and collective protest

Despite these deteriorating conditions and a lack of perspectives, the architects of the European border regime cannot completely stop the movements of migrants. On the one hand, borders continue to be crossed by those not authorised to do so, and on the other hand protest against those conditions challenge the widespread despair.

On October 4th 2016 several hundred migrants started a self-organized march towards the Hungarian border from Belgrade and set a strong sign of ongoing movements against the forced standstill and repression in Serbia. Due to exhaustion and the relentless pressure exerted by the Serbian police the protesters finally decided to return to Belgrade, after they had walked for dozens of kilometres. But the media reporting and public awareness have changed: The sometimes sensationalist and overheated coverage of last year's movements has given way to a dense ignorance underpinned by a certain distrust and skepticism towards migrants' capacities to protest and self-organize. Eventually solidarity structures were targeted and policed as 'troublemakers' and this lighthouse action in a desperate landscape was quickly forgotten and neglected.

On November 5th 2016 an "Open Letter" from the Serbian government to humanitarian organizations was published⁷ stating the aim that all refugees should be made to move to official camps by stopping any aid and solidarity work outside these camps and more importantly – outside complete state control. It remains to be seen which consequence will follow, but it is obvious that it will neither improve migrants' situation in Serbia nor strengthen their autonomy.

c) Conclusion

The forms of violence described above should not be perceived as a given, a natural fact, the way that many may take migration and escape for granted. Last year had seen moments in which migration and despair were not inextricably linked with one another. Only the closure of borders and the politics of fortification and deterrence are to be held accountable for the violence.

Only the unconditional politics of freedom and equality adapted to the reality of migration will bring about an end to violence - be it its apparent or subtle modes.

Moving Europe in November 2016

See this report online: <http://moving-europe.org/bordered-lives-unbound-violence/>

⁷ <https://twitter.com/LydsG/status/794858871387017216>