

# solidarnost je naša snaga

## The Current Refugee Situation in Serbia

### ***Hunger, cold, fear:***

The refugee situation in Serbia has dramatically worsened. Currently in Serbia there are between 7000 and 10 000 refugees. One part of this population has been placed in “transit” centres and asylum centres. Although state authorities claim that 6000 refugees and undocumented peoples in city centres are provided with “all of the necessities they require,” a large number of refugees are still sleeping on the streets or squatting in abandoned buildings. They have secured food and water on their own. The majority of those on the street have already been to these transit centres, but after their experiences in these centres, opted to sleep on the street and look for alternative accommodation, rather than enjoying the “hospitality” of the Serbian state. People shared that one of the biggest challenges in these centres is overcrowding, where rooms designed for 5 people had 15 people crammed into them, that there was a shortage of blankets, there were irregular meals, there was a lack of information, and they experienced difficulties with the Commissariat officials.

### ***Illegal deportations:***

What particularly scares refugees and undocumented peoples is illegal deportations, which have been frequent in recent years. Refugees from all over Serbia are being forcibly taken to the intake centre in Preševo, on the pretext that they must stay at this centre. There are reports from these centres of refugees being kidnapped from the centre and transported in police vehicles to the Macedonian border, where they are forced to then cross into Macedonia.

### ***Refugee centres are becoming prisons:***

Increasingly, these refugee centres are becoming closed. Refugees are denied freedom of movement, and are practically in prison. In the Preševo centre, refugees are not allowed to go outside except in rare cases, in which case they are escorted by police or people from the Commissariat for Refugees. On the rare occasions when refugees are allowed to go out into town, they are under no circumstance allowed to talk to the media. The camp in Subotica has recently banned refugees’ freedom of movement, citing health reasons premised on the excuse that the camp is susceptible to infectious diseases.



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## **Militarization of borders:**

The Serbian-Bulgarian border is completely militarized. There is an enormous number of police and soldiers in this zone, some estimates even say that there are around 5000 armed officials. From Zaječar to Dimitrovgrad, which is by the Bulgarian border, there are approximately 20 police and army checkpoints.

## **Stigmatization of refugees and undocumented asylum seekers:**

The Commissariat for Refugees sent a press release to the media to publicly announce that there are infectious diseases among the refugees passing through the country. Actions like these serve only to further stigmatize the entire refugee population. This is a mechanism for reproducing oppression of the most vulnerable and most marginalized community currently in Serbia. Among other things, this is also meant to hinder asylum seekers' receipt of refugee status, as well as to intimidate those who help them. In addition, it should be noted that the occurrence of scabies and other diseases reflects the poor conditions and the lack of resources at the hands of the Serbian state, in its inability to provide basic healthcare for refugees in intake or transit centres.

## **Pressures on humanitarian organizations:**

National authorities within the state apparatus are putting immense pressure on domestic and foreign organizations that provide assistance of any sort to refugees who are outside of refugee centres. Although there is no legal cause or way to prevent the provision of humanitarian assistance to hungry and frost-bitten people, the authorities intervene in any and every way that they can in order to complicate the provision of aid. There have been bizarre cases where food distribution to refugees in parks has been subject to sanitary inspection, and officials have demanded that it "meets the conditions as outlined by law," as if it were a restaurant. A small kiosk, Info Park, which until recently was located in a downtown park by Belgrade's main bus station, was the main resource for almost all refugees in Belgrade. Their "unpardonable sin" was that alongside other organizations, they organized food distribution for refugees, providing them with two hot meals each day.

## **Repression of activists:**

Activists and individuals who are voluntarily helping refugees are being threatened by state authorities. They are increasingly and frequently approached by police, where activists' documents and identification are demanded and they are interrogated. There are known cases of foreign activists who have been deported from Serbia. Although they have not committed any crimes, they were forced to leave the country in a very short time. In the case of one German activist, the timeframe was only 6 hours. Activists have been exposed to threats, and one particular Women in Black activist was openly threatened by the police inspector who was demanding information about specific refugees that they worked with. When the activist refused to divulge information about these particular people, the policeman replied "I can find other ways for us to communicate".



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## ***“Providing assistance to refugees is NOT ACCEPTABLE”:***

The Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran, and Social Affairs released a public statement on November 4<sup>th</sup> 2016, sending a warning to all non-profits, NGOs, and humanitarian organizations providing assistance to refugees who are outside of government-run refugee centres. The statement included that “assistance and support in the form of food, clothing, footwear, encouraging migrants to reside outside the designated permanent asylum centres and transit reception centres are no longer acceptable, this particularly on the territory of the Belgrade city municipality.” This is a formalization of the policies against refugees that the state has enacted, and which is carried out by the Commissariat for Refugees as well as the police force, among other militarized organs. There is now a fear that activists will have to hide when they are assisting refugees, that the situation will get worse, and that the state’s war on refugees and activists will become heightened.



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Belgrade, November 8th 2011*