



Serbia's Special Military Operation

2024 Report

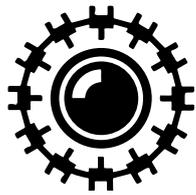


Medical Volunteers
International



Border Violence
Monitoring Network

Violence Within State Borders: Serbia



**Border Violence
Monitoring Network**



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1. Introduction

This report is the product of the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) and Medical Volunteers International Serbia (MVI). The BVMN focuses on documenting violence against people on the move in the Balkans. In addition to recording testimonies of pushbacks across international borders, BVMN collects evidence of physical, material, and structural violence against people on the move within state borders. Medical Volunteers International in Serbia works on providing health education and support with medical needs to people on the move, as well as on facilitating people's access to the Serbian healthcare system. This Internal Violence Report draws on testimonies and observations collected by grassroots actors pertaining to evictions, conditions in government-run centres and police violence perpetrated in the context of the Special Military Operation carried out in Northern Serbia in the period from the end of October 2023 to January 2024.

On October 27th, after several months of increasing numbers of people on the move travelling through Northern Serbia, there was a shooting between people working with smuggling groups near the city of Subotica that left 3 people on the move dead and one severely injured. This event was utilised as justification for the launch of a massive Joint Police Operation, together with Hungarian authorities, announced a day later, on October 28th, by Minister of the Interior Bratislav Gašić during a press conference. The operation involved hundreds of police units from Serbia and Hungary, as well as the heavily armed Serbian Gendarmerie – the state's military police – and the use of patrolling helicopters. President Aleksandar Vučić declared he would also send the military to address the situation if the Minister of Interior “wasn't able to do it”.

The start of the Operation brought the number of officers present in Serbia's northern region of Vojvodina up to 1000, and led to the opening of several new police bases in the areas close to the border. For several weeks, these officers engaged in daily violent evictions and forceful transfers of people on the move, first from informal settlements to nearby government-run accommodations, then from these to official centres in other parts of the country. According to local news, 1,027 people were apprehended and forcefully relocated solely in the first two days after the announcement. The end of this operation was never formally declared by the authorities, but the number of officers present in the region went down to 100 at the beginning of January. Frontex officers were also seen in the region again, after having been apparently absent for the previous two months.

The following report examines the context before the massive deployment of officers, the development of the operation and its impact on people on the move in the country, including, for many, the complete restriction of movement. One of the consequences of the increased militarisation of the



border, leading to growing criminalisation, scrutiny and isolation of people on the move, and many of their supporters, has also been the drastic reduction of contact between people on the move and solidarity structures. Not only has this situation made it more difficult for hundreds of people to access some basic services, but it has also further complicated the monitoring of human rights violations, thus increasing the climate of impunity surrounding the constant abuses against people on the move in the country.



2. Context of the Operation

2.1 Political Context

Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić and his long-dominant Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) faced two significant waves of opposition protests in 2023. Two consecutive days of mass shootings in May left 19 dead at a Belgrade primary school and the villages of Dubona and Malo Orašje. Nearly three months of weekly protests across the country followed, attracting a broad coalition of supporters whose demands included reforms in Serbian media and the resignation of top government officials. Two of the listed ministers are key figures in Serbia's migration management: Minister of Internal Affairs Bratislav Gašić and Aleksandar Vulin, director of the Security Intelligence Agency, who had previously declared that Serbia was "not a parking lot for migrants." Despite the pressure from the protests, a July vote of no confidence in the National Assembly overwhelmingly rejected Gašić's removal.

In October, Vučić announced a snap parliamentary election to be held in December, the third vote in less than three and a half years. Experts suggested that this call was made to limit organising time for the opposition and preempt further slips in SNS's position, such as September's deadly clash at a Serbian monastery in northern Kosovo that jeopardised the already fragile normalisation talks between the two countries. Following the election announcement, the Freedom and Justice Party, the People's Movement of Serbia, and the Green-Left Front formed a new opposition coalition named after the summer protest movement— Serbia Against Violence (SPN).

Despite observers' hopes that the momentum of protests would translate to electoral victory in local Belgrade elections, SPN underperformed expectations with 34.3 percent of votes against SNS's 39.3 percent. Nationally, SNS won 46.75 percent of the votes, with SPN coming out as the top opposition coalition with 23.66 percent. A list led by Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić won 6.55 percent, followed by the National Democratic Alternative (NADA), a right-wing coalition, and the COVID conspiracist-led "We— Voice of the People" list, with 5 and 4.69 percent, respectively.

Leading up to the December 17th election, Serbia's preeminent election watchdog, the Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability (CRTA), alleged that the "campaign took place in a manner in which the border between the state and the party was erased." The cited abuses included pressure on publicly employed employees and beneficiaries, misuse of private data for bribery and marketing, vote buying, and significant overrepresentation of SNS in the media. After the election, observers also alleged that among widespread voting irregularities, organised busing of voters from Republika Srpska, the Serb-majority entity



within Bosnia, was a determining factor in the Belgrade election outcome. Another wave of protests followed in the capital, which Vučić insinuated was organised from abroad. In March, SNS vice president and acting mayor Aleksandar Sapić announced a rerun of the Belgrade municipal elections in the coming months.

Electoral corruption concerns were echoed by the final report of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, released in late February 2024. In the same month, a European Parliament resolution condemned the "lack of institutional response" to the "atmosphere of impunity" surrounding the election and called for an EU investigation. The irregularities were widely denounced by EU representatives as a serious liability for Serbia's EU accession process. Vučić has indicated Serbia's intention to remain on the EU path, despite a March 2024 declaration that the country would consider leaving the Council of Europe in response to Kosovo's possible admission.

2.2 Previous Operations

This time, migration was not promoted as a central issue on the leading lists' platforms. The National Gathering list included two of the most prominent anti-immigrant parties, Zavetnici and Dveri, but failed to pass the parliamentary threshold in the December 2023 election. Public opinion polling conducted in February 2023 found that "presence of migrants in Serbia" was not among the top political or economic issues for Serbians, although 67 percent of respondents indicated it was of relative concern.

However, a history of shows of force against migration in the region of Vojvodina interpreted as electoral moves led many observers and actors on the ground to tie this operation to SNS's quest for support in light of the snap elections. Many initially saw this operation as a second round to the citizens-led campaign for evictions of informal border settlements that took place during the summer of 2023, after a series of violent incidents between smuggling groups. In the months of June and July, several citizens' assemblies on the topic put pressure on local politicians and police to address the situation. An operation involving daily violent evictions, increased apprehensions in the public space (squares, supermarkets, bus stations...) and traffic controls on taxi drivers followed. The announced public goal of these actions— which continued over the whole summer, though in a lesser frequency— was to apprehend and dismantle the smuggling groups in the region. Nevertheless, the violence did not discriminate and, as it is common, it was mostly people on the move in the country who were targeted and abused during the operations.



2.3 EU Accession and Shifting Horizons for Externalisation

The Special Military Operation seems to be a move to further Serbia's compliance with EU migration requirements. It is the strategy of the EU that the "lack of internal border controls in the Schengen area must go hand in hand with compensatory measures to strengthen the external borders." Thus, changes in the Schengen status of Serbia's neighbours have shifted border politics in the region, partially explaining the turn in focus on external border enforcement to the south of Serbia. Bulgaria and Romania gained partial admittance to the Schengen Area in March 2024, following Croatia in January 2023. These changes make most of Serbia's longest borders external borders of the Schengen area. Likewise, EU candidate states must meet benchmarks for migration management and border security to progress their candidacy. According to the EU's 2023 enlargement report on Serbia, the country made "substantial progress to align with EU visa policy" but received recommendations to conclude negotiations for a new agreement with Frontex, increase capacity for "return operations", and create a national anti-trafficking strategy.

Further shifts in Serbia's migration management will likely be felt following the approval of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, which passed in the European Parliament in April 2024 following three years of negotiations. The Pact envisions closer cooperation with countries of origin and transit— with a focus on the Balkans, among others— in order to facilitate return operations to so-called "Safe Third Countries" and increase the externalisation of border controls outside of the EU.

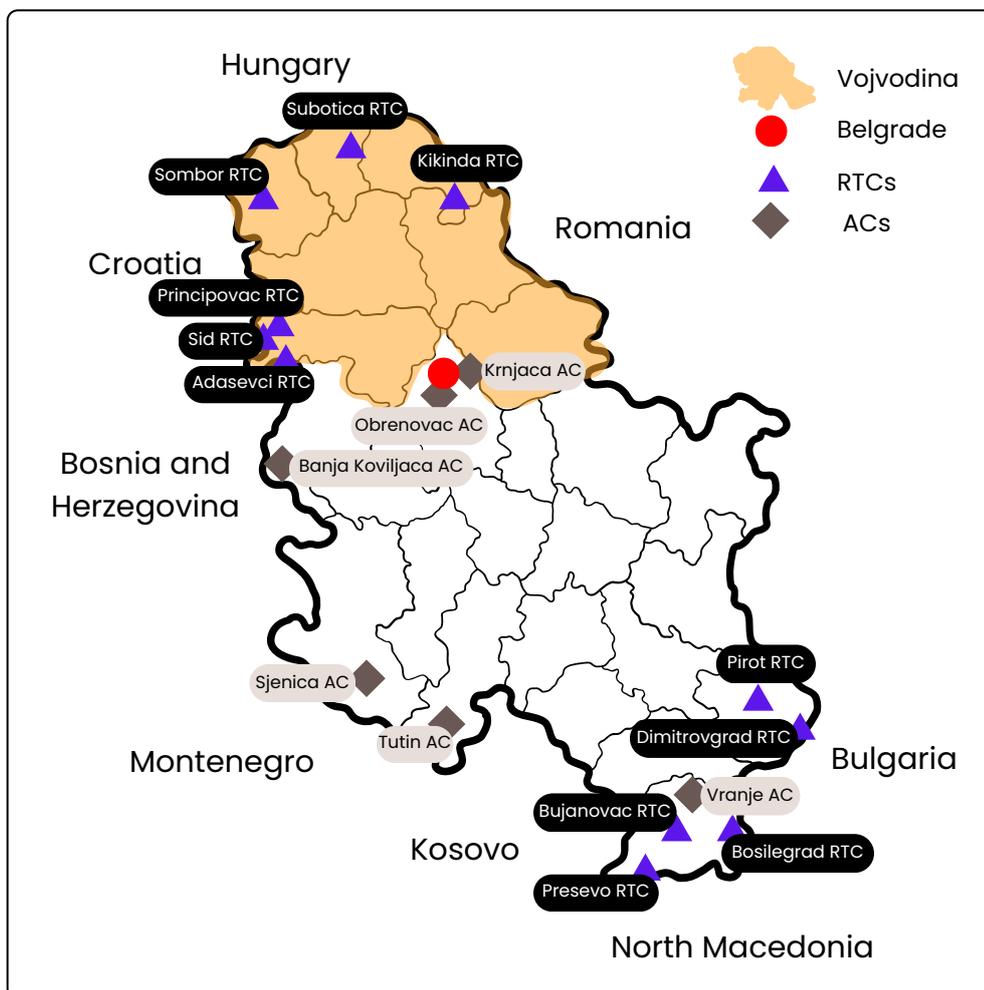
2.4 Population Trends and Camp Overview

According to data from UNHCR, at the end of October, there were an estimated 4,000 people on the move in Serbia, 80 percent of whom were staying at government-run accommodation. The number of people staying outside of official centres, however, is often underreported, especially during the summer months, when people on the move tend to travel more quickly. Grassroots organisations working in northern Serbia observed a rapid increase in the number of people staying in informal settlements in the region in the months preceding the Special Military Operation. While the number of people staying at some of these sites nearly doubled in September, some of the Temporary Reception Centres (RTCs) in the area were also overcapacity. Even though overcrowding in the centres of this region is common, no actions have been taken to improve or expand the facilities and many people— including families with children— are forced to sleep rough outside of them.

At the time of the start of the operation there were 11 working RTCs and 6 Asylum Centres (ACs). Most of the RTCs are located close to the northern or



southern borders of the country, and are under the responsibility of the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration. In theory, people who expressed the wish to stay and apply for asylum in Serbia were transferred to the often well-kept asylum centre facilities. Initially, Temporary Reception Centres, as the name suggests, were set up by the government in 2015 and after to accommodate all the arriving people who stated no interest in going through with the asylum procedure. However, in 2022 it was already a major issue that people with the wish to claim asylum were not referred correctly and that due to the lack of legal migration pathways, hundreds were stuck in RTCs for much longer than the facilities had been envisioned for. In October 2023, two of the three temporary facilities in Vojvodina by the borders with Hungary and Croatia, the Subotica and Sombor RTCs, were at overcapacity, with a combined population of over 520 people.



Map showing all RTCs and ACs in Serbia (October 2023)



3. Evictions

Partly due to the insufficient capacity of the official Reception Centres in the north of the country, together with the inadequate conditions reported from them, for years, thousands of people on the move have found shelter in informal living settlements in multiple locations close to the northern borders of Serbia with Hungary, Romania and Croatia. These settlements have varied in size— sometimes hosting up to 500 people at one point in a single location—, and shown differences in access to services and level of protection from weather conditions.

The practice of police evictions of these informal settlements is not at all a novelty in the government's strategy to intimidate and repress people on the move in the country. As examined in previous BVMN reports and testimonies, over the years, this pattern of evictions has been characterised by high levels of violence and destruction. Moreover, these evictions have often pushed people on the move to find increasingly isolated areas to take shelter, driving them away from the urban centres and multiplying the distance and obstacles to accessing most basic services, including grocery stores. This isolation has also made it increasingly difficult for solidarity organisations to provide support and monitor rights violations. As described in several first-hand testimonies, in the months before the Special Military Operation, foreign officers present in Northern Serbia as part of a FRONTEX mission were witnesses and even participants of these actions that frequently involved physical violence and the destruction of personal belongings.

The frequency of these operations has varied a lot over different periods of time, ranging from nearly daily— as in the spring of 2022, when all settlements around the city of Subotica were emptied— to stopping for a couple of months. Though the practice is not new, the intensity at which it has been implemented by the authorities has reached unprecedented levels during the Special Military Operation. Evictions and the violence that accompanies them have always stood out as deterrence strategies to dissuade people on the move from continuing their journeys, both in Serbia and other countries in Europe, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and France. In Serbia, people on the move are often forcefully relocated to government accommodation centres hundreds of kilometres away, from which most people used to make their way back some days later, thus spending further financial resources.

The eviction practice during the winter operation in the region of Vojvodina has been characterised by the large extension of the covered area, as well as its systematic execution. This specifically differs from past eviction trends. While evictions were previously used mostly for intimidation and dissuasion and carried out around specific areas that people would return to later, this operation seemed to have the goal of physically removing *all*



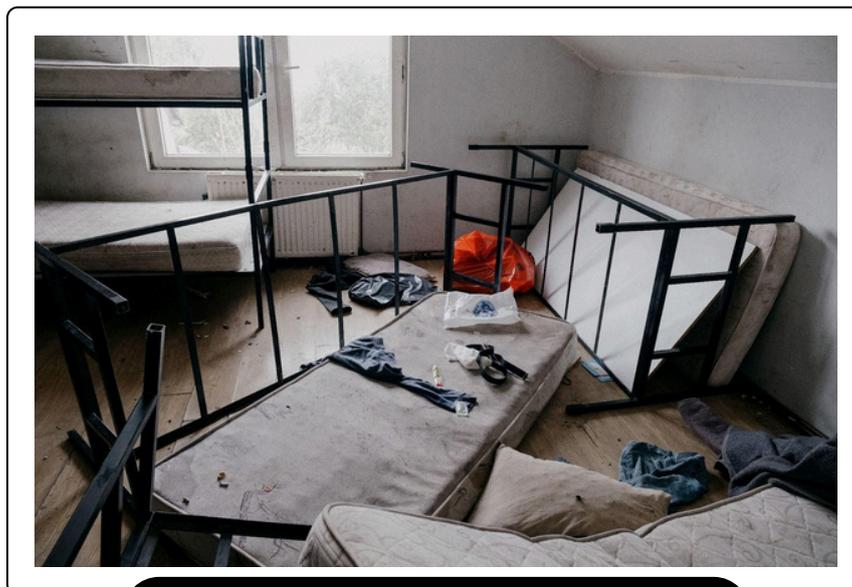
people on the move from the northern part of the country and creating a new status quo where they could not come back. As examined in the next section of this report, this goal went beyond the populations staying at informal living settlements and included the emptying and closure of official camps in the region. However, the violence reported during these evictions was not new, nor was the rate at which they were carried out. The completely unprecedented features of the Military Operation were rather the evictions' long duration, the huge number of personnel deployed and involved, and the accompanying state of surveillance and constant patrolling. These factors made them much more intense and systematic.

The evictions affected all known informal living settlements in Vojvodina, the biggest ones of which were located around the towns of Sombor, Horgoš and Martonoš (a village near Horgoš). At the start of the Military Operation, some of these sites were hosting between 50 and 300 people. Most of the sites were located in abandoned buildings outside of the town, often by dirt roads and several kilometres away from shops and other services. The evictions have normally taken place at early hours of the day, without any formal warnings, thus finding many people asleep in the sites and unable to escape the apprehension. They were characterised by high levels of physical violence perpetrated by the authorities, mainly through beatings, with hands and batons, and kickings.

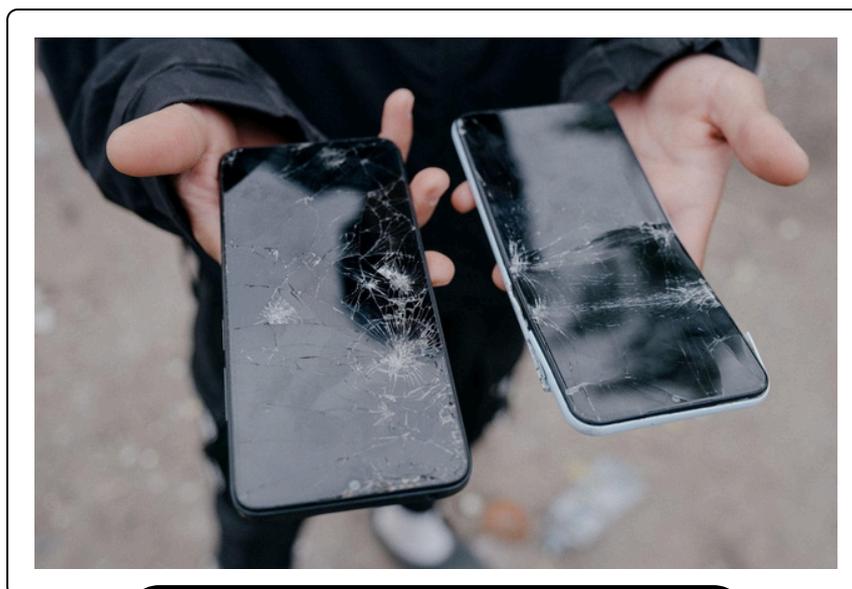
In a testimony collected by Collective Aid on October 20th, an 18 year-old boy from Syria reported on these practices after an eviction. The respondent reported that officers arrived around 8am, when he and others were still asleep. He described that the authorities were wearing all black uniforms and black ski masks covering their faces, and that they entered the building and started to break down doors and some of the furniture. They also went through people's belongings, flipped mattresses and beds, and destroyed many electronic devices. The respondent was reportedly apprehended when he was trying to leave and beaten for several minutes. He sustained many injuries as a result of this violence, including wounds to his face, head, and ribs.

"I tried to run away, but they caught me near the front gate. They hit me very hard. They beat me when I fell on the ground. I was very scared".





One of the bedrooms of the building after the eviction ©Collective Aid



Phones destroyed by officers during the eviction ©Collective Aid

Though this testimony refers to an eviction that took place one week before the official start of the Special Military Operation, the modus operandi and violence described is representative of the pattern that followed.



The destruction of personal belongings, as well as shelter items and infrastructure (such as tents, doors or windows) by the authorities was also a common practice during and after the evictions, aimed at rendering the spaces uninhabitable, especially as the winter approached, and dissuading people from coming back. During the Military Operation, the destruction of infrastructure was taken even further, tarp constructions in between trees were left slashed and many buildings that had previously served as shelter were also burned down or demolished.



Previous informal living site near Sombor, burnt down after the evictions ©Josh Zimmer



Previous informal living site, destroyed after the evictions ©Josh Zimmer



Previous informal living site, destroyed after the evictions ©Josh Zimmer



Multiple passports hidden in a cabinet in an informal living site, left behind ©Sebastian Beierle

Many discarded passports left behind with other belongings indicate that the places had to be left in a hurry by former residents.



4. Changes in the camps

4.1 Overview of the situation: camp closures, evictions and transfers

From the end of October, the announcement of the special operation showed gradual and systematic closures of government accommodation centres and forced transfer of people between facilities in Serbia. Particularly targeted was the north, where reception centres are located near exit points of migration routes through Serbia.

Closures began with the Subotica RTC on the 8th of November. This facility is located closest to the Hungarian border, and has a capacity for 220 people. The announced area for the special operation was the whole of Vojvodina, a large region that encompasses the northern part of the country. However, the initial public focus was seemingly the area around Horgoš, and most evictions and patrolling were observed at the border regions to Hungary. It is understood that the majority of the Subotica RTC population was transferred to the Sombor RTC, as well as Principovac and Adaševci RTC's, close to the town of Šid, by the border with Croatia.



Entrance to the Subotica RTC ©Josh Zimmer



The Kikinda RTC was last visited on November 8th by teams on the ground. Despite all RTCs and ACs in Serbia being “open-type” facilities, at this time residents were prohibited to exit the facility, and were effectively detained in line with the policing operation. This was stated by a police officer stationed at the centre. It was in the 6-day-period between November 8th and 14th that the Kikinda RTC was formally closed and emptied of people. According to UNHCR, the facilities were officially put on “standby” on November 24th.

Between November 8th and 14th, overcrowding at the Sombor RTC resulted from the arrival of people transferred from the closure of the Subtica RTC as well as the evictions of informal living sites in the Sombor area. The Sombor facility was considerably over capacity, with all 300 beds full plus at least 200 people forced to sleep rough in the adjacent Sikara park. On November 19th, those within the Sikara park area were violently evicted, and the rest of the Sombor RTC was also emptied. It was reported that 20 buses took people to facilities in the south of Serbia as well as to the Šid and Adaševci RTCs, in the west.



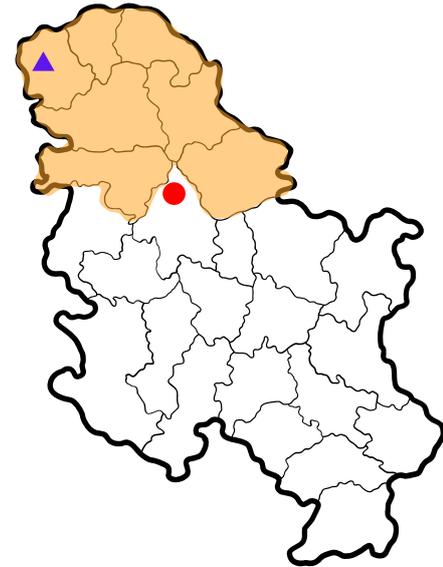
Satellite view of the Sikara park by the Sombor RTC

Between December 9th and 11th, the Asylum Protection Centre (APC), a Serbian organisation working with people on the move reported forced mass transfers of 200 people on two occasions from the Adaševci RTC to the Tutin AC, on the Montenegrin border. Despite these relocations, APC claimed there were still 1500 people between the three RTCs in the Šid area – Adaševci, Principovac, and Šid–, and that new people were arriving everyday. The combined capacity of these facilities total only 1220, and it was reported that sickness and the spread of skin infections was rife at this time.

Observations from grassroots organisations describe that it was around January 5th that the Principovac and Adaševci RTCs closed indefinitely, joining Subotica and Sombor. According to UNHCR, the centres were put on “standby” on December 28th and January 13th, respectively. This left only the Šid RTC open – solely for minors – in the region of Vojvodina.



The camps of Subotica, Sombor, Kikinda, Principovac, and Adaševci remain closed as of the publication of this report. Although officially closed to taking any arrivals, the facilities are still manned with Commissariat staff who patrol the area.



4.2 What happened at Sombor RTC

As stated above, in the period from November 8th to 14th, Sombor RTC was considerably over capacity, with 200 people forced to sleep outside in a nearby park. This was a result of the Sombor camp being one of the destination facilities for the initial forced transfers from the previously full Subotica RTC, as well as from the evicted informal settlements along the border.



A photo shared with Collective Aid by a resident of the Sombor RTC. Photo shows people crammed into a small room inside the camp, as there were no more beds

During this period, the Sikara public park had become a *de facto* 'overflow' area of the Sombor facility. Both the camp and the park were being controlled by two police checkpoints as well as the Commissariat. Like all RTCs in Vojvodina at this time, residents could not leave and re-enter freely. They were effectively detained within the perimeters.

On November 9th, a team of a grassroots organisation was able to witness the situation in the Sikara area first-hand and hear accounts from those stuck in the makeshift camp site. The people in this area were forced to sleep rough without access to any of the camp's facilities or amenities—meaning no access to food or medical assistance. Many had nothing but the clothes on their back, left to sleep on the ground fully exposed to the elements.



There was a shop within the park that sold food and overpriced goods, thus, some people turned to cooking on fires. Many people complained of hunger and some reported not having eaten for days. One man had a severe burn on his arm resulting from cooking on an open fire and described being still repeatedly denied access to the camp doctor without receiving a comprehensible explanation.

Those trapped within the park were also subject to continued police violence and harassment. A young man from Syria reported that the police had slashed his tent to pieces during the night. He also explained that his clothes had been taken from him, and that the blanket he was using to keep warm at night was confiscated and dumped into a pile of things that the police had forcibly taken from people. The items were reportedly set alight and left to burn on the ground as the officers watched. Some described that if people were caught outside of the camp area, they were forced to pay bribes of hundreds of euros to the police or were threatened with violence or prison. Since the announcement of the special operation, some people had been detained in this area for 10 days.

It was known that some of those who were staying within the Sombor RTC facilities –not in the makeshift camp in the Sikara park– were people who had previously managed informal settlements near the border. Some of these individuals were seen walking freely outside of the camp facilities, thus strongly hinting at a basic level of corruption existing between organised crime groups and Serbian authorities operating in state camps.

In the early morning of November 19th, the “overflow” camp area of Sikara park was violently evicted, alongside those within the Sombor RTC. Organisations in Serbia received information that around 50 armed officers entered the park area violently, waking and beating people and escorting them to buses. It was estimated that around 700 people were taken from both areas in this operation to undisclosed locations.



4.3 What happened at Obrenovac AC

Obrenovac AC is located 30 km from Belgrade, and has a capacity of 1200. This camp is understood to have been one of the destinations of those evicted from informal living sites along the Hungarian border during the special operation.

On November 22nd, APC reported overcrowding in the camp with a group of 40 new arrivals that included unaccompanied minors. Obrenovac AC did not and still does not have the adequate facilities to accommodate unaccompanied minors.



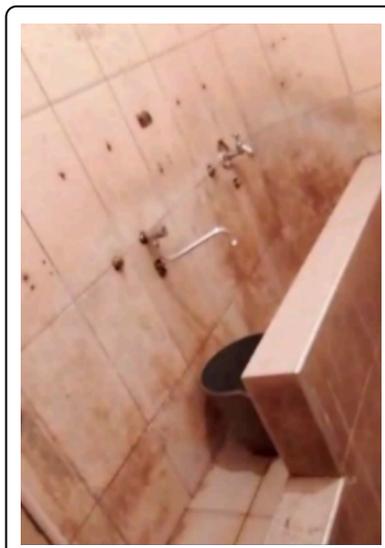
Unaccompanied minors present at the Obrenovac AC should have been safely transferred to suitable accommodation. The Serbian Commissariat were specially negligent in their duty of care to this vulnerable demographic. One of the staff at the centre described that the standard procedure is to call social services who would then take care of the transportation to appropriate facilities. However, this practice has been reportedly neglected due to the financial high cost and the alleged unreliable nature of the minors— meaning that individuals might not be at the site when social services arrive.

Visits from different NGOs to the Obrenovac AC between November 26th and December 6th witnessed large populations of people sleeping rough in an abandoned area referred to as the 'jungle' adjacent to the camp facility, whilst the camp was at full capacity. During this period the population staying in this area ranged between 200-300 people, forced to shelter in abandoned structures and beneath trees.

APC's report included a video which shows extremely cramped conditions believed to have come from a quarantine facility of the centre previously used for COVID measures. It is known that, at least during the special operation, this facility was used on a night-by-night basis as an 'overflow' to house people beyond the camp's capacity. By admission of the Commissariat, the camp's facilities were insufficient to accommodate the new arrivals. Images from within the 'quarantine area' show cramped conditions, inadequate wash facilities, mould on walls, and some windows covered only by fabric material. People outside of the Obrenovac AC reported that the Commissariat would choose individuals at random to stay in the 'quarantine' facility between the hours of 3pm and 7am. During this time, the doors were locked, people were not allowed to use any facilities other than the bed spaces, and the area was not heated.



Overcrowding conditions at Obrenovac AC © Screenshot from video published by APC.



Conditions within the 'quarantine facility' © Sent to MVI by a resident of the facility

Between November 26th and December 6th, grassroots organisations carried out mass distributions of emergency items to those sleeping rough in the 'jungle' area. During one of these distributions— which was disrupted and stopped short due to police intervention— team members witnessed police officers with raised batons threatening and chasing people, as well as forcing some people, including minors, to return the emergency items they had collected. The following week, the 'jungle' area was evicted, and people were taken to Adaševci and Principovac RTCs as well as to other facilities in the south.



On January 18th, APC reported that the Commissariat within Obrenovac AC was denying those registered in the asylum centre access to the relevant legal information and assistance as well as providing unofficial asylum applications. People were left to wait indefinitely for a response from the asylum office which would never come. APC highlighted an incident where an individual was kicked out of the facility at night due to his asylum procedure being suspended as a result of the unofficial documents that he was provided. Such practices effectively deny people the right to claim asylum in Serbia.

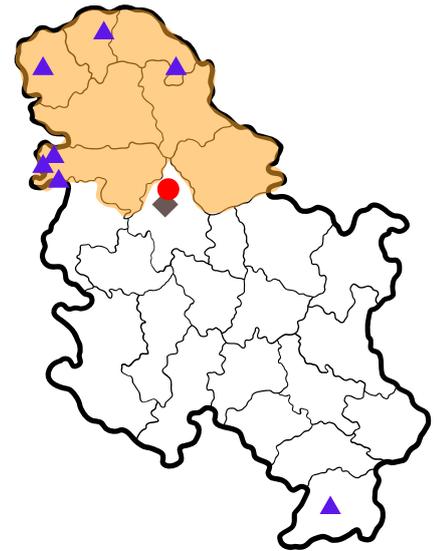
Throughout the month of February, the Obrenovac AC was regularly visited by NGOs and grassroots organisations. During this period there were fluctuating numbers between 10 to 70 people staying in the 'jungle' outside the facility, whilst the camp was now visibly well below its capacity. It was reported by those staying outside that they were denied access to the facility and refused registration by the Commissariat. The few who did stay within the centre were already pursuing their asylum procedures. As the Obrenovac AC is officially a single-male facility, the population forced to sleep rough outside the camp often included families with young children as well as groups of unaccompanied minors. Detailed in the BVMN February monthly report, this population was subject to consistent police harassment as well as the destruction of their personal belongings.

During this period, those outside the Obrenovac AC were often invited to stay the night in the previously described 'quarantine' area. On February 14th, a group of 40-50 people who were staying within this area were forcibly removed and reportedly pushed back to Bulgaria. The group were told to move from the 'jungle' area to the 'quarantine' facility by the police and Commissariat before being pushed back directly from within the facility. This testimony comes from a witness and friend of one of those pushed back with whom he was still in contact when the pushback was happening.



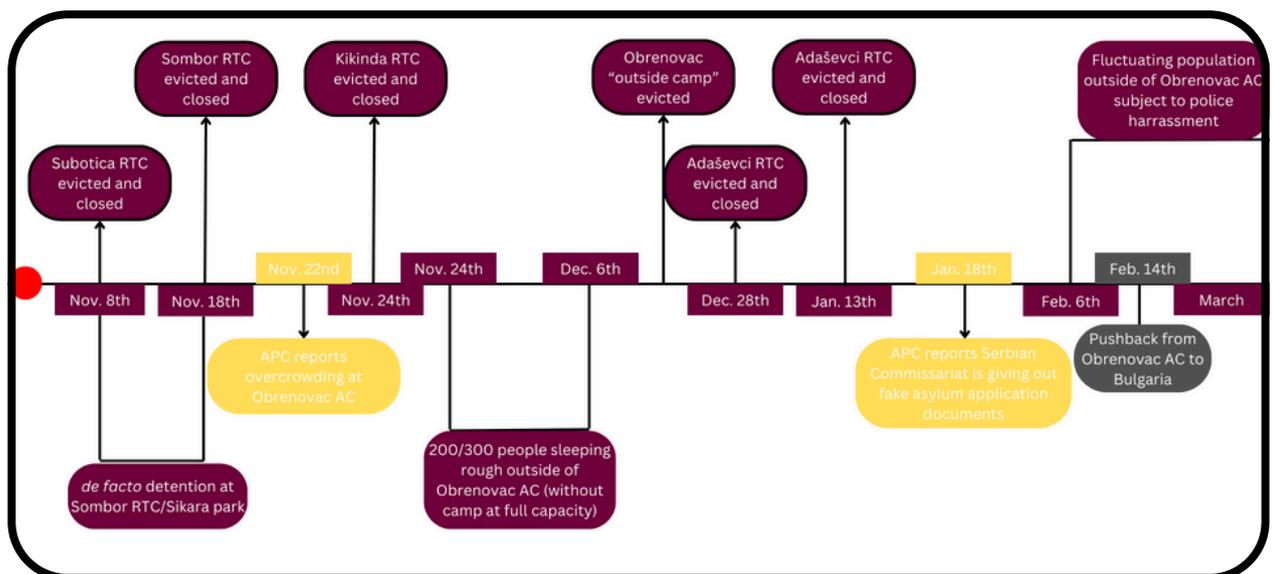
4.4 Current situation

Currently, the reception and transit centres of Subotica, Sombor, Kikinda, Principovac, and Adaševci, which were gradually closed during the special operation, remain closed indefinitely. This means all camps at Serbia's traditional exit points remain closed except the Šid RTC for unaccompanied minors. However, the Šid camp is also forecast to close in line with previous closures and the adaptations of the Bujanovac RTC, on Serbia's borders with Kosovo and North Macedonia, to be equipped for unaccompanied minors. Meanwhile, the Obrenovac AC continues to deny the registration of new arrivals, remaining well below its capacity.



The indefinite closure of camps at Serbia's exit points is instrumental within the aftermath of the police operation. What it means for these camps to remain closed is the eradication of any safe or legitimate space for people on the move to be in the region of Vojvodina. This, in turn, enables the forced transfer of people who are profiled by the public or police in the north of Serbia. Combined with the continued denial of new registrations within the Obrenovac AC, these developments constitute a distinct effort of the state to limit the movement of people to the territory below the capital whilst simultaneously obstructing the right to asylum.

4.5 Timeline





5. End of the operation and consequences

The special operation announced by the Serbian Minister of the Interior has led to an escalation of violence against people on the move in Northern Serbia. Heavy militarization on the Hungarian-Serbian border, including a massive police presence around cities and highways, and frequent evictions of informal living sites and private accommodations led to a variety of new issues and amplified existing ones in the region.

5.1 Access to medical services & increased health issues

As described in the above sections, the sudden and forceful relocation of thousands of people on the move to a handful of reception centres led to severe overcrowding of some of these government-run accommodations. The conditions and amenities at many of these RTCs had already been reported as inadequate on multiple occasions before the police operation, especially with regards to unsanitary conditions and lack of access to proper medical care. Without the expansion or improvement of any of these facilities in the context of the operation, the resulting overcrowding led to deteriorating conditions.

The lack of access to adequate healthcare has been one of the most apparent issues in the facilities under the responsibility of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration for a long time. Before the special operation, insufficient medical access had been frequently reported by residents of the RTCs, specially linked to doctors being present only for a short amount of time during the week, unable to see and treat the large number of people in the centres in need of medical attention. Though the number of residents increased massively after the evictions and relocations, the health staff inside the camps allegedly did not. Thus, medical care at many of the facilities has remained inadequate, characterised by the limited availability of doctors, and prescriptions often requiring patients to buy medication from pharmacies located hours away on foot.

Even some of the centres that are currently below capacity and in a less dire state still fail to provide an environment to successfully monitor and treat acute health issues (e.g. appendicitis, pneumonia), which undetected or delayed in diagnosis can lead to life-threatening conditions. The same can be said about chronic diseases and conditions (e.g. diabetes, high blood pressure, cardiac insufficiency), which, in the absence of adequate treatment, can burden the health of patients or, in severe cases, be life-shortening. A number of otherwise not severe health problems tend to take a back seat during the time spent in camps. Thus, blisters, wound infections from travelling in the woods, and gastrointestinal infections due to consumption of unclean water, can quickly deteriorate when hygiene conditions and food provision are far from adequate. These unhygienic



conditions inside the facilities also provide a higher risk of infections like scabies, upper respiratory infections, or gastrointestinal infections.

Moreover, access to mental health services seems to be absent inside of the official camps, despite reports that place mental health problems as the third most common cause of health interventions among refugees in the country.

Prior to and following the police operation, several NGOs and grassroots organisations working in Serbia received reports that pointed at an increasing trend of possible drug misuse among people on the move. Pregabalin (Lyrica), a medication often used to treat epilepsy and neuropathic pain, has been mentioned specifically. Multiple assessments around former informal living sites also showed old packaging of this medication and others. The medication, which has an addictive effect and should not be consumed for periods over 10 days, has been reportedly prescribed by doctors in official accommodation centres as a relaxing and anti-anxiety treatment. The overcrowding, poor conditions and, at times, *de facto* detention inside the RTCs and ACs leaves residents at an even higher risk of psychological stress, with mental health issues often increasing over time. Unmonitored conditions and lack of support can lead to major crises and, in severe cases, to suicide.



Packs of Lyrica and Epica left behind in informal settlements © Collective Aid

Lastly, most government-run accommodations lack Arabic-speaking translators, which hinders effective communication between doctors and patients, as well as access to legal aid. Thus, patients' understanding of prescribed medication or their own medical condition cannot be ensured. During assessments of the official camps in Serbia, only Tutin AC and Sjenica AC confirmed the presence of Arabic-speaking translators on the premises. However, it was unclear if they were present during doctors' consultation hours.



5.2 Criminalisation

Access to cafes and grocery shops before the police operation was already a challenge for people on the move in many areas due to the discrimination by some local people. In some cases, people on the move would be denied entrance, while in others someone would call the police. As this report shows, since November, restrictions to the free movement of people on the move have been more severe and institutionalised, including the implementation of police checkpoints on highways and around cities where the government-run centres are located. At the moment, two permanent police checkpoints are located at the entrances to Subotica connected to the highways, while another has been set up just after the highway toll payment going out of Belgrade towards the north of the country. Teams of several NGOs and grassroots organisations have been stopped and have had their documents checked at these checkpoints.

One of the targets of this new wave of criminalisation has been taxi drivers. People on the move previously relied heavily on taxis for transportation to avoid growing discrimination in public transport, as well as to reach the increasingly isolated temporary living settlements. Minister Gašić accused taxi drivers of being complicit in smuggling and announced that the special operation would also involve the confiscation of any cars transporting migrants on Serbian territory, and possibly other legal consequences. This measure effectively isolates people on the move from infrastructure that is not in the immediate vicinity of the official accommodation.

Moreover, during the police operation in Vojvodina, owners of private accommodations who would previously rent their facilities to people on the move also faced penalties from Serbian authorities, who coupled restricting access to private accommodations and hostels, with regular checks. Multiple videos posted by Serbia's Ministry of Interior show masked and uniformed officials taking away people from informal settlements and private accommodations.

These measures have discouraged taxi drivers and accommodation owners from providing their services to people on the move, and the ones who still do often charge exorbitant fees given the increasing legal risks, thus draining their financial resources further.



5.3 Pushbacks and changes in the Balkan route

In late January 2024, The Ministry of Internal Affairs established an additional operational base in Mali Zvornik on the Bosnian border, to “suppress irregular migration” in the region, following the structure of similar bases in Subotica (near the Hungarian border), Dimitrovgrad (near the Bulgarian border), and Preševo (near the North Macedonian border). The operation focused on the nearby towns of Ljubovija, Loznica, and Banja Koviljača. Two months later, in a March 2024 statement, Gašić announced that since the beginning of the year, Serbia had contributed to the reduction of crossings of EU external borders by a third. The total number of people on the move recorded by the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration fell from 5,001 in December 2023 to 2,782 in January 2024, decreasing again to 1,687 in February. This drop coincides with a doubling of Bosnia’s camp occupancy from early November 2023 to late January 2024.

An increase of arrivals was also documented by the Collective Aid team located in Sarajevo, who collected testimonies with several groups who had been pushed back to Bosnia by Croatian authorities. These numbers point to a shift in the Balkan route towards Bosnia following Serbia’s police operations, which involves heightened risks and dangers for people on the move, particularly during winter months. The geographic challenges of this route, especially along the Drina River, might increase the likelihood of fatalities.

The Special Military Operation has also been accompanied by a renewed focus on the securitisation of Serbia’s southern border with North Macedonia. Recent videos showing 70 people stripped of their clothing and pushed back from Serbia into North Macedonia indicate an escalation in mistreatment and abuse of people on the move. Serbian authorities denied allegations of the violation, stating that checks conducted at a regional border police station found no evidence of Serbian police patrols in the area at the time of the incident. Prior to the police operation in Northern Serbia, pushbacks had already been a common practice on Serbian borders – though kept off the radar of most mainstream media. However, the massive transfer of people on the move to the southern part of the country might have shifted this pattern of abuse towards the border with North Macedonia. Incidents like these are not isolated occurrences but a widespread practice that violates the rights of people on the move and leaves them at a high risk of further abuses, such as chain pushbacks. North Macedonia has been known to perform systematic collective expulsions to Greece since 2016.



6. Conclusions

This report has examined the way the Special Military Operation in Vojvodina (end of October 2023 to January 2024) led to an increase in the direct and indirect violence perpetrated by the authorities against people on the move in Serbia. Starting with the deployment of hundreds of officers, heightened militarisation of Serbia's northern border, and the eviction and full-blown destruction of informal living settlements, people on the move faced increasing restrictions of their freedom of movement within the country, police harassment and growing isolation from support networks and basic services outside of government-run accommodation.

The forceful and violent relocations and the progressive closure of all official centres above the capital led to the overcrowding of some of the operating facilities, where hundreds of people were forced to stay despite widely reported unhygienic conditions and overall lack of basic services, including food and healthcare. The poor conditions of these centres have huge consequences on the physical and mental health of people on the move in the country. The criminalisation of taxi drivers has also heightened the isolation of people on the move by effectively cutting off the access of many to urban centres and the services of supporting organisations.

Lastly, by eliminating all "legitimate" spaces for people on the move in the north of the country, Serbian authorities contribute to forcing migration routes to become more hidden. This not only increases the dangers faced by people on the move on their journeys, but also eliminates avenues for the monitoring and documentation of human rights violations, fostering a climate of impunity for the perpetrators.



Border Violence Monitoring Network

NETWORK STRUCTURE AND CONTACT

BVMN is a volunteer led endeavor, acting as an alliance of organisations in the Balkans and Greece. BVMN is based on the efforts of partner organizations working in the field of documentation, media, advocacy and litigation.

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.

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