

There shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth: Experiences of people on the move on a new (iteration of the) Balkan route through Romania

Via [LeftEast](#)

With the increasing militarization of the Croatian-Bosnian border and in an overall hostile environment towards migrants, the Balkan route has been shifting in recent months towards Romania. Since October 2020, there has been a sharp increase in the number of people crossing the border in Serbia and ending up in or around Timișoara, the largest city in South-West Romania.

In 2020 alone, the number of asylum applications in Romania tripled, from the yearly average of 2,000 to around 6,000 people. [LOGS – Grup de Inițiativă Sociale](#), a local NGO that offers aid to migrants on a daily basis, reports between 500-1,000 new persons arriving to Timișoara each month. A large segment manage to eventually leave the country through Hungary, and most commonly to Austria, Germany, and Belgium.

We are a small anarchist-leaning collective from Timișoara. Our areas of focus are housing justice and the right to the city. In the last months we have been offering assistance to migrants and refugees, especially multiply-marginalized people in terms of their social location, who fall outside the compartmentalized logic of humanitarian aid. In this piece, we want to share some of the things we have seen and heard in recent weeks from our friends on the move through the region.

The local refugee center is a camp with several dorms and an open space, designed for 100-150 people. There is really no way the center could properly manage 300-350 people with a high turnover, as it is doing at the present. Images sent in the last weeks by friends living there are shocking: overcrowded spaces, improvised and precarious living arrangements with mattresses on the ground, filthy kitchens and bathrooms. F., a young woman from Syria who has walked by foot the whole route from Greece to Romania, says she has not seen anything resembling these conditions in any of the other countries.

If in the beginning this was somewhat understandable due to the suddenness of the changes, now – 6 months later – with no expansion of staff, still, no channeling of resources, no extension of spaces, can this be interpreted in any other way than as (un)managed neglect?

Lacking any other accommodation, most migrants who end up in Timișoara squat in various places around the city. At each time there are around 200-300 migrants sleeping rough, in abandoned buildings or in open fields, sometimes in below freezing temperatures. Many are children 14-15 years of age and some are as young as 8.

If you are sick, disabled, mad, or neurodivergent, the situation is even worse. We met H. in one of the informal camps at the edge of the city. His friends – who we have been in contact with – called us to help because he was going through a psychotic episode related to him being bipolar.

As he was going through quite an acute episode of psychosis, lacking the necessary resources to manage the situation at a community level, we decided to take him to a psychiatric clinic. What followed was a kafkaesque unfolding of events. First, medical staff did not want to treat him at all, then shuffled him around from facility to facility without informing us, and finally tried to discharge him without any

form of support. All of this allegedly happened with his consent. It is hard to believe this could be the case, considering that he does not speak English and was not provided with a translator (not to mention the fact that he was going through psychosis).

Throughout this process, medical staff supplied misleading information and even blatantly lied about his whereabouts. Finally, he was transferred to a detention center for “aliens” (in the village of Horia, in the nearby Arad county), with the help of the border police – reinforcing once more the historical collusion of psychiatry with the carceral state, in the service of heteropatriarchal racist ableist capitalism. The EU has exported the responsibilities for managing its border to Romania without the benefits of fully open EU borders to the Romanian state and its position within global capitalism. And the institution of psychiatry is proving to be just one more tool of this policing of borders; once more it is used to subdue or disappear unruly bodies – the bodies of migrants, in this case.

We still don't know – almost a month later – anything about the current state of health of H. When we try to contact him, we are sent around in circles, like K. in Kafka's *Castle*. From the detention center in Horia, he will be either sent back to Serbia or directly to his home country. Or he will wait for his asylum application to be declined and be sent back only afterwards. These are his options.

Most of the migrants are young men. But sometimes they are women or entire families.

Being a woman makes navigating the precarious geographies of migration much more complicated. We met M. and S. a few days ago, two women from Syria and Tunisia, respectively. They have applied for asylum in Romania and are waiting for the response – a process that could last a few months. They would like to stay here in the country and obtain refugee status. A few days

ago, they contacted us to help them with temporary accommodations. The camp is just too filthy and insecure for single women to live in at the present, especially for longer periods, in large part due to the threat of gendered violence.

Each vector of marginality adds an additional layer of horror in interactions with the state. We have witnessed queer and trans friends being treated with total lack of humanity; constantly deadnamed and misgendered, their identities invalidated, their bodies scrutinized.

It is heartbreaking each time we face people who are fleeing war or government persecution, and for whom this country is not willing to provide even a decent bed. Or a tent, even. Or a shower. Or a toilet. We feel indescribable shame. And hopelessness. And rage.

On top of all the misery and suffering, we have heard many accounts of violence on the part of the police (or people posing as police) both at the border and around the city. When a local NGO tried to publicize such cases, the police responded not by initiating an investigation, but by threatening the NGO with a lawsuit. Whether these were on duty or off duty officers, or right-wing trash posing as police, the facts are the scars and bruises and broken phones, and the burden of proof should lie with those in power.

A short while ago, we got a message with photos that in one of the informal camps a young migrant was beaten with a baton by people in police uniform and had to be brought to the hospital. He is a 15-year-old kid from Afghanistan. What more is there to say? What words would be appropriate?

The abuse extends beyond refugee centers or border-crossing areas. In late April, after a violent crime incident between two groups of migrants, and in the run up to the Orthodox Easter, the authorities in Timișoara made use of (un)favorable public opinion to [round up all the migrants](#) in the city. Such

roundups have been occurring not only at the usual squats and gathering places, but also in hostels and other places, following police tip-offs. This is particularly troubling as Timișoara has a history of [“denunciation of the undesirables.”](#) We have heard from migrant friends that police are even “hunting them down” throughout the city. We have even heard from hostel staff that the police have threatened them not to accept any refugee tenants (!)

This situation has been unfolding on a daily basis since the said incident in late April. First, rounded up migrants are brought to the headquarters of the border police (located in the city). From past experience, people are being held there for hours and hours, without food or water or even the most elementary amenities. From there they are sent to one of the refugee centers either in Timișoara or one of the five others scattered across the country. (On the process and problems of requesting political asylum in Romania, see the transcript of the Romanian language Leneșx Radio podcast episode, [here](#)). To our knowledge, they will be forbidden to leave the centers now. All of this is in blatant violation of national and international law – not only immoral, but ILLEGAL!

No one is saying anything. Not the UNHCR, whose actual fucking job it is to document violations of the rights of migrants and refugees. Not the local media, which is predominantly conservative on the subject of migration. There is only the voice of one NGO, a few independent journalists, and scattered clerical figures. Otherwise, there is silence.

Under the mirage of civility, the new mayor of Timișoara, Dominic Fritz, and the current president, Klaus Iohannis, have brought us one step closer to far-right police states like Hungary and Poland. But, everything is ok!, at least we have solved the problem of corruption... [sarcasm]. Drum rolls and waves of liberal applause to follow...

In [a lecture from 2016](#), Naomi Klein stated that “[a] culture

that places so little value on black and brown lives that it is willing to let human beings disappear beneath the waves, or set themselves on fire in detention centers, will also be willing to let the countries where black and brown people live disappear beneath the waves, or desiccate in the arid heat. When that happens, theories of human hierarchy – that we must take care of our own first – will be marshalled to rationalize these monstrous decisions. We are making this rationalization already, if only implicitly.”

This is happening already. Authorities keep saying it overtly. Their mouths say “we must respect the rights of everyone,” their actions say “Timișoara first, Romania first.” For state representatives (at all levels) these are not people, but a flow of bodies to be managed. Like a blockage in a river current that accumulates trash, these surplus populations accumulating on the borders of Fortress Europe need to be spirited away. Exported (back) to poorer countries, locked up long-term, whatever works. What we see at ground level is that migrants today are *homo sacer*: people who are legally persons only as far as they are made legible by and for the state, but otherwise whose bodies can be locked up, thrown away, or destroyed without consequences.

In place of an ending, we would like to give a shoutout to all the comrades from other countries who have been doing the vital work of supporting people on the move for many years, and to all those who risk everything in search of a better life for themselves and their families. No amount of reading can prepare you for the level of everyday violence that the capitalist state brings upon migrants. Only by holding each other firmly, in love and care and solidarity – starting with those who are the most vulnerable – can we hope for a radically different world.

Dreptul la Oraș (Right to the City) is a democratic, non-

hierarchical group for critical analysis and direct action based in Timișoara, Romania. We want the city to belong to all its inhabitants, present and future, temporary and permanent, privileged and marginalized. We want a just city for all, regardless of class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability, etc., in which everyone has equitable access to resources and social services. A city in which everyone participates in making decisions and formulating public policies, because only through this emancipatory process we can become full-fledged citizens. A city that places people and nature above economic profit.