

## **Invisible Serb Refugees**

**Author:** [Boris Drenca](#)

Thousands of displaced Serbs are struggling to survive in unregistered camps across Serbia - seemingly beyond the reach or the help of the authorities.

The old, run-down barracks lie next to a dirt road some ten km from Belgrade, on the outskirts of the village of Resnik.

Abandoned some time ago by their original occupants, these ten or so buildings now house 95 Serb families who fled their homes after the war ended in Kosovo in 1999.

Most of their possessions were left behind in the rush. When Serbian forces pulled out of Kosovo, they were followed by around 218,000 Serbs, fearful of possible Albanian reprisals.

At the time, refugees were directed toward camps in various locations in south Serbia. But many of these were already full of those Serbs who had fled Croatia and Bosnia. This forced the Kosovo Serbs further north.

As the existing camps were not big enough to accept all who made the long journey, thousands of displaced persons broke into empty factory premises and warehouses and made their homes there - unaware that by doing so, they would make themselves "invisible" in Serbia.

Vesna Petkovic, a public information assistant with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, told IWPR that there are 62 unregistered camps, with more than 3,500 inhabitants, in a number of municipalities.

There are nearly 300 recognised refugee centers, which are home to around 22,000 people.

While those living in unofficial camps are getting some form of help, it is minor when compared to the aid given in the official ones, where UNHCR covers the residents' living costs.

For those who live in the latter, food and other assistance is available - but more importantly, the refugees are given an identity card which allows them to seek employment and qualify for health insurance.

The inhabitants of the Resnik camp - like many others dotted across Serbia - legally do not exist. They have no address, no identity card and thus are completely unable to support their families.

Resident Predrag Zdravkovic, who is originally from the Istok region of Kosovo, told IWPR that he and his fellow refugees sometimes do unskilled labour work for black marketeers to earn some money. "Sometimes we feel as if we are in this country illegally," he said.

Goran Pitulic came to Resnik with his wife Stanka and their four-year-old son in 1999, and his daughter was born in the camp some 14 months ago.

Like all other camp residents, Goran's family lives in two unsanitary rooms. One barrack has twenty such accommodation units, their doors facing each other across a narrow corridor. "See what it's like here. When I open my door I literally walk into my neighbours' room," he said.

Their furniture and kitchen equipment have been salvaged from scrap-yards, repaired and pressed into service. "This is junk for someone, but I took it and fixed it - and for me it is good," said Stanka.

The rooms are divided by thin, damp chipboard. Stanka worries constantly that the old electrical wiring could lead to a fire in the building - especially during the winter months, when the residents burn wood in stoves to keep warm.

Their bathroom is a run-down unheated building some 50 metres from the barracks.

It has ten squat toilets and solitary washbasin. The water in the basin is as frozen as the puddles on the floor. The shower units, however, are supplied from three hot-water tanks bought by residents with help from their neighbours in Resnik.

This helps to keep the children clean and healthy, even if the temperature of the building is scarcely warmer than it is outside. "We are toughening the kids up," said Goran ironically as he showed IWPR around the bathroom.

The camp residents believe that it is a miracle that none of the children have come down with a serious illness, given the conditions they are forced to live in. They do, nevertheless, point out that two of the camp residents have been diagnosed with the coxsackie virus, which attacks the heart.

Beyond the basic considerations - washing, keeping warm, eating regularly - the Resnik families have many other worries to contend with, none of which are helped by their illegal status.

At one point last year, they feared that their electricity supply would be cut off because of unpaid bills amounting to 16,000 euro - a debt disputed by the families, who claim that the bulk of the power was used before they arrived.

Thanks to the intervention of Nebojsa Covic, head of the Yugoslav coordination centre for Kosovo, the power was not cut off. But the bills have still not been paid. Camp residents have instead been given a new deadline to settle the debt, which is growing all the time.

In spite of the poverty and hardship, the majority of Resnik's displaced persons told IWPR that they would not go back home now. "Our houses have either been burned down, or are being occupied by strangers. Even if we were to go back, what would await us there?" asked Goran.

Predrag also believes that he can never return to Istok. He feels strongly that Kosovo's Serbs were misled by the previous Serbian regime, which kept telling them that they could stay in their villages - and then gave them just a few hours to pack and leave.

"I don't think we can ever go back there," he said, preparing for another long, cold day as one of Serbia's hidden refugees.

Boris Drenca is a freelance journalist based in Serbia.

**Location:** Serbia  
Kosovo  
Croatia  
Bosnia and  
Herzegovina

**Focus:** Balkans: Regional Reporting & Sustainable  
Training

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/invisible-serb-refugees>