

The Last Refugees

Author: [Vladimir Sudar](#)

While most Serbs who fled the 1995 offensive in Croatia have built new lives, almost 500 are still stuck in a refugee camp on the outskirts of Belgrade.

The road to the refugee centre at Krnjaca, in the industrial suburbs of Belgrade, is lined with heaps of litter and rubbish. The compound itself is surrounded by wire, with a Roma settlement and factory buildings as its neighbours.

Inside the camp stand rows of unpainted shacks with thin dividing walls. Outside, there is no shade from the merciless summer sun - not one tree has been planted there.

“We call this camp a prison because we’re behind a wire fence,” said one refugee. “If we leave for more than three days, we have to tell the compound manager and if we stay away for more than five days we have to report to the commissariat for refugees.”

The Krnjaca camp is home to 477 refugees and displaced persons. Some are from Bosnia and Hercegovina or Kosovo, but the majority are Serbs who fled in 1995 during the Croatian offensive codenamed Operation Storm to capture the Serb-held Krajina region.

Fresh refugees arrive at Krnjaca almost daily as other centres in Serbia close down after the bulk of their residents have moved out to more conventional housing.

Krnjaca will be the last to close, according to its director, Branislav Spasic.

Its inmates are generally those whose circumstances are the most difficult – they may be too old or too ill to contemplate returning home or beginning a new life in Serbia. Many suffer from psychiatric disorders, cancer, diabetes, kidney failure or other illnesses.

In temperatures of 38 degrees, about a dozen elderly refugees sit in front of their cabins. They do not have enough chairs to sit on so they use large upturned cooking pots.

Younger family members who are fit for work are away trying to earn a living, mostly as poorly-paid manual labour. But they are technically illegal workers, and vulnerable to exploitation.

“My daughter worked for a private entrepreneur at a sawmill near here for a full three months, but she never received any pay,” complained a woman in her sixties dressed in black.

The refugees are bitter about the level of help they receive. They say no one looks after them - that Serbia has given up on them while Croatia makes it hard for them to go back there.

“This is my fifth collection centre,” said one woman. “When we arrived in Serbia, they sent us to Kosovo, and then after the NATO bombing [of Kosovo in 1999] to Rakovica [a working-class suburb of Belgrade].”

She added, "Our two student daughters don't live with us and they have a hard time making ends meet in Belgrade, because they barely earn enough to pay their rent."

The PIM construction company, which owns the campsite, signed a contract with Serbia's commissariat for refugees back in 1993, opening up the premises as a haven for refugees.

The prefabricated wooden housing blocks contain 16 rooms each, ranging from eight to 15 square metres in size. Most rooms house up to three people, depending on the family situation, so each block accommodates 30 or 40 refugees sharing four toilets and three showers.

"We have communal bathrooms and there are no screens or partitions, so the women are exposed to view when they take a shower," said one woman from Knin, in Croatia.

Three refugees have committed suicide in the camp over the last decade, while 15 children have been born there.

The self-proclaimed Republic of Serb Krajina, comprising a large swathe of southwestern Croatia, collapsed rapidly after President Franjo Tudjman ordered a massive military offensive on August 4, 1995.

Of about 230,000 Serbs who lived in the area, over 220,000 fled within 24 hours. Around 180,000 settled in Serbia, even though the government of Slobodan Milosevic in Belgrade tried to prevent them from coming.

According to the Documentation Information Centre Veritas, a non-government group that lobbies on behalf of the exiles, 1,934 Serbs were killed or went missing in the offensive.

"Operation Storm was conducted as part of a strict scorched-earth policy whose ultimate objective was to make it impossible for the Serbs to return," said Veritas's director, Savo Strbac.

One refugee in his sixties in Krnjaca said few people at the camp had sought Serbia and Montenegro citizenship, as this would oblige them to leave the camp and pay for their accommodation.

"If I get citizenship, I'll be out on the street," he said. "What should I do with no work and no place to stay? Here in this prison, at least I have a roof over my head and three meals a day."

But the refugees complain that the aid packages get smaller every year.

"Before last winter, the basketball player Sasa Djordjevic bought several hundred winter coats for us - but someone stole them and they gave us shabby old clothes," said one woman.

While the refugees accuse the authorities of neglect, Sanda Raskovic-Ivic, a former Serbian commissioner for refugees, insisted the state has done its part, spending large sums of money on the provision of lodgings, food, heating, power and education.

"I understand that means nothing to these people if they have no jobs or homes of their own, but they have been supported for ten years now by a state which is itself in bad economic shape," she said.

Raskovic-Ivic recalled that prior to her appointment as head of the commissariat for refugees immediately after the fall of Milosevic in 2000, there had been no real strategy for handling the refugee crisis.

Once in the job, she masterminded a new strategy that included the construction of 670 apartments for the poorest refugees living in camps, and loans on favourable terms for younger people who wanted to buy a place of their own.

“A strategy envisaging the closure of all refugee collection centres is a good strategy,” she said. “Instead of a miserable life in a refugee camp, these people will be offered the chance to return to their homes or to integrate into the local society.”

“Refugee collection centres will be closed down the moment the state offers an alternative to each and every refugee.”

However, those who want to go home say they face obstruction from the authorities in Zagreb. “The Croatians have not solved the issue of the return of about 50,000 apartments seized from Serbs,” said Strbac, referring to the “socially-owned” public housing which people in the former Yugoslavia rented rather than owned, making the issue of post-war property restitution more complex.

“I believe that if tenancy rights were restored to the former occupants of these apartments in Croatia, at least 100,000 Serbs would go back.”

Raskovic-Ivic, too, claims that Croatian officials are hindering the return of Serb refugees, “High-ranking officials urge them to return, but the local authorities are trying to impede the process and make it impossible. The returnees are sometimes arrested, though less so now than in 2001 when the return process was launched.

“There is so much red tape with the sole purpose of making it untenable for Serbs to return. High unemployment in Croatia is another major reason why people are not going back.”

While Croatia says 120,000 Serbs have come back, Raskovic-Ivic says this figure merely refers to the number who have taken out Croatian citizenship, not the number of actual returnees.

Raskovic-Ivic and Strbac say the true number of returnees is between 40,000 and 50,000, most of them elderly people going back to live out their last years. This, they say, is why more Serbs die each year in Croatia than return there.

Serbs and Croats will mark the tenth anniversary of Operation Storm in very different ways. While the Serbs from Krajina – including those now at the Krnjaca camp – will remember a catastrophic defeat and mass flight, Croatia will celebrate a state holiday called the “Day of Homeland Thanksgiving”.

Vladimir Sudar is a freelance journalist in Belgrade.

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