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Statement - Austria: SOS Balkanroute and its chairman Petar Rosandić are facing a SLAPP case

On 18 July 2023, the Vienna Commercial Court will hear the case of the refugee rights organisation **SOS Balkanroute** and its chairman **Petar Rosandić** on the allegations of damaging the reputation of the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD). The ICMPD filed a lawsuit requesting an injunction and retraction, arguing that SOS Balkanroute accused the Centre of building a prison in Bosnia and Herzegovina which is similar to USA's detention camp in Guantanamo Bay and being responsible for mass pushbacks of migrants on the Croatian border.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the lawsuit against the human rights organisation and human rights defender and believes that the lawsuit has the characteristics of a Strategic Lawsuit against Public Participation (SLAPP) and risks setting a dangerous precedent and creating a chilling affect on civil society as a whole.

[Petar Rosandić](#) is a human rights defender and founder of the organisation SOS Balkanroute. He is also known as the rapper Kid Pex. As a former refugee from Croatia, he was actively involved in the “Refugee Protest Camp Vienna” in 2012-2013 and founded SOS Balkanroute in 2019.

[SOS Balkanroute](#) is a refugee rights organisation which focuses on raising awareness of the violations of refugees' rights on what is known as the Balkan route and advocating for improvement of the conditions of their treatment. The “Balkan route” is the escape routes used by refugees to reach Europe via the Balkan Peninsula at the European Union's external border. The organisation also collects donations to provide supplies to refugees on the Balkan route and supports local humanitarian aid networks in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2020, SOS Balkanroute received the [Ute Bock Award](#).

On 11 April 2023, the human rights organisation SOS Balkanroute published a [statement](#) titled “This is what Austria's Guantanamo in Bosnia Looks Like” in which the organisation criticised the newly constructed building within the existing Lipa Camp, a temporary reception centre camp in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is expected to function as a “deportation centre”. The building which is described as “a temporary retention facility for twelve people” by ICMPD was described by SOS Balkanroute as “Austria's Guantanamo” based on the high security measures installed at the building such as “a high fence, cameras at every step, windows with prison bars and almost no daylight in the cells... aimed at keeping refugees in isolation and under inhumane conditions.” SOS Balkanroute holds the Austrian government responsible for being one of the major funders of this new facility and the ICMPD for managing the construction.

The human rights organisation also gives a detailed account of the ill treatment of refugees by the Croatian border police and push backs to Bosnia and Herzegovina, namely to Camp Lipa. The

statement contains several testimonies from refugees with examples of human rights violations which the refugees face along the Balkan route, especially by the Croatian border police. Although the organisation did not associate the ICMPD with the push-backs or the ill treatment of refugees, ICMPD argues that SOS Balkanroute's publications give the impression that ICMPD was responsible for the unlawful detention of refugees, the pushback of migrants, and building a prison resembling the Guantanamo detention camp, which have damaged the Centre's reputation.

The press statements and the related tweets from both SOS Balkanroute and its chairman Petar Rosandić prompted the ICMPD to deny its involvement in the construction of the centre, saying that they were only responsible from the procurement and control of contracts. In response to that, the human rights organisation SOS Balkanroute published the confirmation by local and federal Bosnian authorities that the ICMPD was in fact involved in the construction of the 12-person unit in the camp. The Centre later confirmed this. In their response to the allegations the ICMPD issued a [publication](#) detailing their role on the extension where they state that "ICMPD's role remained limited to the construction of the facility" and that they do "not have any role in determining the final purpose of the use of the facility, and will not have any role in the management of this facility."

The ICMPD justified the lawsuit, stating that the press statement and tweets were "generally misleading, incomplete and partially untrue" and damaging to their reputation. The Centre demands that a revocation of SOS Balkanroute's statements be published in the same form and to the same audience as the original publication, and that they take down the related posts on Twitter. Even though the ICMPD is not claiming damages, SOS Balkanroute will incur large legal costs due to the complexity of the court case

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the lawsuit against the human rights organisation SOS Balkanroute and its head Petar Rosandić and believes that the lawsuit has the characteristics of a Strategic Lawsuit against Public Participation (SLAPP). Even if the complainant did not ask for financial compensation, it is clear that the lawsuit will consume much of the organisation's human and financial resources which will effectively stop SOS Balkanroute's human rights work. This lawsuit also bears the danger of setting a precedent and create a chilling affect on civil society as a whole. Therefore, Front Line Defenders urges the International Centre for Migration Policy Development to withdraw its complaint against the human rights organisation SOS Balkanroute and the human rights defender Petar Rosandić.

Front Line Defenders is worried that SLAPPs are increasingly being used against human rights defenders and journalists to silence criticism and prevent human rights and journalistic work being carried out on matters of public interest. It condemns the use of SLAPPs, as they have a hugely negative impact on human rights defenders' right to freedom of expression and effectively limit their ability to pursue their human rights work.