

# THE 2021 REGIONAL WINNER OF THE UNHCR NANSEN REFUGEE AWARD IN EUROPE

## BIOGRAPHY

# Nikola Kovačević



Nikola Kovačević is no ordinary lawyer. Spending most of his time between courts and Serbia's borders this independent human rights lawyer from Serbia is passionate about defending the rule of law and what he deems as the degradation of human rights.

He is this year's regional winner for Europe of UNHCR's Nansen Refugee Award. UNHCR is recognizing Kovačević for spending years advocating for the human rights of refugees and asylum-seekers in Serbia, going well beyond the call of duty.

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*“They (refugees) only ask for one thing - to have an environment in which their rights that are enlisted in the 1951 Refugee Convention will be respected.”*

Kovačević, 32, has represented almost 30 per cent of the asylum-seekers who have been granted protection in Serbia. He has been actively engaged in the protection of human and refugee rights, individual asylum-seekers and refugees since 2012.

Kovačević is widely recognized as a fierce advocate of international refugee law, speaking publicly about the need to combat pushbacks and violence against asylum-seekers and refugees.

His work has contributed towards key improvements in asylum procedures in Serbia which, in turn, has increased the number of refugees being granted international protection there.

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*“There’s no difference between Syrians and Afghans today, and say, for example, Polish, Serbian or French people during World War II. We should try to stand for something that was created, which rose from the darkest period that we had in this continent.”*

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Through this recognition, UNHCR seeks to shine a light on the protection issues faced by refugees and asylum-seekers, as it continues to call on European countries to uphold their existing commitments to refugees’ protection.



*In order to effectively address pushbacks, Nikola Kovačević works closely with actors on each side of Serbia's borders.*

## Background of the displacement situation in Serbia

In 2015, Serbia experienced a mass influx of asylum-seekers and refugees from outside the region. Since then, sporadic groups of asylum-seekers have continued to enter the country, albeit at a lower level.

Although Serbia has shown some solidarity to forcibly displaced people, illegal expulsions and pushbacks from neighbouring countries have been reported.

UNHCR has made its concerns clear by calling for independent monitoring mechanisms to be set up to ensure access to asylum, to prevent rights violations at borders and to ensure accountability.

The 1951 Refugee Convention, the European Convention on Human Rights and EU law require states to protect the right of people to seek asylum and protection from refoulement, even if they enter irregularly. Authorities cannot automatically deny entry to or return people without undertaking an individual assessment of those in need of protection.