ARMINA GALIJAŠ

Permanently in Transit. Middle Eastern Migrants and Refugees in Serbia

Abstract. Serbia has never been the chosen final destination for refugees from Iraq, Syria, and other beleaguered countries like Afghanistan who have embarked on the so-called Balkan route since 2015. But following the closure of this route in March 2016, between 3,500 and 4,500 migrants have found themselves living in Serbia. This article analyses the composition and changing size of the migrant population, looking at the legal status of individuals and migratory paths taken. It moves on to examine reactions to the migrants from the state authorities and the Serbian public, together with the institutional response manifested in legal measures and infrastructural facilities, and the political contexts in which decisions about these were taken. Specific attention is given to the situation of refugee children who attend state schools in Serbia. The analysis reveals a pragmatic and quite flexible administrative response to the refugees' situation. However, the remarkable level of tolerance is largely related to awareness that the great majority of those stranded in Serbia are doing everything in their power to continue their journey into central and northern Europe—that is to leave Serbia.

Armina Galijaš is Assistant Professor of History at the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz.

Introduction

From 2015, until passage was blocked in March 2016, nearly 700,000 people from the Middle East travelled along the so-called Balkan route from Greece to central and northern Europe. Though the Balkan route was formally closed, this should not be taken to imply a complete barricade of the western Balkans: numerous paths continue to exist despite restrictive movement policies. It was a specific, state-controlled route that had emerged in mid-2015, and which wound its way through Macedonia and Serbia to the European Union (EU), that was effectively closed in the move of March 2016. The existence of this special route had allowed a 'partial suspension of the European migration regime, signifying that people otherwise not authorized to do so could

exceptionally travel across a number of borders in a relatively safe and quick manner'. Since the authorities put an end to this 'safe and quick manner' several thousand migrants have been stranded in Serbia, without realistic possibilities of continuing their journeys in a legal way.¹

In this article, I attempt first of all to give an accurate picture of the size of this migrant population, and to shed light on its composition in terms of nationality, gender, and age. Next, I explore the migrants' situation in Serbia and the reaction of the host society. In trying to cope with the 'refugee crisis', Serbia is very much learning the hard way—through experience. The country has chosen a more humane way of dealing with the migrants than have its neighbouring countries Bulgaria and Hungary. A lot of questions can be asked about this stance. To what extent have the state authorities' decisions been affected by Serbia's process of rapprochement with the EU? Do they come from the Serbian legislature itself? Does Serbia's policy influence migration into the country? Why, for example, did a relatively high number of migrants from Iran register in Serbia in 2018? Were there specific Serbian foreign policy acts related to migration?

As well as addressing such policy questions, I illustrate the very practical ways in which the state has been prepared to shelter, nurture and help migrant people. I also consider the role of the numerous NGOs working in this policy and social field. It is significant that, since September 2017, most migrant children have been attending state schools. In a micro case study, I explore how local communities have interacted with the newcomers.

At the height of the 'refugee crisis' in 2015 and 2016, fairly intensive research efforts were made, on which this study builds. The dynamics of the Balkan route have been explored ethnographically in two sample places, Preševo and Ljubljana.² Scholars have investigated the emergence and closure of the route and its legal and political ambivalences. They have exposed the 'violent European border regime' that prevailed.³ Macedonia and Serbia were deeply implicated in this regime, though, before the formalized corridor was established, they had veered between humanitarian efforts and concern with securitization.⁴ There have been analyses of civil society organizations with a focus on

¹ Cf. Kiri Santer / Vera Wriedt, (De-)Constructing Borders. Contestations in and around the Balkan Corridor in 2015/16, *Movements. Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies* 3, no. 1 (2017), 141-149, quote 142.

² Nadia El-Shaarawi / Maple Razsa, *Movements upon Movements. Refugee and Activist Struggles to Open the Balkan Route to Europe*, *History and Anthropology*, pre-published online, October 2018, DOI: 10.1080/02757206.2018.1530668. All internet references were accessed on 2 March 2019.

³ Santer / Wriedt, (De-)Constructing Borders.

⁴ Barbara Bezec / Marc Speer / Marta Stojić Mitrović, *Governing the Balkan Route. Macedonia, Serbia and the European Border Regime*, Belgrade 2016.

attempts made at cooperation with the authorities in 2015; and Serbian migration legislation and politics have been explored in terms of how they produce migrant 'illegality'.⁵ One consequence of this illegalization process has been the replication of borders far away from the actual state border.⁶ Between 2015 and 2017, organized responses to the migration movements were transformed through a policy of 'learning by doing' which was adapted to local situations.⁷ During the 'long migration summer' of 2015, the Hungarian and Serbian governments embarked on increasingly different policy paths.⁸ In Serbia, there has been a great deal of attention paid to questions about human rights, the asylum system, and unaccompanied minors.⁹ Last, but not least, the 'refugee crisis' has been linked analytically to the migrant situation before this surge occurred.¹⁰

I build on this body of research and focus on the situation that has existed since the closure of the Balkan route, and especially on developments in 2018. This period of aftermath has been characterized by the finding of alternative routes, reduced migration flows, and a longer retention of people on Serbian territory. The questions I address in my discussion of these new circumstances include: How has Serbia acted since the borders were closed? Has there been a change in the legal status of the migrants? How has interaction between the state and the variously involved NGOs developed, and how strong is the state's dependence on these numerous organizations and their financial and human capacities? Has longer retention of migrants had an effect on the

⁵ Nevena Gojković Turunz, The Cooperation Between the State Institutions and Civil Society Organisations in Serbia in the Refugee Crisis, in: Hedwig Giusto / Elsa Laino, eds, *From Europe to Local. Migrating Solidarity*, Brussels 2016, 201-220.

⁶ Marta Stojić Mitrović / Ela Meh, The Reproduction of Borders and the Contagiousness of Illegalisation. A Case of a Belgrade Youth Hostel, *Glasnik Etnografskog instituta SANU* 63, no. 3 (2015), 623-639.

⁷ Marta Stojić Mitrović, Serbian Migration Policy Concerning Irregular Migration and Asylum in the Context of the EU Integration Process, *Etnološki problemi* 9, no. 4 (2014), 1105-1120.

⁸ Chiara Milan / Andrea L.P. Pirro, Interwoven Destinies in the 'Long Migration Summer'. Solidarity Movements Along the Western Balkan Route, in: Donatella della Porta, ed, *Solidarity Mobilizations in the 'Refugee Crisis'*, London 2018, 125-153, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-71752-4.

⁹ Cf. Sonja Tošković, The Human Rights of Migrants and Refugees in the Republic of Serbia, With Special Focus on the Right to Work and the Right to Education, Belgrade 2017; Vesna Petrović, *Ljudska prava u Srbiji 2017. Pravo, praksa i međunarodni standardi ljudskih prava*, Belgrade 2018; Sonja Tošković, ed, *Pravo na azil u Republici Srbiji 2017*, Belgrade 2018; Bogdan Krsić et al., *Unaccompanied and Separated Children in Serbia*, Belgrade 2017; Zoran Lutovac / Slobodan Mrđa, eds, *Savremene migracije i društveni razvoj. Interdisciplinarna perspektiva*, Belgrade 2018.

¹⁰ Marta Stojić Mitrović, Presenting as a Problem, Acting as an Opportunity. Four Cases of Socio-Political Conflicts Taking the Presence of Migrants as a Focal Object in Serbia. *Glasnik Etnografskog instituta SANU* 62 (2014) 1, 66-82.

hospitality shown by the host society? With thousands of migrants staying within its borders for more than a year, is Serbia continuing to be no more than a transit country?

The empirical basis for what follows consists of twelve semi-structured interviews I conducted with different stakeholders and representatives from participating NGOs, and fourteen informal interviews with migrants, all of which took place between 23 February and 26 April 2018 in greater Belgrade. The first of these were at the Rade Drainac primary school in Borča, a suburb just to the north of Belgrade. Those present were the school principal, Slavica Zajić Smiljanić, the teaching supervisor, Marina Todić, and a social worker seconded to the school. After that, I had the help of an interpreter, Snežana Mottaghi, while I talked informally with seven Farsi-speaking students, mostly from Afghanistan. Marina Todić participated in these interviews.

In March 2018 I interviewed Hans Friedrich Schodder, head of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Serbia, along with Mirjana Milenkovski from the UNHCR public information unit, at the organization's headquarters in Belgrade. In addition, I interviewed Nataša Markovska from the non-governmental Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization (*Ekumenska humanitarna organizacija*, EHO), a Christian organization focusing on poverty reduction, the development of inter-church cooperation, the promotion of human rights, and the building of a cohesive civil society in Serbia. Stevan Tatalović was my next interviewee. He is information officer at the NGO Info Park, a refugee centre in Belgrade specializing in protection, information, communication, and education services, and, at national level, is a researcher for the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD). I then spoke with Vladimir Lukić, a social worker at the Asylum Centre in Krnjača, an urban development adjacent to Borča, (also in greater Belgrade). In the course of a one-day visit to this asylum centre, I conducted interviews with seven migrants. In April 2018, I spoke informally with representatives from several different NGOs: Samuel Horn from Refugee Aid Serbia, Marija Tomić from the Ana and Valde Divac Foundation, Senka Škero Koprivica from the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, Jana Stojanović from the Asylum Protection Centre, and Snežana Mottaghi from the Swiss Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA).

In addition to this material, I have used UNHCR reports, and documents from the following organizations: the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, Serbia; Médecins Sans Frontières; Amnesty International; the International Rescue Committee; the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development; and the United Nations Development Programme. I have consulted materials from several regional non-governmental and civil society organizations as well, such as the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights;

Info Park; Atina; Are You Syrious?; the Asylum Protection Centre; Group 484; Refugee Aid Serbia; and the Ana and Vlade Divac Foundation.

The Size and Legal Status of Serbia's Migrant Population

Most migrants I spoke to do not perceive Serbia as their country of asylum. Even if they have sometimes lived in the country for years, they see it as a place of transit. On 30 December 2018, according to the UNHCR, there were 4,468 refugees, asylum-seekers, and migrants in Serbia. Of these 94% (4,205 individuals) were accommodated in sixteen centres administered by the Serbian government.¹¹ Besides these, there were inner city facilities in Belgrade accommodating migrants, almost exclusively men, who had recently arrived. The inner city is the first stop both for those who seek accommodation and registration, and for those who do not want to be registered and intend to move about irregularly.¹²

The same source records over 206 migrants, again mostly men, known to be living outside the centres. These included some hundreds in Belgrade city, and smaller groups near Serbia's borders with Croatia, Hungary, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹³ The number of newly-arrived migrants is currently a few hundred a week; in November 2018, the UNHCR and its partners counted 788 of these in Serbia. Up to the autumn of 2018, most came from Iran, but this seems to have been a temporary trend directly linked to the abolition of the visa requirement for Iranians and the introduction of direct flights from Tehran to Belgrade three times a week.¹⁴ The pattern changed after 8 October 2018, when the Serbian government decided to reintroduce visas for all those coming from the Islamic Republic of Iran. A month later, the most numerous newly-arriving migrants came from Afghanistan (44%), Iraq (21%), and

¹¹ UNHCR, UNHCR Serbia Update, 17-31 December 2018, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/67469>. Cf. Tošković, ed, *Pravo na azil*, 75-95.

¹² Interview with Hans Friedrich Schodder, UNHCR Office Belgrade, Belgrade, 16 March 2018.

¹³ UNHCR, UNHCR Serbia Update, 17-31 December 2018.

¹⁴ Interview with Vladimir Lukić, the Krnjača Asylum Centre, Krnjača, 18 March 2018; Interview with Stevan Tatalović, Info Park, Belgrade, 18 March 2018; Interview with Marina Todić, Rade Drainac Primary School, Borča, 23 February 2018. On the lifting of the visa regime for Iranians cf. *Srbija ukida vize za državljane Indije i Irana*, *Danas*, 22 August 2017, <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/srbija-ukida-vize-za-drzavljane-indije-i-irana/>; Lana Gedošević, *Srbija je ukinula vize građane Ukrajine, Irana, Bahama, Mauricijusa, Barbadosa, Jamajke*, a zbog jedne su nama pretili vraćanjem viza, *Blic*, 4 July 2018, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/srbija-je-ukinula-vize-gradanima-ukrajine-irana-bahama-mauricijusa-barbadosa-jamajke/wwhp4zt>.

Pakistan (9%).¹⁵ This compares with the August 2018 figures of Afghanis (37%), Pakistanis (17%), Iranians (24%), Iraqis (9%), Bangladeshis (6%), Syrians (1%), and migrants from other countries (6%).¹⁶

Most migrants coming to Serbia continue to arrive via Macedonia and Bulgaria.¹⁷ Although Bulgaria is an EU member, migrants do not perceive it as an end destination. They are wary of that country's reported pushback policy, whereby migrants have frequently been stopped at the state borders and forcibly turned back, sometimes with excessive use of force.¹⁸ For Serbia, monthly arrivals of less than 1,000 migrants per month (as these now are) seem manageable, compared to the situation in September 2015, when up to 12,000 people arrived daily. It is possible to offer rudimentary humanitarian aid to those who need it. When the so-called Balkan route was closed to all except those of Afghan, Syrian and Iraqi origin—and a little later to Afghans too—migrants in increasing numbers were left stranded along the route.

What of those left stranded in the Republic of Serbia? According to circumstances, they can be granted different types of legal status. Migrants who come of their own volition and those who arrive involuntarily or as a result of persecution are differentiated. If the authorities determine that any asylum-seekers' fear of persecution in their state of origin is justified, formal refugee status is granted. At a lower level, incomers can be granted two other forms of protection: 'subsidiary protection' and 'temporary protection'.

The UNHCR office in Yugoslavia was opened in the late 1970s, and until 2008 it carried sole responsibility for deciding who could be granted refugee status in Yugoslavia, and then Serbia. During this span of thirty years, no one receiving protection from this office remained in Serbia: all were moved on to the United States, Canada and Australia. Thus, it was possible to apply for asylum in Serbia, but not to stay there.

In 2008, with the implementation of a new Law on Asylum, the Border Police Department took over the mandate from the UNHCR.¹⁹ As Senka Škero

¹⁵ UNHCR, UNHCR Serbia Update, 26 November – 16 December 2018, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/67316>.

¹⁶ UNHCR, UNHCR 'Snapshot' Serbia, August 2018, <http://www.unhcr.rs/dokumenti/izvestaji/snapshots.html>.

¹⁷ UNHCR, UNHCR Serbia Update, 17-31 December 2018. For earlier times, with data for 2016, cf. Bezec / Speer / Stojić Mitrović, *Governing the Balkan Route*, 25.

¹⁸ Amnesty International, *The Amnesty International Report 2017/18, Bulgaria 2017/2018*, 22 February 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/bulgaria/report-bulgaria/>.

¹⁹ The text of the Law is available at Republic of Serbia, Ministry of the Interior, *The Law on Asylum*, Belgrade June 2007, <http://arhiva.mup.gov.rs/domino/zakoni.nsf/Asylum%20Law.doc>. Cf. Dunja Poleti Čosić / Tamara Petrović Trifunović, *Azilni sistem u zemljama tranzita. Srbija kao studija slučaja*, in: Lutovac / Mrđa, eds, *Savremene migracije i društveni razvoj*, 24.

Koprivica from the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights points out, about one hundred people have been granted asylum since this change.²⁰ Some 59 individuals have been granted subsidiary protection, and 44 allotted refugee status (see Figure 1).²¹ There is a huge discrepancy between the number of people applying for asylum and those who have been successful in their application: '[T]wo people were granted asylum and one person subsidiary protection out of 74 who submitted an official request,'²² it was said; and 'even many of those who receive refugee status in Serbia, leave the country'.²³

Problems begin one administrative step back. Effectively, most migrants from the Middle East do not even get to the stage of applying for asylum. Instead they must express an 'intention to seek asylum', upon which they receive the status of 'migrant in transit'. When the Law came into force in 2008, only 77 persons registered with an 'intention to seek asylum'; by 2015 this number had increased to 577,995 (see Figure 2). This form of registration is a necessary first step for migrants in Serbia if they want to get any kind of support. They can express their 'intention' orally or in writing to any police officer or competent official of the Ministry of the Interior at a border checkpoint or within Serbian territory. On doing so, they receive a 'certificate of expressed intention to seek asylum'. The officer collects the individual's personal and biometric data, takes an ID photo, enters all this into electronic databases, and sends the person to one of the asylum centres.²⁴ This procedure was first devised in 2015 in Preševo/Preshevë, a town in southern Serbia near the border with Kosovo and with what has recently been renamed North Macedonia. According to a UNHCR employee, it all came from 'learning by doing' and included a lot of improvisation.²⁵

Any 'confirmation about intention to seek asylum' issued by the police does not mean that the procedure leading to the granting of asylum has been commenced. On the contrary: people who have been granted this preliminary status cannot apply for asylum on their own initiative. They have to wait for staff from the asylum office to contact them. The result is an administrative blockage, only increased by lack of communication between the different levels of authorities. Serbia's aspirations to become a member of the EU and fulfil the

²⁰ Interview with Senka Škero Koprivica, Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, Belgrade, 25 April 2018.

²¹ Tošković, *The Human Rights*, 47.

²² Gojković Turunz, *The Cooperation Between the State Institutions and Civil Society Organisations*, 202.

²³ Stojić Mitrović / Meh, *The Reproduction of Borders and the Contagiousness of Illegalisation*, 626.

²⁴ Republic of Serbia, Ministry of the Interior, *The Law on Asylum*, Article 23(2) Asylum Act, 10-11; cf. Petrović, *Ljudska prava u Srbiji* 2017, 355.

²⁵ Interview with Mirjana Milenkovski, UNHCR, Public Information Unit, Belgrade, 16 March 2018.

Figure 1: Decisions 2008-2017, by Country of Origin. Source: UNHCR, Asylum Fact Sheet, Serbia Asylum 2008-2017, <http://www.unhcr.rs/media/docs/2018/AsylumFactsheet020518ENGf.PDF>.

conditions required has led to the adoption of a law and the implementation of non-comprehensive practices. Clearly local institutions and their personnel have not been adequately prepared.²⁶

The majority of refugees and other migrants in Serbia—all those who have registered and claimed ‘intention to seek asylum’ but have not yet been admitted to any proper application process for asylum—are allowed to stay in reception centres only for the first fifteen days after their arrival. In practice, despite

²⁶ Gojković Turunz, *The Cooperation Between the State Institutions and Civil Society Organisations*, 202-203.

Figure 2: Intentions vs. Applications Submitted 2008-2017. Source: UNHCR, Asylum Fact Sheet, Serbia Asylum 2008-2017, <http://www.unhcr.rs/media/docs/2018/AsylumFactsheet020518ENG.F.PDF>.

the stipulations of the current law, they continue to receive services and aid, although there is no legal framework governing their rights and status.²⁷ So they arrive as ‘illegal’, become ‘legal’ for fifteen days, and then become ‘illegal’, or ‘tolerated’, again.²⁸ After their first fifteen days in Serbia they are treated as ‘migrants in transit’, assumed to be on their way to destinations in the EU. In reality, however, this ‘transit’ is slowed to a standstill. Many ‘migrants in transit’ have been in Serbia for more than a year—and this despite the fact that almost none of the incomers since 2015 has actually wanted to stay.²⁹ This is not where the migrants had planned to seek international protection when

²⁷ ‘Tolerated’ But for How Long?, Mixed Migration Platform, August 2017, <http://www.mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Serbia-feature-article.pdf>.

²⁸ Stojić Mitrović / Meh, The Reproduction of Borders and the Contagiousness of Illegalisation, 627.

²⁹ Cf. Tošković, ed, *Pravo na azil*, 354-361.

they fled their countries of origin. Thus, their intentions coincide with the Serbian authorities' aim to administer Serbia as solely a transit country.³⁰

'Pushback' and 'Game', or How Migrants Move In and Out

With rare individual exceptions, almost the only legal way for migrants to enter the EU from Serbia is by way of transit zones into Hungary. Two of these are located along the Serbian border, in the towns Tompa and Röszke, near Subotica (Serbia) and Szeged (Hungary). Here, in December 2018, the number of migrants the Hungarian authorities admitted was just twenty—the lowest number of admissions since Hungary closed its borders to Serbia on 14 September 2015 by erecting a fence, a move backed up by the closure of the Balkan route in March 2016.³¹ The subsequent dwindling of admissions has been documented by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee: throughout 2016 twenty to thirty individuals were admitted through each of the two transit zones per day; from November 2016 it was ten; in 2017 only five; and since 22 January 2018 Hungary has reduced the quota further to one person in each transit zone per day—a total of ten per week.³²

This reduction has been made according to what is called the 'Hungarian list', a list issued by the Hungarian authorities containing the names of those migrants who have been admitted to asylum procedures and are permitted to enter Hungary. All asylum seekers wishing to be put on this 'Hungarian list' need to be registered in one of the asylum centres in Serbia and must then wait there until it is their turn to be considered. Among the various criteria that determine who is allowed access to the transit zones, time of arrival in Serbia and extent of vulnerability are among the most salient.³³

It is officials at the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees who are responsible for filling in the list. During the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the remainder states Serbia and Montenegro united to become, for a while, the 'Federal Republic of Yugoslavia'. In 1992 this republic adopted a special Law on Refugees. It was mainly concerned with the admission of people from the other Yugoslav

³⁰ Interview with Mirjana Milenkovski, UNHCR, Public Information Unit, Belgrade, 16 March 2018. Cf. Tošković, *The Human Rights*, 48; Gojković Turunz, *The Cooperation Between the State Institutions and Civil Society Organisations*, 202.

³¹ UNHCR, UNHCR Serbia Update, 17-31 December 2018.

³² Hungarian Helsinki Committee, *Access to the Territory and Push Backs*, Hungary, <http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/hungary/asylum-procedure/access-procedure-and-registration/access-territory-and-push>; Info Park, *Hungary Reduces Quota for Regular Entry into Asylum Procedures*, 25 January 2018, <https://mailchi.mp/0f796e41061e/info-park-newsletter-12-january-2018?e=0d84a10dd9>.

³³ Asylum Information Database (AIDA), *Country Report Hungary*, Hungarian Helsinki Committee, 2018, 31 December 2017, 18, https://www.asylumineurope.org/sites/default/files/report-download/aida_hu_2017update.pdf.

republics, and provided for their accommodation, necessary aid, and general humanitarian support. The Law was *not* concerned with determining the legal and administrative status of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) who might be admitted. The Commissariat for Refugees emerged at that time as the most prominent national organization dealing with these issues, while the UNHCR, operating in Belgrade since the 1970s, has seen to asylum procedures within Serbian territory itself according to its mandate.³⁴

The Hungarian border authorities use their 'Hungarian lists' to determine who may be permitted into the transit zones.³⁵ At Tompa they have a single list, while at Röszke they have separate lists for families, unaccompanied children, and single men. Since the difference between the number of migrants in Serbia and those legally permitted to enter Hungary is so vast, many people try to continue their journey illegally. It is here that the so-called 'pushbacks' come into play. That is when the asylum-seekers are stopped and forcibly turned back to the country they came from. The practice of attempting to cross borders illegally is referred to as 'the game'.

Not only Hungary, but Croatia and Romania, and, since 2017, Bosnia and Herzegovina, have all sent large numbers of people back to Serbia—people who attempted to cross the state borders illegally. These pushback activities have often been accompanied by violence and serious injury.³⁶ According to the reports the UNHCR has made on collective expulsions, in December 2018 alone, 128 asylum-seekers were pushed back from Croatia to Serbia, six from Hungary, seventeen from Romania, and thirteen from Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 63% of these cases a denial of access to asylum procedures is alleged, and in 46% accusations of mistreatment by the neighbouring countries' authorities.³⁷ There are further reports, based on the testimonies of thousands of people, attesting to police brutality, humiliation or serious threats migrants have suffered when crossing the border from Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina to Croatia. Asylum-seekers have reported that they were hit, deprived of their belongings, and threatened with guns. They have also been denied access to asylum procedures after crossing the border.³⁸ According to the testimony of

³⁴ Bezec / Speer / Stojić Mitrović, *Governing the Balkan Route*, 29-30.

³⁵ Asylum Information Database (AIDA), *Country Report Hungary*, 18.

³⁶ Games of Violence, Médecins Sans Frontières, October 2017, <http://www.msf.org/sites/msf.org/files/serbia-games-of-violence-3.10.17.pdf>.

³⁷ UNHCR, *UNHCR Serbia Update*, 17-31 December 2018.

³⁸ European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), *Push Backs and Police Violence on the Rise at Croatian Border*, Report Finds, 9 March 2018, <https://www.ecre.org/push-backs-and-police-violence-on-the-rise-at-croatian-border-report-finds/>. Cf. Centar za mirovne studije, *Izveštaj o nezakonitim i nasilnim protjerivanjima izbjeglica iz Republike Hrvatske*, 28 February 2018, https://www.cms.hr/system/article_document/doc/501/IZVJE_TAJ_O_NEZAKONITIM_I_NASILNIM_PROTJERIVANJIMA_IZBJEGLICA_IZ_REPUBLIKE_HRVATSKE.pdf; Alarmanтно u Krajini. Ljudi se boje, nema dovoljno hrane, *Fokus*, 27 July 2018,

migrants and monitoring groups, since 2018 the Croatian police have engaged in a systematic campaign of violence and theft against migrants and refugees attempting to find a route to Western Europe through their country.³⁹ Asylum-seekers have often been slung into a van and been driven back to the other side of the border—or forced to walk. Amnesty International has released a report in which irregular migrants relate how the Hungarian police and military pushed them back to Serbia. In their own words:

‘Once we managed to get twenty-one kilometres into Hungary. But police came and still brought us back to Serbia. First of all when they caught us they said don’t worry we will take you to a camp. [...] They transferred us to a different group of mixed police and military. [...] They had a video camera with them. They said I had to say to the camera that I broke the law and we were only three kilometres in. They were aggressive, they said if we didn’t do that, they would use tear gas and hit us. They gave us no papers, took no fingerprints. Just drove us back to the border by Kelebia and then looked at our passports and threw them over the fence.’⁴⁰

Despite experience of suffering violence and injuries, migrants often try to cross the border again, daringly engaging in ‘the game’. As Milena Timotijević from the International Rescue Committee explains:

‘Every time a refugee plays “the game” they are putting their lives at risk. They are at the mercy of unscrupulous smugglers and human traffickers; they are frequently pushed back, violently, by border guards; they are subjected to “survival sex” and other forms of sexual abuse. And yet they never stop trying.’⁴¹

Some have attempted to cross the border more than twenty times, and a few have eventually been successful. It is mostly men who play ‘the game’, but sometimes families with children play it too:

‘Recently I met a family at Miksalište who have been in Preševo in southern Serbia since 2015. They have not moved from Preševo since then and they cannot stand it anymore. They also want to get into “the game”. Now they have come to

<https://www.fokus.ba/vijesti/bih/alarmantno-u-krajini-ljudi-se-boje-nema-dovoljno-hrane-foto/1178674/>; Christian Jakob, Kroatien ist so rabiat wie Ungarn, *die Tageszeitung*, 8 August 2018, <http://www.taz.de/!5521293/>; Shaun Walker, Refugees Crossing from Bosnia ‘Beaten and Robbed by Croatian Police’, *The Guardian*, 15 August 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/15/refugees-crossing-from-bosnia-beaten-and-robbed-by-croatian-police>.

³⁹ Walker, *Refugees Crossing*.

⁴⁰ *Stranded Hope. Hungary’s Sustained Attack on the Rights of Refugee and Migrant*, Amnesty International, London 2016, https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/stranded_hope_eur2748642016.pdf.

⁴¹ Saeed Kamali Dehghan, ‘Iran Was Like Hell.’ The Young Refugees Starting New Lives in Serbia, *The Guardian*, 28 September 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/28/iran-refugees-europe-eu-serbia-belgrade-asylum-seekers?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other.

Belgrade to Miksalište and have asked whether they should go through Bosnia or Hungary.⁴²

Miksalište Refugee Aid is a coalition of citizens, local companies and civil society organizations that provides aid and medical support to refugees from war-torn countries like Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. It tries to meet their most pressing needs while they are in Serbia—either at the borders or at the Miksalište aid collection post and distribution centre in the capital, Belgrade. Though playing ‘the game’ is frequently unsuccessful and always very risky, and though migrants continue to arrive, a UNHCR representative claims that there has been a decrease in the number of migrants remaining in Serbia between 2016 and 2019.⁴³ Obviously, significant numbers have found undocumented ways to move on.

Between 8,000 and 10,000 migrants travelled through Serbia in 2017. Robert Crepinko, Head of the European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC), stressed that, in reality, ‘the Western Balkans route is not closed, despite the borders being much better protected’ now. Since refugees and other migrants cannot legally get to Western Europe, they have been increasingly dependent on traffickers, who profit from the EU border closures and often do not hesitate to expose refugees to great dangers.⁴⁴ Transit migration has been recriminalized, and refugees are in a state of extreme vulnerability. Yet, even though it has decreased, and even though transit has become more dangerous and financially more costly, the flow of migrants has not stopped. The migrants’ choice of border to be crossed on the way to central and northern Europe is dependent on the connections they have with traffickers but also differs according to nationality. Kurds, Yazidi and other minority groups from Iraq go to the border of Romania, while others, such as Afghans or Syrians, go to the borders of Hungary and Croatia.⁴⁵

On average, about forty people try to cross the Hungarian border each day, attempting to cut the fence. Often this is to no effect, but they continue trying nevertheless. NGO employees like Stevan Tatalović of Info Park have often managed to develop a trustful relationship with the migrants they know, and some of them feel sufficiently confident to talk openly about their experiences. In our interview, he related how some make attempts once or twice a week, and keep on doing so for months. Those who have the money make use of

⁴² Interview with Mirjana Milenkovski, UNHCR, Public Information Unit, Belgrade, 16 March 2018.

⁴³ Interview with Mirjana Milenkovski, UNHCR, Public Information Unit, Belgrade, 16 March 2018.

⁴⁴ Julian Staib / Michael Stabenow, Europol: Balkanroute ist nicht geschlossen, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 February 2017, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/f-a-z-exklusiv-europol-balkanroute-ist-nicht-geschlossen-14826502.html>.

⁴⁵ Interview with Vladimir Lukić, Krnjača Asylum Centre, Krnjača, 18 March 2018.

more sophisticated methods. For example, they hide between the goods in loaded trucks, or travel by car. If border guards find them, they might let them go, because there is much corruption; such corrupt practices are called 'professional smuggling'. Lukić says that truck drivers now stop and inspect their vehicles before entering a country, because migrants might have climbed in without their knowledge.⁴⁶

In greater Belgrade, Samuel Horn from Refugee Aid Serbia expressed a suspicion that the smugglers are omnipresent in certain places, including the asylum centres, and that, in this way, migrants are encouraged to attempt continuing their journey.⁴⁷ According to Vladimir Lukić, social worker at the Krnjača Asylum Centre, employees know who the smugglers are and how they attach themselves to people touting their services.

With increased state securitization, there has also been an increase in 'grey zone' smuggling. New trafficking hubs have been established, for example in Timișoara in Romania, a city that is increasingly used as an anchor point for smuggling migrants towards Western Europe.⁴⁸ A refugee from Afghanistan, wanting to enter the EU through Hungary, explained his chances in an interview for the news portal N1: 'We have no choice but to go with smugglers, otherwise we wait here forever.'⁴⁹ According to my informants and media reports such as those of Radio Free Europe, smugglers' prices in 2018 were as high as 8,000 euros and even went up to 10,000. International intelligence agencies estimate that smugglers in Southeastern Europe earned more than five billion US dollars in 2015 alone. Vladimir Lukić suspected that refugees living in the asylum centres could not afford such sums.⁵⁰ In fact, it seems that, in 2018, most of those able to pay money like this were Iranians passing through Serbia on the smuggling route, invisible to the state and to statistics. Between August 2017 and October 2018 Iranians could travel to Serbia visa-free and were hardly anywhere registered as migrants.

⁴⁶ Interview with Vladimir Lukić, Krnjača Asylum Centre, Krnjača, 18 March 2018; Interview with Stevan Tatalović, Info Park, Belgrade, 18 March 2018.

⁴⁷ Informal conversation with Samuel Horn, Refugee Aid Serbia, Belgrade, 25 April 2018.

⁴⁸ Interview with Stevan Tatalović, Info Park, Belgrade, 18 March 2018. Cf. Beznec/Speer/Stojić Mitrović, *Governing the Balkan Route*, 26; Mara Bierbach, *New Trafficking Hubs Emerge in the Balkans*, *Info Migrants*, 20 February 2018, <http://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/7641/new-trafficking-hubs-emerge-in-the-balkans>.

⁴⁹ Ksenija Pavkov, *Park kod Autobuske sirijski, preko puta avganistanski*, N1, 21 May 2016, <http://rs.n1info.com/a162229/Vesti/Vesti/Park-kod-autobuske-sirijski-preko-puta-avganistanski.html>.

⁵⁰ Interview with Vladimir Lukić, Krnjača Asylum Centre, Krnjača, 18 March 2018; Interview with Stevan Tatalović, Info Park, Belgrade, 18 March 2018; *Iranci u srpskoj 'igri' za ulazak u EU*, *Radio Free Europe*, 26 June 2018, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/iran-eu-ulazak-migranti-krijum%C4%8Ddari-/29318150.html>; Pavkov, *Park kod Autobuske sirijski*.

Image 1: Migrant Centres in Serbia. Source: UNHCR, Drifter Housing in Serbia, UNHCR Serbia Update, Center Profiling Serbia, January 2019, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/55034>.

Currently, there seem to be three main routes on which smugglers operate: a 'northern route' from Turkey via Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary, then to Austria and onward; a 'southern route' from Turkey via Greece, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia to Austria and on again; and the 'Balkan route' already referred to. This route, through Serbia and Croatia, was the one most commonly used in 2015, and has not ceased functioning. But, as the numbers Bosnian officials released in 2018 show, a 'new Balkan route' has come into being—from Serbia through Bosnia.⁵¹

A Case Study of Migrants' Facilities. The Krnjača Asylum Centre

In December 2018, 4,205 migrants were being accommodated in nineteen centres in Serbia, run and financed by the government and referred to as asylum centres (AC) and reception / transit centres (RTC) (see Image 1). Before the crisis of 2015, there were just five centres for migrants in Serbia, with a total of 810 beds; so the increase is considerable.⁵² Some of the centres had been

⁵¹ Bierbach, *New Trafficking Hubs Emerge in the Balkans*.

⁵² For more information about family utilities, child protection, freedom of movement, education and leisure, communication, health, shelter, washing facilities, safety and security, food and nonfood items (NFI) in the Krnjača Asylum Centre cf. Tošković, ed, *Pravo*

used in the past to host refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from former Yugoslavia. A large number of the present-day ones originated as barracks or resorts, and they have different owners. For example, the Adaševci Centre, once a holiday resort for workers, is located in Syrmia and is the property of NIS Petrol. The centre at Bogovođa, a village in the Kolubara District, was once a resort hosting school children and families with health problems, but is now owned by the Red Cross. The Krnjača Asylum Centre, ten kilometres from Belgrade, is the property of the Ivan Milutinović Company (*Preduzeće Ivan Milutinović*, PIM) and once housed the company's workers. It is the one that I visited in March 2018.

The former Ivan Milutinović engineering factory has been subject to insolvency proceedings since 2015.⁵³ Some of its previous personnel, such as the kitchen staff and the security men at the entrance, continue to be formal employees of the factory. However, ever since the Yugoslav IDPs and refugees started arriving during the wars of the 1990s, they have been paid by the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration. The old company still has a presence in things like its logo at the entrance gate (see Image 2), the uniforms of the security personnel and the photograph of Ivan Milutinović himself in the factory canteen, now turned into a dining room for the migrant inhabitants (see Image 3). Milutinović was a Yugoslav partisan general from Montenegro and an eminent military commander in World War II. He died in combat in 1944. In Tito's Yugoslavia he was held up as a hero who had devoted his life to the idea of a communist Yugoslav state. The strangely ironical photograph shows him in his partisan uniform with the communist star on his military beret. In socialist times, the company built dams and ports in the Middle East, for example in Iraq in Umm Qasr and Basra.⁵⁴ Quite by chance, those living today in the previous workers' barracks mostly come from the Middle East.

But the irony goes much further. Today's inhabitants had other migrant predecessors—those displaced by the wars of Yugoslav succession in the 1990s. According to the 'Migration Profile of Serbia' published by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, there were 203,140 displaced persons from Kosovo, and 29,457 acknowledged refugees from other parts of the former Yugoslavia in Serbia in 2016.⁵⁵ This barracks and dining room were their

na azil, 83-85, as well UNHCR, Migrant Housing in Serbia, UNHCR Serbia Update, Centre Profiling Serbia.

⁵³ Privredni sud u Beogradu, Stečajni oglasi objavljeni u zvaničnom glasilu zaključno sa 6.11.2015. godine, 6 November 2015, <https://www.paragraf.rs/dnevne-vesti/101115/101115-stecajeji.pdf>.

⁵⁴ For more information on PIM see the homepage of the company, <http://www.pim.co.rs/uvod.html>.

⁵⁵ Tošković, *The Human Rights*, 46-47.

Image 2: The Entrance Gate of the Old Ivan Milutinović Company, now the Krnjača Asylum Centre. Source: Armina Galijaš.

quarters. The photograph of Milutinović is one of a partisan who gave his life for a state that then disintegrated in violence; of a man whose name was chosen for a company that profited from Yugoslavia's non-aligned status in the Cold War, but then suffered from new wars and violence twice over. When the first migrants from the Middle East came to Krnjača in 2015, they encountered the Serb refugees and internally displaced persons, many of whom had been living there since 1993. Several of my interlocutors were present during this time. In their recollections, there were very few episodes of conflict between the two groups.⁵⁶

In fact, the Serbian refugees and IDPs benefited from the new crisis, since they were offered improved accommodation. Many had been living in these factory barracks or similar accommodation for more than twenty years. It seems as if the new crisis forced the Serbian authorities to speed up action to remedy the previous one. The Regional Housing Programme, a joint initiative shared by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia, was set

⁵⁶ Interview with Mirjana Milenkovski, UNHCR, Public Information Unit, Belgrade, 16 March 2018; Interview with Vladimir Lukić, Krnjača Asylum Centre, Krnjača, 18 March 2018.

Image 3: The Photograph of Ivan Milutinović in the Company's Canteen / Migrants' Dining Room. Source: Armina Galijaš.

up to tackle the protracted displacements the 1990s conflicts had caused. On 24 April 2012, an international donors' conference was organized in Sarajevo to raise funds for a housing programme. Sadako Ogata, who was the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees at the time of the wars in Yugoslavia pledged to contribute, and so did a number of states—Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Switzerland, Turkey, and the USA.⁵⁷

When I paid a visit to Krnjača in March 2018, about 600 people were living in the former workers' barracks. Krnjača is a 'family centre', and proportionally, 44% of those there were children, 18% women, and 38% men. This contrasts with the transit centre at Obrenovac, forty kilometres southwest of Belgrade, which, with 776 men in January 2019, has an entirely male population. In Krnjača (again taking January 2019 figures) the majority of the inhabitants (84%) are people who fled from Afghanistan, while 7% are from Iran, 2% from Pakistan, 2% from Iraq, and 5% from other countries. Many of them

⁵⁷ For more information about the Regional Housing Programme cf. <http://regionalhousingprogramme.org/>.

have been in the centre for more than twelve months. The number has fluctuated, however: new migrants have kept arriving, and some older ones have managed to continue their journeys illegally. In the first half of 2018, the number of these older ones had decreased by about a hundred. They did not all leave the country, and sometimes people left, only to return. Occasionally, this was to spend a few months somewhere near the border, waiting for an opportunity to cross over illegally. Such initiatives are tolerated both by the staff in the centres and by the Serbian state. My interlocutors confirmed that attempts at illegal border crossings increase as soon as the weather permits. If an attempt fails, people return to gather their strength, and then try again.⁵⁸

The actual capacity of Krnjača is 800 to 1,000 people, and with the current lower number of 600 it functions well.⁵⁹ Three meals are served each day, and an impressive array of NGOs organizes different activities. In Krnjača, there are more than ten national and international organizations helping the migrants, including the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Danish Refugee Council, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization, Caritas, the Red Cross, the Ana and Vlade Divac Foundation, UNICEF, UNHCR, SOS Children's Villages, and Te-Tzu Chang. In the centre, structures have been set up so that those living there can play billiards, sew, have their hair dressed, learn languages, paint and do homework, to give just a few examples. The organizations' funds, however, are often very modest (see Image 4). After the closure of the Balkan route in 2016, the migrants' length of stay increased significantly, which means that, although *de jure* they remain 'migrants in transit', *de facto* they are not. With this drastic change, their needs have altered.⁶⁰ One of these needs is for proper medical attention, and, with aid from the EU, new medical units have been opened in all centres; in Krnjača currently there are three working surgeries (see Image 5).

Three-quarters of the migrants in Krnjača are families with children; the rest are single men and so-called unaccompanied minors, though these last are difficult to establish, as many carry no personal documents and the registration authorities are dependent only on their statements.⁶¹ In March 2018,

⁵⁸ UNHCR, Centre Profiling Serbia; Interview with Vladimir Lukić, Krnjača Asylum Centre, Krnjača, 18 March 2018; Interview with Mirjana Milenkovski, UNHCR, Public Information Unit, Belgrade, 16 March 2018.

⁵⁹ UNHCR, Centre Profiling Serbia.

⁶⁰ Interview with Mirjana Milenkovski, UNHCR, Public Information Unit, Belgrade, 16 March 2018.

⁶¹ Interview with Vladimir Lukić, Krnjača Asylum Centre, Krnjača, 18 March 2018; Human Rights in Serbia 2015, Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, Belgrade 2016, 253; Cf. Miroslava Jelačić, ed, Challenges of the Migrant-Refugee Crisis from the Perspective of CSOs, Belgrade 2016, 10-12.

Image 4: Migrants Play Cricket in the Asylum Centre. Source: Armina Galijaš.

71 unaccompanied minors were living in the centre, and four ‘guardians’ from the Municipal Centre for Social Work (*Gradski centar za socijalni rad*) are responsible for their care. The guardians come to the centre every day for two to three hours to support the minors in their leisure time, for example by taking them on short outings to the countryside, perhaps ending with a football match. However, as Vladimir Lukić, the social worker at Krnjača, pointed out, conflicts between the minors, or cases of drunkenness, are dealt with by others—for smaller incidents, the centre staff; for more serious ones, the police.⁶² The police take records and intimidate the culprits. What the minors lack is adequate protection: they are in a particularly vulnerable position, and risk being exposed to violence, exploitation, and abuse. It is difficult to provide proper institutional support in Serbia because both the personnel and the knowledge are lacking. The infrastructures were not prepared for the situation the country now faces.⁶³

⁶² Interview with Vladimir Lukić, Krnjača Asylum Centre, Krnjača, 18 March 2018.

⁶³ Krasić et al., *Unaccompanied and Separated Children*, 28, 39; Poleti Ćosić/Petrović Trifunović, *Azilni sistem u zemljama tranzita*, 28–31.

Image 5: The Medical Unit in Krnjača. Source: Armina Galijaš.

‘Arrangements’ between the State and the Migrants

The Migrants – Their Makeshift Lives

As Stevan Tatalović of the NGO Info Park has pointed out, the foremost problem migrants face is the uncertainty of their situation: ‘There is no appropriate institutional support, and no proper protection.’⁶⁴ The Serbian state has provided humanitarian aid, including food, footwear, clothing, babies’ nappies, and other similar things. But there is no prevention of human trafficking or smuggling. Often only two private security employees are present in the centres, and they do not have the authority to be up to the task of controlling hundreds of people living in extreme circumstances. Tatalović mentioned the sexual abuse of boys, and a dozen robberies. There are no separate facilities for the accommodation of the unaccompanied minors. The police react if crimes are referred to them, but much goes unreported due to fears of retribution. Minors and women additionally risk ill treatment at the hands of traffickers and smugglers, who allegedly work through bribery of the victim, or the judge.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Interview with Stevan Tatalović, Info Park, Belgrade, 18 March 2018.

⁶⁵ Interview with Stevan Tatalović, Info Park, Belgrade, 18 March 2018. Cf. Krasić et al., *Unaccompanied and Separated Children*, 31-40; UNHCR, 2017 *Trafficking in Persons*

Incidents such as these show the full effect of having illegal status. While refugees often choose the route through Serbia because they believe it is a safe passage posing little risk to life, and without extensive pushbacks or serious and systematic police maltreatment, they nevertheless have to survive without any institutional or legal protection. In Krnjača, minor incidents of crime or violence occur every two to three days, and major ones, once every two to three months. Sometimes the perpetrators end up in the detention room. But there are no consequences, either for the perpetrators or for the victims. Even if a report is filed, those responsible for the violence go unpunished, precisely because they have no legal status. If individuals are charged with a criminal offence or are caught at an illegal border crossing, the law stipulates that they should be deported from the country. But this measure is futile both in Serbia and in the rest of Europe, because there is nowhere the refugees can be deported to: it is impossible to send anyone back to Syria or to parts of Iraq. So, those who break the law continue to live in Serbia, and keep trying to enter the EU.⁶⁶

Even if the migrants' legal situation were resolved in their favour, the economic situation in Serbia would make it very difficult to make any serious plans to stay, integrate, or expect a better future. The unemployment rate in Serbia stood at 11.9% in 2018, so that chances of finding a job are low, even for those able to learn the language.⁶⁷ President Vučić's commendation of the pro-active integration of a family from Afghanistan is no more than a showcase instance, and is an exception that confirms the rule.⁶⁸

The migrants' situation in Serbia is indeed conflicted. On the one hand, they do not have a strong community there in any way comparable to those that exist in Germany, for example. A longing for this is one of the reasons migrants strive to go there. There, they imagine, they can find a 'grey zone' job and a place to sleep, even if their legal status remains unresolved. In Serbia the closest they can come to 'community' is a group of people of the same kinship group confined to a camp, and in a perpetual limbo that mocks their legal status of being 'in transit'. On the other hand, Serbia has seen no large-

Report. Serbia, 27 June 2017, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5959ec5d11.html>; Sreten M. Jelić / Milica D. Vasić, *Žene i deca migranti. Žrtve trgovine ljudima*, in: Lutovac / Mrđa, eds, *Savremene migracije i društveni razvoj*, 87-95, 87-89.

⁶⁶ Interview with Stevan Tatalović, Info Park, Belgrade, 18 March 2018; Interview with Vladimir Lukić, Krnjača Asylum Centre, Krnjača, 18 March 2018.

⁶⁷ *Nezaposlenost u Srbiji 11,9 odsto*, *N1*, 31 August 2018, <http://rs.n1info.com/a416369/Biznis/Nezaposlenost-u-Srbiji-11-9-odsto.html>.

⁶⁸ *Državljanstvo, posao za oca, stipendija za dečaka*. Vučić primio Farhadija Nurija, izbeglicu iz Avganistana, *Blic*, 16 August 2017, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/drzavljanstvo-posao-za-oca-stipendija-za-decaka-vucic-primio-farhadija-nurija/rphgwtc>.

Image 6: The Rade Drainac Primary School in Borča. Source: Armina Galijaš.

scale protests against migrants, and individual violent attacks on ‘foreigners’ have also been comparatively rare.⁶⁹

Since the start of the school year 2016/2017, 150 migrant children have been enrolled in seven primary schools in greater Belgrade with the support of UNICEF. In early May 2017, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MESTD) issued a ‘Guideline on the Integration of all Children in the Education System’, which regulates in detail the pupils’ enrolment and the support they are to receive as they are integrated into the school system. The adoption of this guideline is very important, in view of the fact that in 2017 over 2,000 migrant children of school age were to be found in Serbia.⁷⁰

The children who live in the Krnjača Centre attend schools in neighbouring Borča. To impart some idea of their lives, I focus on some Farsi-speaking children from Afghanistan who go to the Rade Drainac primary school (see Image 6). A school bus, paid for and organized by a Swiss humanitarian organization, the ADRA, makes sure that the children arrive back at the

⁶⁹ Interview with Stevan Tatalović, Info Park, Belgrade, 18 March 2018.

⁷⁰ Ministarstvo prosvete, nauke i tehnološki razvoj, *Obrazovanje dece migranata*, 20 March 2017, <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/obrazovanje-dece-migranata/>. Cf. Tošković, *The Human Rights*, 63; Krasić et al., *Unaccompanied and Separated Children*, 10, 37; *Right to Asylum in the Republic of Serbia. Periodic Report for April – June 2017*, Belgrade 2017, 28.

asylum centre on time to receive their meals (they get a snack at the school as well). School attendance gives the youngsters their first opportunity to receive education since they left their home countries—or, in some cases, their first education at all.⁷¹

The general picture I got from my interviews at the school was that the migrant children were enjoying a successful intercultural and educational experience. The teaching staff observed that the newcomers have been well received and accepted by their peers, and the children confirmed this, saying that they were included in joint activities and that they played with the other pupils. Importantly, they are assisted in their learning, especially with learning the Serbian language.⁷²

In advance of the beginning of the school year, teachers, parents, and pupils had been prepared for the new situation. Around 400 teachers in nine school catchment areas near the asylum and reception centres had received specific training and thorough instruction on how to put the Ministry's 'Guideline' into practice. Together with the MESTD, the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, UNICEF's Belgrade office, and the Centre for Education Policy (*Centar za obrazovne politike*, CEP) helped with implementation. The latter is an independent, multidisciplinary research centre providing professional support to decision-makers and practitioners in developing, implementing and evaluating policies in the field of education.⁷³ The migrant children have been equipped with the school supplies they need and have been assigned to regular classes. The language of instruction is Serbian:

'At the moment we have got interpreters who are very helpful for the children in the fifth to eighth grades, while the children from the first to the fourth grades have quickly mastered the language. [...] I do not speak English, which in fact is helpful, as they needed to learn Serbian very fast to communicate with me.'⁷⁴

Care is taken in placement. The Branko Pešić primary school in Zemun, for instance, assessed the children's cross-curricular competences at the time of their enrolment, so as to fit them appropriately into the school's structure. Special IT-based applications have helped children learn the Serbian language in

⁷¹ Interview with Mirjana Milenkovski, UNHCR, Public Information Unit, Belgrade, 16 March 2018; Interview with Nataša Markovska, Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation, Belgrade, 16 March 2018. On the topic of interculturalism and social inclusion in education in the context of migration cf. Gorica Lukić, *Savremene migracije i interkulturalizam u obrazovanju*, in: Lutovac / Mrđa, eds, *Savremene migracije i društveni razvoj*, 37-48.

⁷² Interview with Marina Todić, the Rade Drainac primary school, Borča, 23 February 2018; Interviews with migrant pupils at the Rade Drainac primary school, Borča, 23 February 2018.

⁷³ Tošković, *The Human Rights*, 66. More information on the Centre for Education Policy is available on the organization's website, <http://www.cep.edu.rs/about>.

⁷⁴ Interview with Marina Todić, the Rade Drainac primary school, Borča, 23 February 2018.

a separate group, while they have widened their knowledge of all other school subjects through an integrated curriculum which they share with the Serbian children.⁷⁵ So, although the UNHCR makes many complaints about the asylum system in Serbia, it acknowledges that the schooling of migrant children has been a shining example of good practice. Some 95% of the children living in the various refugee, transit, and asylum centres in 2018 were attending school.⁷⁶

So how can the relations between Serbian society and the migrants be assessed more generally? According to the employees of the Krnjača Centre, the migrants have been well received by people in the surrounding area. A 2017 survey by TNS Medium Gallup in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Serbia showed that negative attitudes towards migrants arose due to security concerns. While many Serbian citizens donated food and equipment, they showed a lower level of readiness to initiate any closer interaction.⁷⁷ The Ninamedia Research Agency conducted a survey in 2016, according to which over 86% of Serbian citizens believed that the asylum-seekers would not remain in Serbia, and some 34% confirmed that they would be concerned if they did.⁷⁸ As an explanation, those surveyed observed that Serbia was a poor country and thus unable to help. In addition,

‘the social distance towards asylum-seekers and migrants in general proved to be higher than what was recorded in surveys of 2012 and 2015: for example, only 55% of the respondents accepted the possibility of asylum-seekers living in the same town, and only 26% accepted the possibility of an asylum-seeker being their spouse.’⁷⁹

Between May 2016 and May 2017, three more surveys into attitudes related to refugees and migrants in Serbia were conducted, this time by the ProPozitiv Agency in cooperation with the Ana and Vlade Divac Foundation. These surveys covered eight towns and municipalities that were directly affected by the migration, as they were located along what had been the former Balkan route. Of those surveyed, 43% showed a positive attitude and a degree of empathy

⁷⁵ Krasić et al., *Unaccompanied and Separated Children*, 38.

⁷⁶ Interview with Mirjana Milenkovski, UNHCR, Public Information Unit, Belgrade, 16 March 2018.

⁷⁷ TNS Medium Gallup, *Attitudes Towards the Impact of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in Serbia's Municipalities*, August 2017, 22, http://www.rs.undp.org/content/dam/serbia/Publications%20and%20reports/undp_rs_QuantitativePublicOpinionSurveyAttitudesMigrant_Aug2017.pdf.

⁷⁸ Cf. UNDP, *Citizens' Attitudes Towards Refugees and Migrants in Migration-Affected Municipalities and Recommendations for Developing Social Cohesion*, August 2017, 5, http://www.rs.undp.org/content/dam/serbia/undp_rs_QualitativeResearchCitizensAttitudesMigrants_Aug%202017.pdf.

⁷⁹ UNDP, *Citizens' Attitudes Towards Refugees and Migrants*, 5.

towards the migrants.⁸⁰ A comparison of the results from all three of these most recent surveys reveals a relatively stable number of Serbian citizens expressing a similarly positive attitude.⁸¹ As Aleksandar Pavlović points out, Serbia has had a far easier task than any of the EU countries, for one simple reason: 'The refugees entering Serbia had one, and one goal only—to leave it as soon as possible.' Thus, for Serbia, it has been relatively easy to brag about 'traditional Serbian humanism and hospitality'.⁸² On the other hand, it is also true that Bulgaria, which is in a comparable situation as one of the poorest EU countries and also one where the migrants do not want to stay, has reacted very differently to the crisis.

The State's Dilemma – Treating the Migrants Well or Getting Rid of Them?

At the beginning of the 'refugee crisis' Serbia established a formalized corridor in response not only to the border openings by Germany, but also to the border closures by Hungary.⁸³ Serbia aimed not 'to produce sustainable solutions and alternative long-term migration policies', but rather to ensure the swift transport of migrants out, which 'would transfer the responsibility for them to the next state' as quickly as possible.⁸⁴ The state thus attempted to regulate matters on the understanding that the transit was an exceptional arrangement, and most Serbians reacted in a manner that corresponded with this state policy. Most citizens are compassionate and respectful to migrants, as long as it remains implicit that they will continue their journey.⁸⁵

The Serbian state authorities have acted strategically and have played an important role in deflecting potential protests among the population into what has been relatively good acceptance of the migrants. Mirjana Milenkovski from the UNHCR's public information unit credits the former prime minister and

⁸⁰ Miodrag Sovilj, Pozitivan stav prema migrantima ima 43 odsto građana Srbije, *N1*, 19 June 2017, <http://rs.n1info.com/a277073/Vesti/Vesti/Gradjani-Srbije-o-migrantima.html>.

⁸¹ UNDP, Citizens' Attitudes Towards Refugees and Migrants, 6.

⁸² Aleksandar Pavlović, A Passage to Europe. Serbia and the Refugee Crisis, *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 3, no. 1 (2016), 59-65, 60. http://www.contemporarysee.org/sites/default/files/papers/a_pavlovic_a_passage_to_europe.pdf.

⁸³ Cf. El-Shaarawi / Razsa, Movements upon Movements, 4, who mention four phases—that of the clandestine Balkan route, the open Balkan route, the official Balkan corridor, and the closed Balkan route: 'In popular memory, and most media accounts, the Balkan Route was opened because of the humanitarian impulses of German chancellor Angela Merkel. Merkel, it should be remembered, famously declared an open-door policy under the slogan "Wir schaffen das" ("We can do it").'

⁸⁴ Beznec / Speer / Stojić Mitrović, Governing the Balkan Route, 61-62.

⁸⁵ Interview with Stevan Tatalović, Info Park, Belgrade, 18 March 2018; Cf. Beznec / Speer / Stojić Mitrović, Governing the Balkan Route, 61.

current president Aleksandar Vučić for this. He publicly denounced any protests that occurred, and has kept a firm grip through his substantially authoritarian rule—there is hardly any opposition in Serbia left, as all voices against Vučić's rule have been silenced.⁸⁶ The Serbian media, closely bound to official politics, have given their backing, contrasting a praiseworthy Serbia with its recalcitrant neighbours: 'Images of migrants in Belgrade's parks and smiling policemen holding migrant children were juxtaposed in the media with cages in which migrants were being held in Hungary, or angry Macedonian officers beating migrants on the border.'⁸⁷ During 2015 and in the first six months of 2016, such a slant on the news was widely disseminated. It condemned Hungary and Croatia, self-styled 'guardians of the gates to Europe', and also Bulgaria.⁸⁸ Serbia was different. Vučić proclaimed that his country would 'never erect walls' or restrict the movement of people seeking protection. He had a decisive influence on public opinion.⁸⁹ The media emphasized the humanitarian side of the migration, together with the humanity of Serbian citizens, effectively triggering empathetic attitudes. Many people became directly engaged in helping the refugees. Yes, there were dissenting voices: Mihalj Bimbo, mayor of the Kanjiža municipality in Vojvodina, claimed that 'foreigners do not have the basic elements of intelligence and culture'; but such outbursts were very rare.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Interview with Mirjana Milenkovski, UNHCR, Public Information Unit, Belgrade, 16 March 2018; Cf. also Serbian PM: We Acted in European Way, Neighbors Didn't, CNN, 16. September 2015, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2015/09/16/amanpour-serbia-refugee-crisis-aleksandar-vucic-intv.cnn>; Vučić migrantima: Ovde ste uvek dobrodošli, osećajte se sigurno, *Blic*, 19 August 2015, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/vucic-migrantima-ovde-ste-uvek-dobrodosli-osecajte-se-sigurno/ncwns15>; Vučić: Neevropsko ponašanje mora da se zaustavi, *RTS*, 16 September 2015, <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/2040446/vucic-neeuropejsko-ponasanje-mora-da-se-zaustavi.html>.

⁸⁷ Beznec / Speer / Stojić Mitrović, *Governing the Balkan Route*, 56. Cf. Zoran B. Jevtović / Predrag Đ. Bajić, Slika o migrantima u diskursu dnevne štampe Srbije, in: Lutovac / Mrđa, eds, *Savremene migracije i društveni razvoj*, 97-110.

⁸⁸ Dejana J. Kostić, *Policing the Border, Producing the State. A Critical Discourse Analysis of Press Representation of Conflict on the Serbian-Hungarian Border During 'Refugee Crisis'*, in: Lutovac / Mrđa, eds, *Savremene migracije i društveni razvoj*, 111-121; Jevtović / Bajić, Slika o migrantima u diskursu dnevne štampe Srbije, 102.

⁸⁹ Vučić: Srbija neće podizati zid, makar čuskije padale s neba!, *Telegraf*, 25 October 2015, <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/politika/1819811-vucic-srbija-neze-podizati-zid-makar-cuskije-padale-s-neba>; Filip Avramović / Igor Jovanović, Serbia Will Take in Some Migrants, Vucic Says. *Balkan Insight*, 2 September 2015, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbia-to-receive-certain-number-of-migrants-pm-says-09-01-2015#sthash.s7vLCdOV.dpuf>.

⁹⁰ Gojković Turunz, *The Cooperation Between the State Institutions*, 204. Cf. Jelačić, ed, *Challenges of the Migrant-Refugee Crisis*, 15; Jevtović / Bajić, Slika o migrantima u diskursu dnevne štampe Srbije, 109.

Vučić's approach at the time was in line with the politics of the German chancellor, Angela Merkel. He was calculating his politics carefully with an eye on EU enlargement, and he capitalized on the refugee crisis.⁹¹ Accession to the European Union remains a strategic goal for the Republic of Serbia, but it involves compliance with European values and standards, and not least respect for human rights. A strategic legislatively and institutionally sound migration policy seemed particularly important for furthering the accession process.⁹²

The benchmarks had been set by the EU. In the midst of the crisis, in July 2016, Serbia formally opened Chapters 23 and 24, which deal with issues of human rights and anti-discrimination. The Serbian Ministry of the Interior has been negotiating Chapter 24 with the EU, and the action plan for its implementation covers topics such as migration, asylum, visa policy, external borders, and the Schengen regime (in which border controls are dropped).⁹³ Already, following the closure of the Balkan route, Serbia began receiving financial support from the EU to cover the migrants' basic needs at the collective centres: health services, clothing, food, water, child-friendly spaces, and informal education in things like sewing or learning the language, and so on. Indeed, between the beginning of the refugee crisis and July 2018, the EU allocated more than 25 million euros in humanitarian aid to Serbia specifically to assist refugees and migrants. Furthermore:

'Since 2015 more than € 80 million have been financed, through different EU financial mechanisms, helping Serbia to ensure the accommodation of migrants and refugees in accommodation centres; to support the delivery of health and other primary services to refugees, migrants and host communities; and to reinforce its border control capabilities.'⁹⁴

In May 2015, there were five refugee centres in Serbia, mainly serving refugees and IDPs from the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Then, as Mirjana Milenkovski from the UNHCR's public information unit explained, the state responded to the new crisis by setting up thirteen more centres, all with the help of the EU

⁹¹ El-Shaarawi / Razsa, *Movements upon Movements*, 8. Cf. Milan / Pirro, *Interwoven Destinies in the 'Long Migration Summer'*.

⁹² For details cf. Bezec / Speer / Stojić Mitrović, *Governing the Balkan Route*, 29-60.

⁹³ For the action plan for Chapter 23 cf. Republika Srbija, Pregovaračka grupa za poglavlje 23, *Akcioni plan za poglavlje 23*, Beogradski centar za bezbednosnu politiku, April 2016, http://www.bezbednost.org/upload/document/akcioni_plan_23.pdf; for Chapter 24 cf. Republika Srbija, Pregovaračka grupa za poglavlje 24, *Akcioni plan za poglavlje 24*. *Pravda, sloboda, bezbednost*, Beogradski centar za bezbednosnu politiku, 1 March 2016, http://www.bezbednost.org/upload/document/akcioni_plan_pg_24.pdf; Cf. Sonja Tošković, *The Human Rights*, 50-51; Stojić Mitrović, *Serbian Migration Policy*, 1115-1116.

⁹⁴ European Commission, Press Release, EU Announces Additional Emergency Aid to Help Refugees in Serbia, 8 October 2017, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-3730_en.htm.

and humanitarian organizations.⁹⁵ These new facilities were set up in abandoned halls, hotels, and former centres of collectives, all very quickly adapted in order to accommodate the large numbers of migrants. In March 2016, when the Balkan route was closed, around 8,000 people were stranded in Serbia. They were distributed amongst the eighteen centres. Initially the centres did not meet even 40% of the EU standards, but they improved with time. The capacity promised by the Serbian authorities in consultation with the EU was 6,000 places. By the end of 2016, this had been achieved, and, at the same time, the numbers of newcomers decreased. The UNHCR and its partners estimate that almost 7,000 refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants were present in Serbia in December 2016, with over 5,760 (82%) accommodated in governmental facilities.⁹⁶ By June 2017, the overall number had shrunk to 5,948.⁹⁷

It is worth looking at how all this was started up. In May 2015 the Serbian government established a working group for migration that included the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, the Commissariat for Refugees (up to this point concerned only with refugees and IDPs from the former Yugoslavia), the UNHCR, and several international organizations such as Youth for Refugees. The Ministry of Internal Affairs was responsible for registering the migrants; the Ministry of Defence saw to security issues; and there was support from many individual volunteers like the imam of a nearby village, Miratovac. With all this support, the government acted quickly and professionally. The first of the new centres was established in July 2015 at Preševo in southern Serbia: it was a converted tobacco factory. The Preševo centre functioned between July 2015 and August 2018, when its inhabitants were distributed to other centres.⁹⁸

Most of the refugees have an Islamic background. Has religious affiliation played a role in the distribution of migrants in Serbia? Some of the decisions about where to build the new centres had to be made literally overnight. In Bogovađa, a village situated in the Lajkovac municipality about seventy kilometres south of Belgrade, the locals had already tried to get the first wave of Middle Eastern migrants evicted. This was in 2014. In Banja Koviljača, to the west of Bogovađa at the border with Bosnia, there had also been problems. There the number of migrants came to equal the number of local people, who

⁹⁵ Interview with Mirjana Milenkovski, UNHCR, Public Information Unit, Belgrade, 16 March 2018.

⁹⁶ UNHCR, UNHCR Serbia Update, 22-25 Dec 2016, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/52711>.

⁹⁷ UNHCR, UNHCR Serbia Update, 19-25 June 2017, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/58187>.

⁹⁸ Interview with Mirjana Milenkovski, UNHCR, Public Information Unit, Belgrade, 16 March 2018. On the situation at Preševo/Preshevë, see El-Shaarawi / Razsa, *Movements upon Movements*, 9-11.

found it troubling that many strangers arrived without registration or any recognizable official procedure.⁹⁹

Thus the decision was made to transfer the migrants to the towns of Sjenica and Tutin in Sandžak, 300 kilometres to the south of Belgrade and near the border with Montenegro and Kosovo. Vladimir Lukić, the social worker at Krnjača, believes the state purposely chose places in the south of Serbia with a Muslim majority, and he told me that there have indeed been fewer problems of assimilation there.

In practical terms, building refugee centres in Sjenica and Tutin was not an economical solution for the state, as the centres are at about 1,000 and 760 metres above sea level, with snowfall between October and March, making them expensive locations to keep heated. Their physical distance from Belgrade also complicates efficient management.¹⁰⁰ But, as Lukić maintains, this is a small price to pay for social peace: 'Muslims have it easier in Muslim environments.'¹⁰¹ Polls indeed confirm that in the municipalities of Sjenica, Tutin (and also Preševo), all areas with a Muslim majority, the percentages of mutual acceptance are strikingly above average: 'In Sjenica 99% of the contact was positively rated, in Tutin it was 100%, and in Preševo 94%.'¹⁰² How far religion plays a role in this cannot be properly established on these data alone.

Another huge issue that demonstrates how disruptive the sudden closure of the Balkan route was, was the 'railway station case' in Belgrade. When it became clear that migrants were not going to be able to leave Serbia at all soon, the Serbian authorities launched a push to evict migrants and aid organizations from the Belgrade parks. In January 2017, between 700 and 1,000 young men, several of them unaccompanied minors, lingered on near the railway station. They did not want to go to the centres, as they were afraid that they would be registered, and that this would prevent them from applying for asylum in central and northern Europe: the countries there might send them back. The Serbian government found a way to handle the situation that avoided any major use of force. They moved most of the people from the two parks near the

⁹⁹ Meštani traže iseljenje azilanata iz Bogovađe, *Blic*, 2 November 2014, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/mestani-traze-iseljenje-azilanata-iz-bogovade/2nh03mv>; Bogovađa. Protesti zbog sve više azilanata, *Al Jazeera*, 9 November 2013, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/bogovada-protesti-zbog-sve-vise-azilanata>. Cf. Pavlović, *A Passage to Europe*, 63.

¹⁰⁰ Poleti Čosić / Petrović Trifunović, *Azilni sistem u zemljama tranzita*, 27.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Vladimir Lukić, Krnjača Asylum Centre, Krnjača, 18 March 2018. Marija Tomić from the Ana and Vlade Divac Foundation emphasized the same, based on surveys conducted by the Foundation, Informal conversation with Marija Tomić, Belgrade, 25 April 2018.

¹⁰² Ana and Vlade Divac Foundation / US Agency for International Development (USAID), *The Attitudes of Serbian Citizens Towards Refugees, Key Survey Findings*, Belgrade 2017, https://www.divac.com/upload/document/attitude_-_brochure_english_print.pdf.

central bus station to Obrenovac, some 40 kilometres southwest of Belgrade. An old military barracks was converted for their exclusive use and became the home for almost all of these men. They continue to live there, unregistered but tolerated by the state and receiving humanitarian aid, even though they have no legal status.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, in Belgrade, the state authorities restricted the activities of the non-governmental groups providing aid:

‘[A] squatted building serving as the No Border Hostel was demolished, and shortly afterwards the nearby central aid distribution facility Miksalište was torn down too. In the following period, the grassy parts of the parks where migrants used to sleep were ploughed over and fenced in.’¹⁰⁴

In sum, Serbia’s treatment of migrants and refugees has been strongly influenced by international circumstances—by the policies of neighbouring countries, and by the political decisions of the European Union and of Germany in particular. Clearly, it has been in the European Union’s interest to support Serbia in managing the stranded refugees. If the EU loses this interest, Serbia’s pragmatic approach might very well change.

A Particular Serbian Story. Migration from Iran

If international policies and EU requirements influence Serbia’s migration policies, Serbia itself has some responsibility for who comes in. The great increase in Iranian migrants to Serbia in 2018 has already been mentioned. That trend was directly linked to the abolition of the visa regime for Iran in August 2017, which made Serbia the only country in mainland Europe to offer Iranians visa-free travel.¹⁰⁵ The Serbian government says this move was made for economic reasons, but many doubt this and see it as a reward for Iran’s support for Serbia’s case in Kosovo.¹⁰⁶

Serbia’s Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications, under Rasim Ljajić, has confirmed that in the first seven months of 2018 a total of 15,855 Iranians visited Serbia. Of these, more than 1,500 expressed an ‘intention to seek asylum’. An unknown number then proceeded to the EU, and a lot of them

¹⁰³ Interview with Mirjana Milenkovski, UNHCR, Public Information Unit, Belgrade, 16 March 2018.

¹⁰⁴ For details cf. Bezec / Speer / Stojić Mitrović, *Governing the Balkan Route*, 58.

¹⁰⁵ Srbija ukida vize za državljane Indije i Irana.

¹⁰⁶ Gedošević, *Srbija je ukinula vize*; Veliki poslovni forum Srbija. Iran šansa za naše građevinarstvo, tekstilce, drvnu industriju, *Blic*, 21 June 2018, <https://www.blic.rs/biznis/veliki-poslovni-forum-srbija-iran-sansa-za-nase-gradevinarstvo-tekstilce-drvnu/kcv6k9q>; ‘Iran mora da ulaže u srpsku privredu, a njima fale auto-delovi’, *b92*, 27 February 2018, https://www.b92.net/biz/vesti/srbija.php?yyyy=2018&mm=02&dd=27&nav_id=1363472.

emerged as migrants in Bosnia on their way.¹⁰⁷ Between January and September 2018, the number of Iranians entering Bosnia was more than a hundred times higher than the figure for the entire previous year. According to data gathered by Bosnia's Foreigners' Affairs Service, sixteen Iranians requested asylum in 2017; in 2018, up to September, the number was 1,647. Denis Zvizdić, chairman of Bosnia's Council of Ministers, commented on the 'fake Iranian tourists' suddenly appearing: 'They come to Serbia as tourists, and then emerge in Bosnia without any identification documents.'¹⁰⁸

Shortly after the abolition of the visa in 2017, direct flights from Tehran to Belgrade were introduced, and the first Iran Air plane in twenty-seven years landed in Belgrade the following March. Two more Iranian airlines, Qeshm Air and Mahan Air, immediately followed suit. Iran Air, which is state-owned, took to operating on this route twice a week and tickets on the flights sold out several months in advance.¹⁰⁹ However, though the planes arrived full, they departed considerably emptier: 'When the number of tourists coming from Iran on arriving flights to Belgrade are compared to those returning to Tehran,' the director of Info Park, Gordan Paunović, told *The Guardian*, 'there is a 30% difference. The people who are missing on the return flights have continued their path toward [Western] Europe.'¹¹⁰

I was told that, while Info Park met most migrants in Belgrade after their arrival, the Iranians were an exception, because their recently established community in Belgrade had become strong quickly, and Serbia had become a place of opportunity for them, from which they could continue their journeys. In addition, Vladimir Lukić points out, Serbia was a budget country for them, and travelling there was comparably cheap—they did not need to spend their money on the long trip through Turkey, Greece or some other intermediate country, as migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria do. Many of them came well dressed and with lots of luggage, and were not necessarily accommodated in the migrant centres. In March 2018 there were about 500 Iranians altogether living in the centres, fifty of them in Krnjača; the others were seeing to themselves.¹¹¹ Belgrade's hostels and holiday apartments were full,

¹⁰⁷ Kamali Dehghan, 'Iran Was Like Hell'; Iranians Tourists in Serbia End Up as Migrants in Bosnia, *N1*, 7 September 2018, <http://ba.n1info.com/a283505/English/NEWS/Iranians-tourists-in-Serbia-end-up-as-migrants-in-Bosnia.html>.

¹⁰⁸ Iranians Tourists in Serbia End up as Migrants in Bosnia; cf. Mladen Lakic, Serbia Blames System's 'Abuse' for Restoring Visas for Iranians, *Balkan Insight*, 11 October 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/10/11/serbia-reinstates-visas-for-iranians-10-11-2018/>.

¹⁰⁹ Prvi direktan let Teheran-Beograd posle 27 godina pauze, *N1*, 19 March 2018, <http://rs.n1info.com/a370379/Biznis/Prvi-direktan-let-Teheran-Beograd-posle-27-godina-pauze.html>.

¹¹⁰ Dehghan, 'Iran Was Like Hell'.

¹¹¹ Interview with Vladimir Lukić, Krnjača Asylum Centre, Krnjača, 18 March 2018; Interview with Stevan Tatalović, Info Park, Belgrade, 18 March 2018.

thanks to the Iranian tourists. If they intended not to return, they got into contact with traffickers. Other migrant groups huddle together in the centres or even camp in certain parks, as in the Luka Ćelović park, near Belgrade's main railway station, nicknamed 'Afghani Park' (*Avgan Park*) by the locals. The Iranians, by contrast, made their presence known. In Knez Mihailova, Belgrade's main pedestrian boulevard, Farsi could frequently be heard. In his interview with *The Guardian*, Gordan Paunović described how

'you immediately recognise Iranians. You see Syrians, Afghans, and they all look poor. Suddenly you see a group of kids with backpacks, who look like they're on a school excursion [...] You look at them and you give them a smile and you get so many smiles back.'¹¹²

The reason for attempting to take refuge in Europe that most Iranians gave was that they were either LGBT, Christian, politically oppressed, or black-listed because they had fought for the Assad regime in Syria.¹¹³ My interlocutors confirmed that several Iranian Christians lived in the Krnjača Asylum Centre, and that most of them were converts from Islam. Their defiance of Islam was such that they would ask for pork on the menu, despite having no real desire to eat it.¹¹⁴ The *Guardian* report just mentioned tells how Amin, a 27-year-old gay Iranian, fled from Shiraz after his father reported him to the police for having sex with his partner. Amin was quoted as saying: 'I came here with nothing. In Iran, my biggest threat was my own family, not the government. Family is the biggest problem when it comes to LGBT.'¹¹⁵ For those who were fleeing from persecution, returning to Iran was not an option. Often, when Iranians arrived, it was clear how little they knew about Serbia; the only thing they knew was that they did not need a visa.¹¹⁶ But 'one way or another, they will end their journey elsewhere, outside of this country,' Vladimir Lukić insists.¹¹⁷

No consensus exists on what the number of Iranian migrants may have been during 2018. Gordan Paunović believed it to be a significantly higher number than Rasim Ljajić at the Ministry admitted. According to N1 and data that Info Park presented to the media in October 2018 (with the help of various other NGOs, and of Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency),

¹¹² Dehghan, 'Iran Was Like Hell'.

¹¹³ Interview with Stevan Tatalović, Info Park, Belgrade, 18 March 2018; Cf. Iranci u srpskoj 'igri' za ulazak u EU, *Radio Free Europe*, 26. Juni 2018, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/iran-eu-ulazak-migranti-krijum%C4%8Ddari-29318150.html>.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Vladimir Lukić, Krnjača Asylum Centre, Krnjača, 18 March 2018.

¹¹⁵ Dehghan, 'Iran Was Like Hell'.

¹¹⁶ Šabnam fon Hajn / Sanja Kljajić, Irske izbeglice zalutale u Beogradu, *Deutsche Welle*, 14 April 2018, <https://www.dw.com/sr/iranske-izbeglice-zalutale-u-beogradu/a-43378893>.

¹¹⁷ Interview with Vladimir Lukić, Krnjača Asylum Centre, Krnjača, 18 March 2018.

more than 40,000 Iranians entered Serbia after the visa requirement was lifted.¹¹⁸ Serbia received criticism about this from the European Union, and the European Council demanded that it respect EU visa policies. On 8 October 2018, the Serbian government gave in to this pressure and on 16 October it reintroduced its visa requirement for Iranians.¹¹⁹ The Serbian minister of the interior, Nebojša Stefanović, said in parliament that Iranians had ‘abused the abolition of visas’.¹²⁰

Conclusion

The response of the Serbian state to the refugee crisis was from the beginning both pragmatic and flexible. Refugees who registered and claimed an ‘intention to seek asylum’ have been allowed to stay in the reception centres for an unlimited period of time, despite the stipulations of the law, which defines them as ‘migrants in transit’. Serbia has adapted its laws so as to manage the situation—partly for its own political advantage, but to an extent out of genuine concern for the migrants. The state authorities have played an important role in containing outbreaks of racism and violence towards migrants, such as have occurred in Bulgaria and Hungary. President Aleksandar Vučić publicly denounced protests against migrants, and the media—often strongly influenced by the authorities—have largely refrained from using inflammatory language. A humanitarian approach is being enforced by autocratic means.

This has a lot to do with Serbia’s EU accession process—its strategic goal of obtaining EU membership. In July 2016, the country formally opened Chapters 23 and 24, which, along with issues of human rights and anti-discrimination, deal with migration and asylum policy. Thus, Serbia’s treatment of migrants and refugees has been influenced by EU conditionalities. Moreover, Serbia’s ‘humanitarian face’ has depended on the assumption that migration through its territory will remain temporary and transitional.

On the other hand, Serbia’s own policy has influenced incoming migration. This was especially the case when, in August 2017, Serbia offered Iranians visa-free travel. It was the first and only country in mainland Europe to make

¹¹⁸ Iranians Tourists in Serbia End Up as Migrants in Bosnia.

¹¹⁹ EU Forces Serbia to Return Visa Regime for Iranian Passport Holders, Schengen Visa Info, 11 October 2018, <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/eu-forces-serbia-to-return-visa-regime-for-iranian-passport-holders/>. Cf. Posle kritika iz EU Srbija ukinula bezvizni režim sa Iranom, *Blic*, 10 October 2018, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/posle-kritika-iz-eu-srbija-ukinula-bezvizni-rezim-sa-iranom/c8yz115>.

¹²⁰ Vlada Srbije ukinula bezvizni režim za građane Irana, *Radio Free Europe*, 10 October 2018, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29536566.html>; Odluka o prestanku važenja Odluke o ukidanju viza za ulazak u Republiku Srbiju za državljane Islamske Republike Iran, *Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije*, no. 75, 9 October 2018.

such a concession (probably because the Iranians had agreed not to recognize Kosovo). The move triggered a wave of migration from Iran in the months that followed. A significant number of Iranian 'tourists' came to Serbia visa-free but did not get on the return flights, instead becoming illegal migrants. Because of this, the Serbian government reintroduced the visa regime in October 2018.

Despite Serbia's deficient asylum system and the limited institutional and infrastructural capacities it had at the beginning of the refugee crisis, the country has opted for a policy of open borders. Its political discourse and its handling of the crisis can, on the whole, be assessed as positive. Numerous non-governmental and civil society organizations have played an important role in this achievement. They have been indispensable partners in tackling the migration problem.

Personal contacts and interactions between local populations and the migrants has been very limited. However, many Serbian citizens help by donating food and equipment; and flare-ups of conflict are comparatively rare. An analysis of opinions expressed in the Serbian media shows that the transitory character of the migrant community is key here: so long as the migrants are perceived as people who will not stay permanently, they are relatively well accepted.

A really exemplary achievement has been the enrolment of migrant children in schools. Since February 2017, almost all the migrant children in greater Belgrade have been attending seven selected primary schools and have been successfully integrated into the formal education system. Many teachers have shown extraordinary devotion and engagement in managing this. The efforts made seem to be governed by a widespread talent for improvisation, born out of notorious deficits in systematic planning. It is this that has made the teachers so capable of informal yet efficient help.

Last but not least, one reason for the relatively warm acceptance of the migrants by the local population is the lack of a fully-fledged welfare system. In Serbia, there is not much cause for jealousy and mistrust as it exists in richer countries, since there is no social security system which local people might accuse the refugees of infiltrating, and there is no labour market to engender fears that migrants might take over local jobs for less money under worse conditions.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Armina Galijaš Centre for Southeast European Studies, Schubertstrasse 21/1, 8010 Graz, Austria.
E-mail: armina.galijas@uni-graz.at