



BELGRADE, SERBIA

A Case Study of Refugees in Towns

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Source: Lazara Marinković

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About the RIT Project

This report is a case study of Refugees in Towns (RIT), a research project that aims to promote understanding of migrant and refugee experiences with integration—both formal and informal—in urban settings in the U.S. and around the world. Our case studies are ground in local knowledge. They are designed, conducted, and written by refugees and locals, capturing their voices and the perspectives of the communities in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen, and is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University. It is funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

Our goals are twofold

1. First, by gathering a range of case studies we are amassing a global data base that will help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant and refugee integration. These cases reveal global differences and similarities in the factors that enable and obstruct integration, and the different ways in which migrants and hosts perceive, co-exist, adapt, and struggle with integration. We draw our case studies from towns in resettlement countries (e.g. the United States); transit countries (e.g. Greece), and countries of first asylum (e.g. Lebanon). Our long-term goal is to build a global, grounded theory of integration.
2. Second, the RIT project seeks to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy and practice. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

Why now?

The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policies through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. and globally are responding in a range of different ways: some are resisting national policy changes by declaring themselves to be “sanctuary cities,” while others are supporting travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we need deeper understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, other migrants, and their hosts interact. Local perspectives on these processes are not well represented in the scholarship on integration: our RIT project seeks to draw on—and give voice to—both refugee and host communities in their experiences with integration around the world.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case study reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world. Keep in touch: we regularly release more reports as our case study projects develop. There is also more information available about RIT’s researchers, goals, practical local outcomes, and theoretical analyses.

www.refugeesintowns.org

Location



Introduction

Before 2015, the prevailing representation of irregular migration to the European Union concerned the Mediterranean migration routes, but in the summer of 2015, the focus shifted to the Balkan Route (Beznec *et al.* 2016, p.4). The corridor established in early summer 2015 led to large groups of refugees and migrants becoming stranded in Serbia – often sleeping in parks in Belgrade. This case study looks at the legal status, social, and economic life, and opportunities of migrants and refugees two years later, in Belgrade, Serbia. Our findings are a result of five months of field research conducted during the summer and fall of 2017, and draw on one author’s experience with humanitarian service provision at an aid center in Belgrade. The report is based on interviews with local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), government representatives, and conversations with refugees and migrants currently residing in Belgrade.

In the first section, we explain the methodology behind the research, present the challenges and

limitations, and define key terms. The second section gives an overview of the refugee situation in Serbia; we explain why Belgrade has been a focal point for refugees transiting through the Balkans, where these refugees have resided, and how they receive protection according to their legal status. The next section outlines how the refugee population in Belgrade is changing, their economic activity, relationships with the local population, and the shift in attitudes of Belgrade’s citizens with implications for the future of refugees and migrants in Serbia. Then we elaborate the urban impact of refugees and the economic, social, cultural, and political factors that affect the lives of migrants in Belgrade. The last section tries to foresee the future of integration and calls for improvements in Serbian law and policies, including the creation of legal categories to define the status of migrants in order to ensure the human rights and safety of both refugees and their host communities.

Methodology

This report is based on research during the summer and fall of 2017, when both authors were in Belgrade. We conducted interviews with the staff of 15 NGOs involved in the humanitarian response before and after the closure of the Balkan Route, and with government representatives, academics, journalists, political leaders, and representatives of nonprofit organizations in Belgrade. We engaged in participant observation in the Krnjača and Obrenovac asylum centers and at Refugee Aid Miksalište, the space where migrants gather, socialize, and connect with NGOs in the center of Belgrade. This approach allowed us to engage in informal conversations with refugees and migrants that provided us with insights to their experiences and the challenges

they face in Serbia. Quantitative data from a range of studies and memos from NGO and government representatives were analyzed and included in this report. We also produced a map, based on ethnographic observation and participation, which shows the areas in Belgrade where refugees are clustered.

The Institutional Review Board (Tufts University) approval for this research was obtained in May 2017 by Marina Lažetić as the Principal Investigator.

Interview Sampling Chart

Research participants and key informants	Men	Women
<p>Number of individual research participants: N=47</p> <p>Migrant participants were from: Serbia (24), Afghanistan (11), Nigeria (2), Algeria (2), Syria (1), South Sudan (1), Pakistan (2), Iraq (4).</p> <p>The migrants' education levels varied from some high school to university degree.</p> <p>Serbian participants were representatives of the government or local or international nonprofits, and held a university degree.</p>	27	20
Age range	20-58	22-55
<p>Number of key informants</p> <p>Main organizations of key informants: Catholic Relief Services; Čovekoljublje; Initiative for Development and Cooperation; UNHCR Serbia; ADRA Serbia; Grupa 484; Refugee Aid Miksalište; Mikser Association; Oxfam Serbia; Danish Refugee Council; International Organization for Migration; ATINA Serbia; Belgrade Center for Human Rights; Commissariat for Refugees; Asylum Protection Center APC / CZA</p>	6	18

Field Research Challenges and Limitations

The research faced numerous challenges. The migrants in Serbia have been moved around the country several times as the government closes down informal settlements and transfers migrants and refugees into government-provided centers. Our initial research design included participant observation in informal settlements and Refugee Aid Miksalište, but a day prior to beginning the field research, the informal settlements were knocked down and all migrants were transferred to Obrenovac or Krnjača asylum centers outside of Belgrade. Acquiring permits to enter these centers was difficult, which limited our access. Migrants were suspicious of outsiders, and tended to stay away from places like Miksalište for the first part of the summer due to the increased police presence and fear of being placed in an asylum or reception center far from the city center. We spent more time than expected visiting asylum centers outside the city and meeting migrants through chain-referral

for informal conversations. For the last month of our field research (September 2017), we were able to obtain the permits to enter the two reception centers in Belgrade, where we spoke to more migrants and collected additional information from those who had lived in informal settlements before their closure.

Teodora's position as a humanitarian worker within Refugee Aid Miksalište represented both a challenge and an advantage. Given that she has worked with migrants and refugees in Belgrade since October 2016, her experience and knowledge allowed for an in-depth analysis of the current situation and challenges faced by migrants in Serbia. Her connections with local NGOs, the Commissariat for Refugees, and migrants themselves added depth to the research. The challenge was that her position as a humanitarian worker created assumptions from key informants about the reasons she was doing the research, and at times limited the amount of information they were willing to share. Teodora did her best to be transparent with respondents. Additionally, her personal relationships with migrants and aid

workers, as well as her own experience working in Belgrade presented a possible bias. Working as a team, we consciously tried to understand and address how Teodora's position effected our findings.

Marina's position as an "outsider" mitigated some of these challenges, but brought others. As an American-educated researcher and a visiting researcher at the Belgrade Center for Security Policy, she faced difficulties positioning herself in the field, and explaining her interest in the region and the topic. Her experience growing up in the Balkans and experiencing internal displacement during the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina allowed her to establish strong relationships with migrants and empathize with the issues they are facing on a personal level. Her outsider perspective also allowed her to engage with government officials and nonprofit organizations on sensitive topics such as disagreements over humanitarian operations (a cause of friction between the government and NGOs). These topics would have been off limits to an insider practitioner with a stake in those disagreements, but were accessible to an outsider academic.

A Note on Terminology

Serbian law does not have separate categories for migrants and refugees, and there is no legal category for individuals who cross the border illegally and decide not to apply for asylum. In the absence of legal provisions, there is often confusion about the terminology used for different categories of migrants. Most of our research participants spoke about three categories of people: those who enter Serbia illegally and do not register or apply for asylum - "migrants" (*migranti*), those who express the intent or apply for asylum - asylum seekers (*tražioc azila*), and those who received asylum - asylees (*azilanti*). The general public uses blanket terms to refer to either migrants or refugees. Because we have noticed differences in treatment and opportunities as well as the choices they make, in this report we make a distinction between migrants and refugees (both asylum seekers and asylees). We make this distinction because migrants in Serbia have no regulated legal status, while asylum seekers do. Only a very small number of people receive asylum in Serbia, so we do not treat asylees as a separate category.

Overview of Refugees in Serbia

Since 2014, more than 920,000 migrants and refugees have transited through Serbia (European Commission, 2017b, p.1). Before the closure of the Balkan Route (see Box and Map) most continued their journey to Western Europe in less than 72 hours. After the closure, the average stay extended from a couple of weeks in 2015 to over a year by the summer of 2017 as migrants became stuck at border crossings and then made their way to Serbian towns. Our interviews suggest migrants have little interest in settling in Serbia, because

of poor economic opportunities, a lower standard of living than the rest of Europe, a complicated asylum process, and lack of good integration approaches.

The number of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants in Serbia declined in early 2017, and stabilized during the summer (UNHCR, 2017). By June 2017, there were fewer than 7,000 migrants in Serbia, of whom over 40% had been present longer than six months, and 20% for over a year.

Box 1: Western Balkan Route

The Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia) has extensive experience with refugees both during and after the armed conflict and widespread violence associated with the dissolution of Yugoslavia (1991-2001). Possibly motivated by their experiences and empathy for the migrants, the Western Balkan countries initially facilitated the movement of asylum seekers to Western Europe, but the closure of borders of the EU Member States restricted this movement. Passage through Serbia to Hungary and later through Croatia and Slovenia, known as the Balkan Route, was closed in March 2016, leaving migrants “stuck” in Serbia and FYR Macedonia (see map).

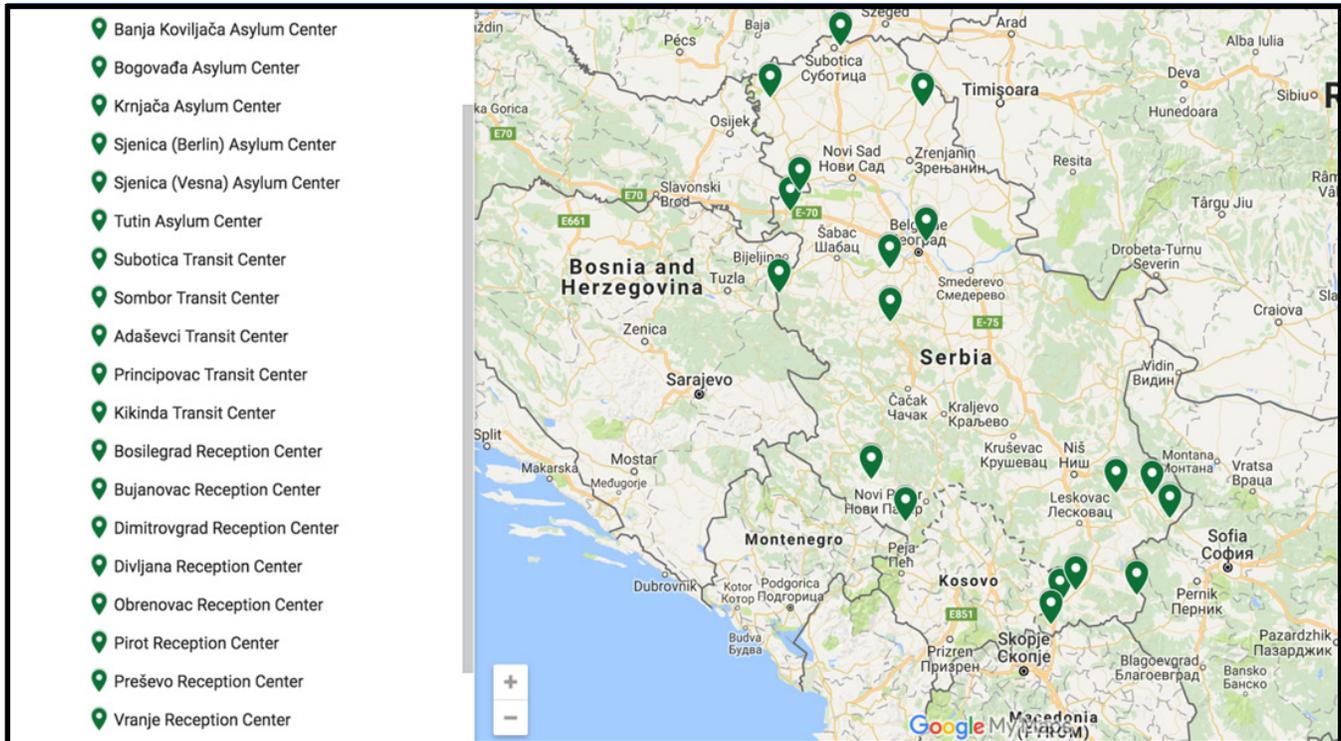


The Balkan route pre-March 2016.

However, September 2017 saw an increase in arrivals. According to one NGO, there were 954 new arrivals in September 2017 alone (Praxis, 2017). These numbers are based on the people to whom Praxis provided services that month, which means that the actual number is much higher. It is difficult to explain the increase in arrivals, but NGO representatives believe at least some are a result of illegal returns and border pushbacks from Bulgaria and Hungary. Of the registered migrants in the country, 95% have not applied for asylum but only expressed their intention to seek asylum. In September 2017, Serbia had five asylum centers,

five reception centers, and eight reception centers (See Box 2 Asylum and Reception Centers in Serbia).

Box 2: Asylum, Transit And Reception Centers In Serbia



[Click to view in Google Maps](#)

Overview of Refugees in Belgrade

Initially, in 2015, the citizens of Belgrade responded warmly to the refugees, whose suffering reminded them of their own struggles during the war, when many Serbians had themselves been displaced, and people from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina had sought asylum in Serbia. Belgrade citizens brought clothes, shoes, food, hygiene items, and other goods to the parks where large numbers of migrants gathered. In August 2015, a cultural center in Savamala neighborhood called Mikser House launched a public campaign to collect donations for humanitarian aid. Miksalište humanitarian center was opened, followed by Info Park, which provided assistance in city parks.

Many migrants lived in informal arrangements near the center of Belgrade. The government tried to move them into reception centers, but most refused to leave as they preferred proximity to the city center and to smugglers. For example, some 1,500 migrants lived behind the train station in the barracks that have previously been used by Roma communities. As migrants stayed longer in Belgrade's city center, health and security problems arose. Harsh winter conditions at the beginning of 2017 (temperatures below -16°C , or 3.2°F) created hazards for migrants living outdoors or in non-weatherized shelters. Government officials were also concerned about outbreaks of body lice and substance abuse. Fights and

robberies involving migrants and local smugglers increased, making the local population nervous. Additionally, among the activists from different European countries who volunteered in Belgrade, there were anarchists who moved into the barracks and organized political actions such as hunger strikes and refused to leave the barracks per government orders. Since the dissolution of the barracks, migrants in Serbia have not been politically active, but if their legal status remains unresolved, political activity is likely to resume in the future.

Municipal and Commissariat for Refugees' attempts to move this group out of the city failed until January 2017 when harsh winter weather combined with inadequate living conditions in the barracks forced some migrants to accept the government's offer to move out. This marked the first wave of relocations out of the city center: migrants who agreed to move were scattered to different asylum and reception centers across Serbia. The relocations were completed in May 2017, when the barracks were demolished to create space for a new development project called "Belgrade Waterfront," and the migrants who lived in the barracks were relocated to Krnjača and Obrenovac.

Today the government provides official accommodation for refugees in Krnjača and Obrenovac reception centers, in municipalities of the same name on the periphery of Belgrade. In the summer of 2017, these two centers housed 1,338 migrants and refugees, who commute to the city center daily using public transportation (UNHCR, 2017). In addition, some 350 migrants stay in the area around the main train and bus station, often sleeping outdoors in city parks such as Luke Čelovića, known to the locals as "Afghani park." These numbers are higher in reality, because UNHCR reports are based on official counts, which often exclude hidden or unregistered people.

Refugee Aid Miksalište, located in this area, provides unofficial accommodation for newly arrived families with children and for unaccompanied minors while they wait to be

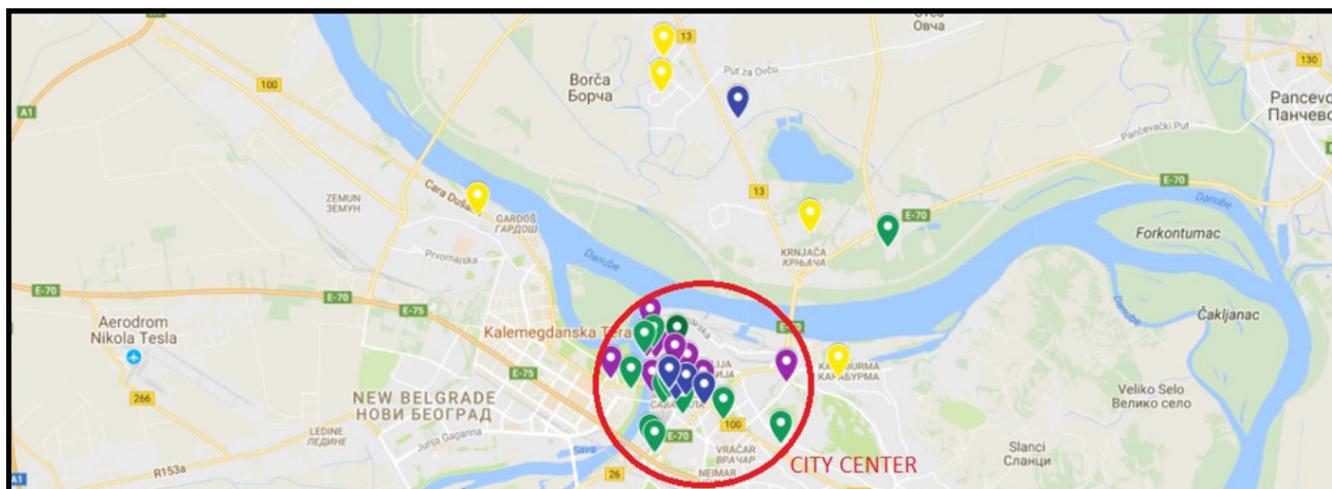
moved to asylum and reception centers across the country. Smaller groups gather around the bus station, sleeping on the streets for a couple of weeks before they move to centers or try to cross the border.

As complaints from the host community increased, the Serbian government began to blame the NGOs for migrants not registering or staying in government provided centers. The Ministry of Labor banned humanitarian aid distribution outside of government asylum and reception centers in fall 2016. Since then, the state has gained control of aid distribution, and all EU funds now go directly to the government, instead of national and international NGOs. Refugees have moved to official asylum and reception centers run by the Commissariat for Refugees (KIRS) and the Ministry of Labor. NGOs now operate out of these centers, providing humanitarian aid and services. In Belgrade, KIRS mobile teams aided by NGOs, bring refugees from the streets of Belgrade to the centers. We witnessed increasing cooperation between the state and civil society through 2017.

By September 2017, most migrants and refugees in Serbia lived in government provided centers, since they are free, and generally safer than living in the city. Official government policy was initially to allow individuals who expressed interest in seeking asylum in Serbia to stay at the centers, but the policy changed to allow all migrants and refugees access to free food and accommodation. Besides humanitarian considerations, this policy change was motivated by security concerns: it was deemed safer for both migrants and the host population if aid and the movement of all migrants could be monitored. In Belgrade especially, there were frequent fights between migrants and disturbances reported to the police by locals who became increasingly impatient with the lengthening wait period following regional border closures.

Mapping the Refugee Population

Box 3: Belgrade Neighborhoods Where Refugees Were Clustered, Summer/Fall 2017



[Click to view in Google Maps](#)

Serbian Government Policy and Asylum

Serbia, and Belgrade in particular, has been praised by the EU for the management of the refugee “crisis” (European Commission, 2017b). As an EU candidate country since 2012, Serbia has committed to cooperation and regional stability, and the EU has provided Serbia with humanitarian and financial support for managing migration. In July 2016, during negotiations on Chapter 24—which includes asylum and migration related provisions—the EU defined Serbia as a key partner in finding a sustainable solution to the migrant crisis. The Serbian government has taken the official position that refugees do not want asylum in Serbia, so migrants traveling through the country are officially treated as temporary residents.

Serbia lacks a coherent migration strategy, despite its constitutional commitments. Article 57 of the Constitution guarantees the right to asylum, through the Law on Asylum, the Law on Foreigners, the Law on Migration Management, and the General Administrative Procedure Act, and the Administrative Disputes Act. The current Law on Asylum was adopted in 2007. The Ministry of

the Interior has drafted a new asylum law expected to be adopted by the end of 2017, however, changes in EU regulations related to migration might delay this, as Serbia would then need to redraft its new migration law and allow time for it to be approved by the EU and domestic governing bodies.

Competent government institutions involved in the asylum system are the Asylum Office, the Foreigners Administration, the Asylum Commission, the Administrative Court, the Commissariat for Refugees, the Working Group for Solving Problems of Mixed Migration Flows, the Center for Social Work and Local Magistrates Courts (Belgrade Center for Human Rights 2017, p.15-17). The Asylum Office (Ministry of the Interior) is in charge of the first instance procedure. Asylum seekers must express their intention to seek asylum upon arrival at the border or inside the country. Both asylum seekers and asylees (persons granted asylum) are entitled to healthcare, shelter in an asylum center, an asylum ID, free primary education, social assistance, and freedom of movement within Serbia.

Only a small number of people have actually received asylum in Serbia. When the request for asylum is submitted, the next step is an interview

which begins the first instance procedure and refugee status determination. Asylum applications are rejected either because migrants are categorized as economic migrants, or because they had previously been in a safe third country and thus are considered to have had the opportunity to ask for asylum there. The list of safe third countries issued by the Serbian government in 2009 includes all countries that border Serbia. Thus, a migrant coming through these border countries will not qualify for asylum -- only if he or she arrives by airplane, which is not likely because Serbia lacks direct flight connections with most countries of origin (Asylum Information Database 2017). These legal difficulties mean migrants generally avoid applying for asylum, resulting in

a limited ability for humanitarian agencies or the government to find and protect vulnerable people.

NGOs are filling the gaps where the government bodies fail to accelerate the asylum procedure. According to Asylum Protection Center (APC/CZA), only 164 people submitted request for asylum, out of 3,830 who have expressed the intention to seek asylum in 2017 (Asylum Protection Center, 2017). This is a serious concern given that almost 2,000 migrants in Serbia are unaccompanied minors. UNHCR provides free legal aid and information through partnerships with local organizations and monitors implementation of the 1951 Convention. In 2016, only 42 people were granted asylum in Serbia (Belgrade Center for Human Rights, 2017), of which 25 supported by UNHCR partners (UNHCR Serbia, 2017). In 2017, asylum has only been granted to two men, one from Syria and one from Afghanistan (Rudic, 2017).



"Afghani Park," refugees moving from barracks to camps in May 2017 (Marinković, 2017).

Migrants whose asylum application is rejected can appeal the decision. This is a long process, but it allows a migrant to stay legally. If asylum is denied, migrants are usually not able to return to their home countries either because they are not safe or because Serbia lacks diplomatic relationships with their origin country's government. The EU has not defined its own migration policy, and given that Serbia is not a member of the EU, movement of migrants to EU countries is also not a likely possibility. Therefore, the vast majority of migrants remain in Serbia "illegally" as the current law does not offer "tolerated stay" as legal protection status as do some of the EU member states including Germany and Austria.

The Urban Impact

Economic activity has increased, mostly in the informal sector, in neighborhoods such as Savamala and Zeleni Venac where migrants reside, socialize, and trade with other migrants and the local population. Restaurants selling *halal* food in Savamala have increased their earnings.

Some fast food restaurants on Kamenička Street have signs in Arabic and Farsi stating that they sell *halal* food. Refugees sell and buy clothes and other items; for example, fake Nike sneakers manufactured in China or Turkey and smuggled in by Serbian traders are popular with refugees.

Since November 2016 when the government stopped NGOs from distributing humanitarian aid outside government reception and asylum centers, migrants and refugees are obliged to buy many essentials from commercial shops (even though some nonprofit organizations continue to distribute aid clandestinely).

Impact on Services

Full access to education, health services, and other social and welfare programs is officially limited to those who receive asylum status. However most migrants do not have legal status and are hoping to continue their journey to Europe. As their stay has lengthened, migrants are changing their minds about asylum seeking and participation in government and NGO provided programs. Many families and individuals that initially rejected NGO-provided aid and accommodation in government provided centers changed their minds after several months and decided to enter asylum procedures so they can get access to aid. However, the number of migrants who decide to stay in Serbia still remains pretty low. Numerous NGOs visit the reception and asylum centers and fill in the gaps where the government is not able to help, including provision of basic humanitarian aid, internet access for contacting families in source countries and abroad, medical aid, legal assistance with asylum applications, and English or Serbian language lessons.

While some reception and asylum centers have their own medical center, there are no treatment facilities in the Krnjača and Obrenovac centers in Belgrade. Some NGOs with mobile teams of doctors and nurses providing health services in Belgrade are Real Medicine Foundation (RMF), Doctors without Borders (MSF), and Doctors of the World (MDM). Some NGOs or International Organization for Migration drive people in government centers to community health centers, or the MSF clinic on Gavrića Principa Street, or to one of the state hospitals in the area. Refugee women give birth in the maternity hospital, “GAK

Narodni front,” where most babies are delivered in Belgrade.

Access to schools has been difficult for migrants and refugees. At the beginning of the crisis, many parents and unaccompanied minors did not express interest in school enrollment as they assumed that they would be continuing their journey soon. For this reason, access to formal education was not a priority and efforts went toward informal education and providing basic language and math classes for children who were not able to enroll in public schools. By 2017 however, as migrants and refugees realized they would have to stay in Serbia, parents applied for asylum and started advocating for their children to join the formal education system.

As of September 2017, around 700 migrant children have started formal education in Serbia, of which 130 started schooling in Belgrade’s 12 elementary schools in Palilula Municipality (UNICEF, 2017). Each grade level in Belgrade schools has several separate classes, and migrants are dispersed among them so that each class only has a few individuals enrolled. It is still unclear how long these children will stay in schools as their legal status remains unresolved. All classes are in Serbian, which presents a major obstacle to learning. However, enrollment offers a long-term benefit of allowing children to learn Serbian, and increases their capacity for economic and social integration. NGOs and volunteers help arrange daily transportation. Migrants who work as mediators in NGOs help communicate issues and complaints to the school. Migrant enrollment in schools is often met by resistance from the local population, so advocates for migrants and refugees and NGOs have begun work on highlighting positive examples of youth integration. (See Box 4).

Shifting Demographics

Since the beginning of the migration crisis, the demographics of migrants transiting through Serbia have drastically changed. Before the Balkan

Box 4: A young refugee artist

Farhad Nouri, a ten-year-old refugee known as “Little Picasso,” has been presented in the media as a positive example of integration (Zorthian, 2017). Nouri lives in Krnjača camp with his parents and two brothers, and has been recognized for his artistic talents and is often interviewed by local TV and radio stations. Local NGOs and the government have been supporting Nouri and his family, who recently organized an exhibition of his work in a local cafe. Although there were minor complaints from other refugees about the special treatment the family receives, Nouri’s exhibition has been welcomed by the local population and has helped soften some of the division lines between migrants and locals.

Route closure, the record number of migrants arriving in Greece impacted all of the countries along the route as migrants sought to re-enter the EU through the Hungary and Croatia borders with Serbia. In 2015, the region recorded 764,000 irregular border crossings (Frontex, 2017). The top-ranking nationality was Syrian, followed by Iraqis and Afghans. At the beginning of the crisis, most refugees in Serbia were middle class, educated Syrian families transiting through the Balkans to Western Europe. After the closure of the Balkan Route, most of the migrants and refugees who remain “stuck” in Serbia are of lower economic status, mostly single men from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Algeria, Morocco, Somalia, Syria, and Tunisia. Some 2,000 migrants are unaccompanied minors. However, arrivals in September 2017 show a demographic shift to families from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria (Praxis, 2017).

Migrants who can afford to rent their own rooms and apartments often live in hostels or apartments around the main train and bus station. Those who want to stay in Serbia and apply for asylum (most do not, because Serbia has low living standards compared to Europe) tend to find private accommodation, often paying higher rents than the local population. Even with help from organizations to find private apartments, their search is difficult. Migrants report that smugglers often rent apartments in the city after being expelled from government centers.

Belgrade is a vibrant and rapidly growing capital city, with recent foreign investment and new development projects in the city center and surrounding neighborhoods. Migrants and refugees tend to find housing in lower income



A resident of the barracks eats his only meal for the day (Marinković, 2017).

areas, such as Krnjača and Obrenovac (where the two reception centers are), just outside the city center. However, these municipalities are isolated with few social activities, and most migrants and refugees commute to the city center to spend time in upscale areas such as Knez Mihailova Street (the main promenade in the city), Sava Promenada, Savamala, and Dorćol. Migrants move around the city, staying in informal settings in warmer months and moving to government centers in the winter.

Economic Activity and Livelihoods

Most of the people who are now in Belgrade started their journey to Europe before March 2016 when the borders closed, and by the time they

reached Serbia they had run out of money. They need money for food and basic needs (including cigarettes — and to pay smugglers, as many are still attempting to leave Serbia. Asylum applicants have to wait nine months before they receive their work permit, and a very small number have been approved. The main sources of income for migrants are cash cards (which registered migrants receive from Čovekoljublje, a charity); money from abroad (received via Western Union); and savings in cash (brought from home) (Passey, 2017, p.23). Trade in humanitarian aid items is also a source of income, particularly in the area around Krnjača reception center and Kamenička street where refugees interact and trade with the local Roma population. Cash cards are distributed in asylum centers once a month, but some migrants miss this distribution and complain that this is unfair. Money from abroad comes from family and friends in home countries, planned destination countries, or other countries where migrants' personal connections have emigrated. Receiving money from Western Union is illegal without government issued documents, which makes it difficult for refugees and migrants to receive funds, so they often ask foreign volunteers to receive money for them. These volunteers, who stay in Serbia for short periods (days or weeks), often agree to receive the money on their behalf; this makes the migrants harder to track as they leave the country.

Those who receive asylum and a work permit are entitled to receive government assistance if they work. However, most refugees do not benefit from this assistance. A few find employment with local

or international NGOs as cultural mediators and translators, but lack of employment opportunities means some resort to reselling humanitarian aid on the street to support themselves and their families. Donors send new packaged goods, which are distributed in government centers, and in NGO centers (in smaller amounts, for people sleeping outside the government centers). Humanitarian workers want people who need new clothes to get them, but they also tolerate reselling of donated goods, as that is one of the only ways migrants can make money. However, this practice creates suspicion towards refugees among the host population about the authenticity of refugees' needs. Migrants without a work permit sometimes find jobs in local fast food restaurants.



Parking in "Afghani park" (Marinković, 2017).

The Refugee Experience

Interactions with Local Populations

Until 2015, Serbia had not experienced a refugee influx from the Middle East; its experience of

displacement was from the former Yugoslavia. Krnjača reception center in Belgrade, for example, was established in 1992 to host Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and later Kosovo, referred to as the "old" (*stare izbeglice*) or "our" (*naše izbeglice*) refugees by the local population,

government officials, and NGOs. After two decades of living in Krnjača center, these IDPs moved out in 2016, when the Ana and Vlade Divac Foundation provided new apartments for them. They were replaced with “new” (*nove izbeglice*) refugees from the Middle East.

The citizens of Belgrade have responded to the “new” refugees differently. At first, locals saw their presence as the outcome of a humanitarian crisis in which refugees were temporarily stopping in Belgrade to rest and recover before continuing their journey to Western Europe. However, as refugees stayed on, local attitudes became more negative. The main concerns are religious differences, fear of terrorism, and competition for jobs. After migrants were moved from the city center to reception and asylum centers on the periphery, there were fewer daily interactions between migrants and hosts and this has negatively affected the “humanization” of migrants in the public eye. In smaller towns in Serbia, the media report higher level of robberies and public order disturbances involving refugee and migrant populations.



Afghani Park (Marinković, 2017).

Migrants also interact more with the local Roma population, trading goods and services particularly around the informal Roma settlement next to the Krnjača center. Migrants complain about the Roma stealing things but many, particularly unaccompanied minors, go to the Roma communities in search of alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, and prostitutes. This is a sensitive issue as trafficking has been historically associated with the Roma, and there are concerns that trafficking can be exacerbated by the presence of migrants and smugglers in Krnjača. The interaction between refugee and Roma children is noticeable in elementary schools, where they go to the same classes.

The attitudes of the local population are strongly influenced by media representations of refugees. Serbian media have been broadly welcoming, however in the past year security incidents involving migrants are reported more often, which adds to the souring of local attitudes. These security incidents have incited far-right and anti-immigration groups to mobilize the local population to sign petitions and organize against relocations of migrants and openings of asylum centers in smaller border towns, making integration efforts difficult. While migrant-host relations in Belgrade are still generally positive, reports of security incidents and resistance from the local populations are much more common in these towns. Refugees in smaller towns live in asylum centers with fewer services. Nonprofit representatives we spoke with reported that locals in small Serbian towns were uneasy with groups of young migrant men walking around the town or spending time in local bars. Alcohol and drug abuse is becoming more common in these places due to idleness in asylum centers.

Conclusion

While the Serbian government awaits instructions from the EU on how to handle the current situation, relations between the local population and

migrants are becoming increasingly tense, with incidents in and outside asylum and reception centers, and increased complaints from the host

communities about disturbances. Lack of legal provisions limit advocacy efforts that seek to protect migrants and educate local populations, causing further division between migrants and their host communities. Laws and policies are applied and implemented differently across the country at the expense of protections of migrants, representing a violation of human rights and security risks for the migrants and their hosts.

For most refugees, having a defined legal status and a secure, well-paid job are the most desirable aspects of integration, although some refugees who stay in Serbia will probably agree to work for smaller salary, if they get a good opportunity. However, the Serbian labor market is underdeveloped, wages are already low, and unemployment is very high (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2017), making economic integration unlikely.

Refugees started their journey with high expectations, motivated by information from friends and family abroad, but this information quickly becomes out of date and their goals are changing as they stay in Serbia longer. On the other hand, the impatience and the fears of the local populations are being leveraged by radical far-right movements, organizations, and parties. Since the summer of 2017 several events and public debates have been organized by newly established anti-immigration movements in Belgrade. Radical far-right movements and political parties have been mobilizing local populations in smaller towns to protest openings of reception and asylum centers and demand deportations of migrants. One such initiative resulted in closure of a reception center in Šid, a town bordering Croatia. Several anti-immigration Facebook groups have become anti-immigration movements, and both new and older, well-established, far-right movements in Serbia have established or strengthened their connections with the European far-right. Increased far-right activity and organizing threatens to destabilize the social and political fabric of Serbian society, and there is potential to derail its EU integration process should the migrant situation remain unresolved for much longer.

To end on a positive note: there has been some inclusion of refugee children in the Serbian school system. Serbia has a good education system: many Serbian students who emigrate to Western Europe or America do well academically. This education system will benefit refugee children, many of whom already speak some Serbian after only a brief stay in country. Children adapt more easily than adults and develop strong connections with the local populations, and the enrollment of migrant children in Serbian schools this year, we believe, improves their integration prospects, should their families stay in Serbia.

The Future of Integration in Belgrade

Most migrants in Serbia do not have legal status, and integration is primarily concerned with access to rights and services rather than inclusion of migrants and refugees in social, cultural, and economic life in Serbia. In discussions with government representatives and NGOs involved with migrants, “integration” is used to describe a variety of activities – from launching arts and crafts workshops and Serbian language classes, to inclusion in the Serbian labor market. Most integration projects focus on social activities at the asylum and reception centers in the hope of addressing the idleness and boredom that lead to problems for migrants, the local population, and political leadership.

The initial influx of refugees stimulated economic activity in depressed towns across the country and neighborhoods in Belgrade, but their extended stay is being felt more deeply both by migrant and host communities. Government agencies, such as the Commissariat for Refugees, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy, as well as NGOs are investing significant energy and resources in supporting local communities to build or renew shelter space for refugees. One such renovation is the old military quarter in Obrenovac which is now turned into a reception center hosting migrants who previously lived in informal settlements in

Belgrade's city center. The possibility of long term stay raises questions related to labor market access for refugees and migrants, security, and the ability and willingness of migrant populations to integrate into Serbian society.

Our informal conversations with migrants and refugees showed that they still do not see their future in Serbia. Even people applying for asylum claim that they just want to be safe in Serbia for a couple of years before they continue their journey. They hope that the "crisis" mentality will end and that border authorities will become more tolerant

of legal and irregular crossings. In 2015 and 2016, most migrants wanted to get to Germany or Austria, but by late 2016 and in 2017 many believed Germany will not accept them. Refugees and migrants rely on their social connections when planning for the future, and these connections change their desired destination countries. By the end of summer 2017 most said that France is now their preferred destination, because France represents a country with high living standards and multiculturalism, and there are pre-existing connections to family and friends. Increasingly, the smuggler routes now lead through Italy to France.

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[A note from the authors: Officially, the rate is %15,9, but in reality it is much higher, since politicians manipulate these numbers.]

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Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

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