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Joint Annual Report on Asylum/Migration Practice and Discrimination Challenges in Serbia in 2018



LOVE
Law, Order, Values

Pravo, Red, Vrednosti, za migrante/azilante/ljude kojima je dodeljen azil
u ostvarivanju svojih prava bez diskriminacije



APC/CZA
ASYLUM PROTECTION CENTER
CENTAR ZA ZAŠTITU I POMOĆ
TRAŽIOJCIMA AZILA



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FIELD PRACTICE OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Migrants, asylum seekers and refugees are still continuously coming to Serbia, arriving irregularly via Bulgaria, via Macedonia to south-eastern Serbia in spite of Balkan countries border controls and migration arms appearing over Albania and Montenegro. Being stranded in Serbia for longer period of time out of any system or procedure they are generally witnessing more complex difficulties than before, struggling with discrimination, neglect, denial of information, rights and procedures, facing restrictive policies, even abuse or maltreatment of smugglers but also criminal individuals and corrupted representatives of the institutions.

Serbia continues to be a buffer zone of intercontinental migration coming over Turkey via Balkan route as the last external European frontier before EU zone without serious international/regional attention. That migration has never stopped nor bypassed Serbia and people are still continuously coming to Serbia, arriving irregularly mostly via Bulgaria, via Macedonia and even Kosovo in dozens every day (estimation of minimum 30 000 persons entered Serbia in 2018) and in spite of Balkan countries border controls and alternative migration routes appearing over Albania and Montenegro. On the other side, dozens of migrants are being daily illegally pushed from Croatia, Hungary, even Romania, back to Serbia, and with increasing trends of stopping people to enter Bosnia by Bosnian police and repulsing them to Serbia. Moreover, migrants that have never been in Serbia are now being deported illegally to Serbia from neighboring EU countries (Croatian and Hungarian border police).

All illegal push-back practices from the neighbouring countries are widely tolerated by Serbian police and institutions. All mentioned circumstances led Serbia to become buffer zone and purgatory of migration on the edge of the EU zone. Additionally, there are appearing signs of ill treatment of migrants done by Serbian border police officers along northern Serbian borders with EU countries, trying to prevent them to cross EU borders and enter Croatia and Hungary, and possibly as a result of Serbia's tighter relations with neighbouring EU countries and with Frontex in stopping migration (Serbia has initiated the Agreement with Frontex in September 2018, ready to be ratified in 2019).

Many existing factors are keeping Serbia as purgatory of intercontinental migration to EU, among others especially: EU migratory and border policy restrictive changes, de facto functioning of the Balkan migration route to and through Serbia, constant ongoing influx of refugees to Serbia from Serbian southern neighbors - Bulgaria, Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, increase in illegal smuggling to Serbia, strong border controls on Serbian northern borders and constant unlawful push backs of refugees to Serbia by Hungary, Croatia, Romania, and nowadays Bosnia, deterioration of human rights and position of migrants and refugees in Serbia, longer stay of irregular

migrants, potential asylum seekers and refugees in Serbia, spreading of disinformation to migrants in Serbia and their irregular stay, lack of system capacities and negative anti asylum trends in practice and in de facto policies, lack of fair asylum and other migrant procedures functioning, human rights violations, raise of xenophobia and prejudices in local communities in Serbia.

Serbia is failing to address migration and asylum problems in media or in public, negating their existence, rather depriving asylum seekers, refugees, migrants of valid information about their rights, accommodation, legal stay and access to asylum and other procedures in practice, keeping them in irregular shady position and on the move, keeping them invisible officially to the institutions, instead of providing assistance and respecting their guaranteed rights while they are in Serbia. Serbian migration and asylum policies and practices toward refugees are getting more restrictive and ignoring in order to send clear message to newcomers that they are not welcomed in Serbia and that Serbia is not the place of their longer nor final stay or refuge. Same messages have been said and sent to beneficiaries through concrete field actions of institutions (especially Commissariat for Refugees and Migration - KIRS and its camps' managements, and increasingly more by Police) while state and institutions are trying to hide these problems and presence of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees from the eyes of public and media, pretending to deal sustainably with the migration, building reception system and respecting their rights in Serbia. Although less present in local or regional public, chronic refugee situation with constant influx of people and constant northern neighbors' pushback practices are leaving thousands of refugees in need stranded in Serbia for a longer period of time (many months and even years), with multiple and now more complex information/legal/psychological/social needs, as well as with interaction/integration and humanitarian needs. All these problems are becoming chronic but not efficiently addressed nor recognized by the Government or the system, that are trying to keep refugees on the move, to hide their real numbers from public and media.

MIGRATION TRENDS

In total, more than 30 000 people entered Serbia in 2018, out of them approximately 40% were women and children. They are mostly coming from Afghanistan (approx.39%), Iran (approx.32%), Pakistan (approx.16%), Iraq (approx.5%), Syria (approx.3%); and approx. 5% from other countries Sudan, Somalia, Western Africa, Maghreb-North Africa, etc. Significant rise in number of Iranians seeking asylum that had entered Serbia legally, using direct flights from Teheran to Belgrade, claiming to escape political or religious persecution in Iran, is seen as direct consequence of visa liberation agreement between Iran and Serbia. At any moment, there are more than 6000 migrants, refugees and asylum seekers present in Serbia, out of whom approximately 3000-4000 persons residing in state accommodation facilities, others are on their own. Many are just avoiding reception camps and staying on their own (urban areas, borders zones) due to the limited access, treatment in the camps and practice to be sent to the southern camps of Vranje or Bujanovac in case they would ask for accommodation. Approximately, minimum 2000 persons are situated in northern, western and southern areas out of the accommodation. Beside newcomers, dozens of migrants are being daily illegally pushed from Croatia, Hungary back to Serbia. Also, there is increasing trends of stopping people to enter Bosnia by Bosnian police and repulsing them to Serbia. Moreover, migrants that have never been in Serbia are now being deported illegally to Serbia from neighboring EU countries (Croatian and Hungarian border police).

Once refugees enter Serbia, they are still heading first toward North of Serbia, very often making stop in Belgrade, which remains one of the hotspots on migration route with its daily number of minimum 100 refugees staying in the open, only in downtown of the city, and with more than 1500 refugees with more complex legal, psychosocial needs staying in uncertain situation in reception facilities in and around the city, predominantly staying irregularly out of procedures and the system. Further migration trends for refugees reaching and staying in Serbia are dependent on the actual situation at the Serbian - Croatian, Hungarian, Bosnian borders, on sharing of rumors among migrants, disinformation, structure of smuggling nets, activities of police, but Belgrade and Vojvodina region remain the areas where most of the people are coming for the first place and then plan alternatives only in case there is no options for successful crossing to Croatia or Hungary. Bosnian route opened as the new and the last possibility for many of refugees to reach EU and it became dominant exit route from Serbia in the first six months of 2018. Facing with severe and unlawful border controls on EU-Serbian Northern borders but probably even because of bad, arbitrary and uncertain treatment of people in Serbia, many migrants are trying their luck using Bosnian route. However, in second half of the year, certain number of refugees started returning from Bosnia to Serbia after uncertain and poor reception conditions there, as well as harsher Bosnian border controls, entry refusals and deportations back to Serbia, increased violence during push backs from Croatia to Bosnia, as well as migration routes heading again dominantly toward Croatia and Hungary.

Just some of newcomers with money and ready to pay high prices are managing to move swiftly through Serbia and finally reach western European countries, others often being pushed back to Serbia for numerous times from Croatia, Hungary, Romania and nowadays Bosnia. More and more people are waiting for more than a year stranded in Serbia in legal limbo without legal status and beyond the system with more present psychosocial, health, existential and legal problems. They face more complex and raising difficulties then before, struggling with ignorance of the system, discrimination, neglect, misinforming, denial of information/rights/procedures, restrictive state polices, even abuse or maltreatment of smugglers/criminals/individuals or corrupted representatives of the institutions. They are facing with difficulties to access asylum, other administrative/civil procedures all due to lack of information, contested behavior of Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (KIRS) and camp managements, police, and other state institutions, and due to their vulnerable position, absence of any legal representation, facing language and other barriers.

PUSH BACKS

For majority of the migrants and asylum seekers Serbia is seen as the last frontier to European countries, where they want to seek international protection and settle. This physical proximity to the final goal motivates them additionally to persist and find ways to cross the final obstacle. The first and foremost concerns the introduction of restrictive, violent and unlawful border and migration policies by Hungary and Croatia. Difficulties to cross the border and ask for asylum has made migrants and refugees in Serbia even more dependent on smugglers, and as such more likely to be the victims of various kinds of abuse. For both countries, the most effective deterrent strategy for protecting borders and managing unwanted migration involves dehumanizing treatment of the exiles once they attempt to cross their borders.

Based on testimonies of over 1000 migrants and asylum seekers in 2018 on more than 20 locations in Serbia, to whom APC provided direct legal assistance and psychological counseling, extensive and systemic use of force and violence was recorded, mostly on Hungarian and Croatian border, and less on Romanian. The most common forms of violence include: kicking head and back; slapping and beating head; kicking the back with cables; spitting in face; holding the migrants locked in vehicles for 24 hours, without water and food; destroying mobile phones and chargers; confiscating personal belongings and money; tearing the documents and Serbian camp IDs; humiliating migrants, for example by forcing them to kneel for hours, with hands behind the head; various forms of verbal humiliation such as swearing and insulting; forcing migrants to take off their clothes and shoes. Both for Hungary and Croatia, the migrants most frequently use smugglers' services, which can cost up to 4000 euros. Smugglers' arrangements as well border police brutality dictate the choice of border, therefore in some periods Hungarian border crossings were more frequented than Croatian; and vice versa. These passages or "the game" in popular jargon, can either take place on foot, which is most common for Croatian border and to some extent with Hungary, but it was noticed that "truck game" became also frequent, where migrants jump in different vehicles, such as trucks that are transporting goods, but also cold storage and tank trucks, exposing themselves to dangerous conditions and risking their health and lives.

As an illustrative testimony from October 2018, a group of young single Afghans in bordering town Šid told how the Croatian police found them attempting to cross the Croatian border on foot, caught them, smashed their phones, put them in police vehicles and returned to Serbia. They were in a group of some 300 people who were put in only three vehicles where they spent hours on verge of suffocating. In a separate testimony, an unaccompanied minor Afghan reported how he was beaten by Croatian police after his group was caught. They were kicked, slapped in head and were stolen mobile phones. Eventually, the police officers ordered them to take off their shoes and clothes, and in such state, they walked into reception camp in Principovac, Serbia, which other refugees and local population could witness themselves.

In a separate, more brutal testimony from December 2018, three single Iranians claimed they tried to cross to Hungary hidden in a lorry. They were noticed by the Hungarian border police with battery torch, taken out, beaten, slapped, spit in their face, kicked all over their bodies, registered and photographed, and finally pushed them back to the Serbian territory.

In some cases, police brutality and physical violence towards migrants was leaving them with severe injuries such as broken bones, deep wounds, shoulder dislocations, shellshock, etc. In others, dehumanization and psychological violence was more present and people were stripped of their clothes, taken only one shoe, forced to kneel in snow for hours, threaten with guns, and even firing shots in the air.

Pushbacks happen regularly on other border crossings with Serbia as well (Macedonian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Bosnian), but with lower intensity and less use of force. Interestingly, pushbacks to Serbia can even occur if the person has never been in Serbia before. There are many recorded cases of migrants pushed back to Serbia from Croatia, prior to their stay in Bosnia. Also, there were cases when people were entering Hungary through some other country, such as Romania, and still they were pushed back to Serbia, while they were by the police that they will be taken to asylum camp, since they expressed intention to apply for asylum in Hungary.

ACCOMMODATION

There is still a lack of available accommodation capacities for asylum seekers. Asylum seekers are still accommodated both in reception centres (urgent shelter for illegal migrants due to humanitarian reasons) and asylum centers, because of lack of accommodation capacities. Besides that, asylum seekers are almost always, after being registered, directed and accommodated in reception centers that are not intended for asylum seekers but for illegal migrants, and where the asylum procedure does not take place. Only if they, after being accommodated, urge by themselves or through their legal counsellors, they are transferred to asylum centers in order to continue the asylum procedure, leading to the conclusion that this unwritten rule is one of the steps for limiting access to asylum and making triage between "real" asylum seekers. Those who are not registered are being placed in camps on arbitrary decisions of KIRS staff, usually made in Belgrade in so called "one stop center" Miksalište, where refugees are being referred to, even by the police, in order to regulate accommodation, or upon their arrival in south of the country. There were cases when this "mechanism" was also used to prolong and eventually turn away people from continuing their asylum procedures.

Arbitrary reception, removal and throw-out from accommodation facilities by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration continues, and there are cases where the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration acts contrary to the police order from the registration certificate and does not receive the asylum seekers, even when it comes to unaccompanied minors, or they throw-out them from accommodation, which leads to the suspension of their asylum procedures and the prevention of access to asylum. Also, a case of collective forced eviction of the asylum seekers with the assistance of the police, from an asylum center to the reception center, was recorded in 2018, as a punitive measure for alleged violation of the house rules.

Another thing that is continuing are bad material reception conditions in centers, where refugees complain about the lack of hot water, sometimes even drinking water, insufficient clothing, insufficient food portions and quality of the food. There is no financial aid provided by state, except from cash cards (with around 25euros on them) sometimes (on a monthly basis during period of project) shared by non-governmental and humanitarian organizations. When that happens, Commissariat staff is denying even poor hygienic packets that they are obliged to share (together with other humanitarian aid, such as clothes and shoes), claiming that refugees should by all of that by themselves, since "they got cash cards".

When talking about especially vulnerable groups, such as minors, people with disabilities, mental health problems, etc., still there is no special accommodation, or special conditions in regular facilities to fulfill their specific needs.

ACCESS TO ASYLUM PROCEDURE

Refugees remained unaware of the asylum/other procedures and their rights and obligations in Serbia. Additionally they are more often falsely informed by Commissariat for refugees and migration (KIRS), camp managements or incompetent organizations or individuals, on their position, situation, challenges or existing options as asylum seekers, refugees or migrants. Many such misinformation were provided maliciously, other due to ignorance and lack of knowledge, leading beneficiaries to lose their rights, status, to stop their procedures, to become irregular, to be expelled from the accommodation, to become discriminated or to end up in the shady zone out of the system.

When it comes to registration, police stations often turn away asylum seekers, claiming that they do not have the capacity to register (in people, technicalities, or translators) and instructing them to come in later. Since this repeats couple of times and "later" comes sometimes after 2 or 3 days, refugees often give up, or end up being sent by Commissariat to camps, mostly southern ones, without even being registered, which results in keeping people in illegal, gray, zone. Another scenario is that in some police stations, inspectors for foreigners completely reject asylum seekers and instruct them to try in other cities. Similar practice is being undertaken by KIRS camp managements in camps in south of Serbia who were providing false information to migrants on procedural steps to be fulfilled in order to access asylum system. They were failing to react and inform police on requests of accommodated migrants to claim asylum under excuse of technical incapacity or due to insufficient interest and number of migrants willing to claim asylum in same camps, waiting to reach certain critical number of persons willing to claim asylum before informing police about their asylum intentions. On the other side, asylum seekers gain access to the asylum procedure and are registered in cases when legal assistance or legal representation were provided by non-governmental organisations, who often take them to a police station, or undertake legal representations. In last six months was rarely noted that any asylum seekers exercise their rights to access asylum without this kind of assistance. Cases in Belgrade have been noted that inspectors for foreigners, instead of registering asylum seekers, are often referring them to NGOs providing humanitarian assistance or to representatives of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (KIRS) in charge of accommodation and not authorized for accepting asylum intentions or registration. Beside this, state authorities are encouraging asylum seekers to leave or not to enter the asylum procedure, by giving them a chance to continue their way to EU countries by putting them on "the list for Hungary" which is unofficial and unbinding list of those who would like to access the territory of Hungary.

When it comes to asylum procedure itself, in June 2018 new Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection was adopted and started to be implemented. Unfortunately it did not lead to easy and unlimited access to asylum procedure, but rather the contrary. The law has

tightened obligations for asylum seekers from their registration to their application for asylum, without providing procedural guarantees for it. Namely, failure to comply with the instructions given by the police in the asylum registration certificate/paper to reach a concrete asylum center within a period of 72 hours, without a justified reason, leads to a loss of their right to claim asylum and to their misdemeanor liability. Whereby the content/form of those certificates is in Serbian and not translated into languages asylum seekers understand. The certificates themselves contain unclear instructions, in the Cyrillic alphabet of the Serbian language. There is furthermore, no legal assistance during registration, and asylum seekers are not explained the information in the certificate, their rights and obligations and the consequences of not arriving on time, nor is transport made available for them from police stations to the asylum centers.

Although the new Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection has given the opportunity for asylum seekers to apply for asylum on their own, without being in the presence of an official from the Office for Asylum, as had been the case previously, they must be registered, as previously indicated, which is often denied, and the aforementioned new legislations did not improve access to asylum. In addition, the asylum application itself must be submitted in the Serbian language, on a form that is also all in Serbian. While there are no official translations of the application for asylum in foreign language, making it impossible for asylum seekers without legal aid, interpreters and technical capacities to complete an application on their own.

Consequences of all of the above mentioned are visible also in official statistics of Asylum office, where there is a big disproportion between number of people who expressed intention to apply for asylum, those who got chance to start it, and those who can consider themselves "lucky" and who got the protection. For the whole 2018 year, 8433 persons expressed their intention, while 305 of them started their asylum procedure, which is 3.62% of all. Sadly, only 21 person got asylum or subsidiary protection, showing complete inefficiency of asylum system in Serbia, as well its restrictiveness.

INTEGRATION

Issues of integration – with de facto prolonged stay in Serbia, those often pushed back as far as from Slovenia, Italy or Croatia, or pushed back for dozens of times to Serbia, are starting to change their minds, looking more for an alternative refuge place to EU and perceiving Serbia as such. On the other side, many of newcomers, receiving negative news from their stranded/pushed back countrymen via social networks and other means of communication, even before reaching Serbia, witnessing increased difficulties in reaching EU destination countries and witnessing regular push backs, are coming to Serbia already willing to stay and seek refugee in Serbia, as their final destination at least for a certain period of time. Issues of integration and interaction within local communities are appearing, while local authorities and central institutions are not willing, skilled nor prepared to ease such process, on the contrary looking for ways how to stop it. Local communities are not sensitised neither do they have communication or interest in approaching or facilitating social inclusion and integration, since the main philosophy that is being used by the government, relevant institutions and at end majority of citizens is that "these people don't want to stay in our country" and that "they will eventually leave our country". Despite that, refugees are staying for longer time, deciding to apply for asylum, gaining their working permissions, moving out of the camps to private addresses, having need to communicate with local institutions, but also to socialize and become part of the community. The longer they are staying, the more complex needs and gap between local and refugee community are visible. Problems were appearing related with integration process of people and their access to labour market, taxes for obtaining labour licences, access to private accommodation. Open and hidden discrimination was taking place done by individuals, private firms and companies, telecommunication companies, banks, food chains related to provision of services.

Integration process is tightly connected with possibility to spend meaningful time with locals and gained independency, which lead to better understanding of language, culture, social norms and implicit rules and eventually better adaptation and integration. For children, the most important medium for this process is school. Trend from 2016 of migrant children being enrolled into local schools continued, unfortunately with same low rate and discontinuity in attendance, as well high drop-out rate. It also seems that interest of the government institutions as well NGOs and IGOs in supporting and improving process of enrollment of refugees into educational system has dropped, and that refugee children together with their parents are left on their own to find motivation and strength to continue their education. Systematic solution for those minors who are out of age range for elementary school is still unavailable, and depend on personal devotion and advocacy of school, KIRS, social workers (in cases of unaccompanied minors their guardians) to enroll them in last grade of elementary school and eventually high school.

Like school for children, work is for adults one of the most important mediums of integration. In this way they are gaining independency, but also connecting with locals, spending time with them, cooperating. By law, asylum seekers are entitled to working permit 9 months after the beginning of their asylum procedure. Not only that the waiting period is very long, but procedure of issuing working permit is not easy and refugees cannot get them by themselves, but exclusively with help from their legal representatives. Beside that since working permit for foreigners is not free of charge, significant effort was made by APC legal department couple of years ago to change the practise for asylum seekers. It was done successfully, which eased gaining of independency and accelerating integration among

refugees. In 2018 there was an attempt by National Unemployment Service to limit the access to the labor market by changing the practice of issuing personal work permits free of charge, proving that the main course of Serbia is to prevent people to stay, integrate and become part of Serbian society. Luckily this attempt was successfully stopped by work of APC lawyers, near the end of the year.

UNACCOMPANIED MINORS

Especially vulnerable are minors and youth, especially unaccompanied minors, who face with lack of basic information about their position, procedures, rights, risks, and ways of getting protected. Moreover, they are faced with difficulties not only to orientate, understand language, but to understand even a meaning of the information provided in their own language due to their age and overall restrictive circumstances. They were often neglected by the system due to discriminatory behavior of the institutions acting without initiative, without interpreters, and perceiving asylum minors as non-equals to Serbian minors.

With involvement of new privately funded guardians as additional support to local Social welfare centers (a project funded by the big international organizations as UN, in limited period of time), many young and unexperienced staff, not professional guardians nor necessarily social workers, started dealing with the most sensitive issues of protection and wellbeing of the children as guardians, assuming responsibility from the former guardians/social workers from the local Social welfare centers. That started to create problems in terms of supervision and proper decision making of new project funded private guardians, who started to pay allegiance to the donors instead to the local Social Welfare centers, but also additionally strengthened Social welfare centers in their wrong and unfounded position/belief to ignore needs of the unaccompanied minors under the excuse of having someone else, other than local social system, with the jurisdiction and finances to pay attention on and take care about that problem.

Still, there is burning absence of special unaccompanied minors (hereinafter UAM) accommodation facilities. Although decision makers (namely Ministry for social protection) were claiming that they will improve care of UAMs, which are the biggest vulnerable group among migrants, nothing was done to solve even basic necessities, such as safe and specialized shelter. UAMs are accommodated together with adults in camps operated by KIRS and those among them that are especially vulnerable in 4 local institutions for social protection, which have capacity up to 50 places in total, not nearly enough for all UAMs. There were also many *ad hoc* changes in practice of accommodation of unaccompanied minors, and most did not comply with laws and instructions governing this issue. KIRS has taken responsibility for deciding where UAMs will be placed, regardless of the camp to which they are referred by police paper, as well as the opinions of social workers on the best interest of child. The decision on the camp in which children were to be accommodated also changed several times throughout the year, resulting in their relocation, but also the refusal of the kids to go to accommodation, and their self-initiated returns to parks and streets of Belgrade, Šid and north of Serbia. There were no attempts to understand what is the root of this practice done by UAMs, except that they want to continue their journey and don't want to respect and obey the rules. That kind of transfer of responsibility and blaming the kids was visible in reactions of responsible local center for social welfare and KIRS. There were no questioning of appropriateness of those camps, competence of KIRS staff working in them and capacities, knowledge and skills of local social welfare centers. Also, placing children together with adults put them in a greater risk of violence and exploitations from which they got very little or no protection from the state officials. If UAMs complained, usually they got ignorance or even threats from KIRS staff "not to cause problems". Escalation of this situation was in the summer 2018, when there was a case of a rape of unaccompanied minor, happened in the camp in Belgrade, governed by KIRS.

Second big issue in 2018 that wasn't even approached systematically, was age assessment. Since 2016 there is a trend of increase of number of unaccompanied minors, which created enormous pressure on already poor child protection system, and highlighted the need to properly assess their situation, needs, risks, and first of all their age. In Serbia, however, 11 years after the start of the implementation of the asylum law and the emergence of the asylum system, there is no, or has ever existed, procedure for determining the age of migrants. The previous Law on Asylum provides that in the situation of lack of documents, the statement of the person on the age is taken into account and treated as valid, while in the current Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection that is not specified. On the other hand, in the already mentioned situation of a large influx of children and young people traveling alone and enormous pressure on the protection system, *ad hoc*, unreliable, completely arbitrary practices have emerged, which unfortunately have settled in certain situations, completely ignoring personal statements about the age and very often identifying and treating minors as adults on the basis of very variable and subjective criteria of the assessor (police officer, representative of the social work center or very often an official of KIRS).

Finally, third significant part of child protection – legal status, is still completely neglected. As in other aspects of dealing with migration, in this field is also dominant attitude that "children don't want to stay in Serbia" and that "we cannot stop them in moving forward". First of all, police registration (first step in legalizing status) rate is extremely low, which resulted in only 698 registered UAMs in whole 2018 year. Comparing to KIRS statistics for the same year, where they identified 1742 UAMs accommodated in their camps, it is clear that 60% of UAMs were invisible for the system, being provided only with a shelter and kept in an illegal position. Alarming are also statistics of local centers for social welfare, where we see on the example of Belgrade, where majority of UAMs were accommodated, that only 719 of them had contact with social workers. Number of those who were appointed with guardian is far lower. It is obvious that system is very slow, inefficient and discriminating towards minors that are traveling alone. Their position and needs are being completely ignored. From the top, decision makers, to the bottom, field social workers and KIRS staff, it is visible that kids are treated as adults, that they are depersonalized, seen as a burden rather than beneficiaries.

CONCLUSION

In line with the rest of the Europe, Serbia is adopting more and more restrictive attitude towards migrants and refugees. That is visible in laws that are accepted and implemented, as well as functioning of institutions and behaviour of their officials on the ground.

Still, the system stayed on the level of dealing with crisis, and that kind of discourse is heavily present and has significant influence on governing the migration. Violence is more and more present, and in this Commissariat for refugees and migration takes first place. Treatment of migrants from their staff is usually harsh, aggressive, inhumane, and in some cases even against the law. Conditions in which people are living are very poor and often insufficient. There is tendency of provisional transfer of people from one reception center to another, done by KIRS, which takes away sense of safety, control and continuity among refugees. Besides practical reasons for these transfers as part of poor migration management, it appears that bad conditions and instability have also purpose to distract people from thinking about applying for asylum and trying to build their lives in Serbia.

It looks like asylum procedure also serves the same purpose. Access to asylum is far worse than before, and people are being rejected by inspectors for foreigners, they are being lied to and intimidated by KRIS staff, persuaded not to apply by promises that „soon it will be their turn on the Hungarian list“, etc. When they eventually, with help of legal representative, manage to express intention for asylum, they are facing long and uncertain procedure which often ends with unjustified rejection.

All of the above mentioned is turning away people for seeking refuge in Serbia, but rather staying and waiting for entrance to Hungary, or „perfect chance“ to move on with smugglers. Those deciding to continue their migration illegally, are becoming victims of very violent push backs, leaving them with physical but also psychological scars.

Overall, due to inability and unwillingness of system of protection and support of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees to provide proper, lawful and sustainable support to people, they are being humiliated, violated, prevented from normalizing their lives. Very harsh reality leaves them psychologically disturbed, anxious, tensed, frustrated, and at the end depressed, hopeless and helpless with strong belief that it is impossible to find peace and protection in Serbia.

ASYLUM AND MIGRATION POLICY MONITORING REPORT

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The increase in arrivals of refugees and migrants that Europe faced in 2015 resulted at the same pace in a peak of arrivals in Serbia, mainly due to its strategic role as a transit country and as a crucial segment of the Balkan Route.

The increase of migratory flows in Serbia raised questions whether the country's institutions and civil society are capable to implement asylum and migration policies and notably in relation to the integration process of migrants in different spheres of society.

Namely, Serbia in 2015 saw a peak of 800.000 arrivals, numbers which dramatically decreased after the alleged closure of the Balkan Route resulting from the EU-Turkey statement in March 2016. That year the country recorded 12,821 people who expressed their intention to apply for asylum in the country, which resulted finally in 6,400 people staying on the Serbian territory (UNHCR, 2017). Despite the EU-Turkey Agreement, which provided the allocation of 6 billion euros of European Funds to prevent further migratory fluxes from the Middle East to the European Union through the Balkan route, and which was intended to close definitely the Balkan Route, the refugee pathway has never been effectively closed, even though a substantial decrease in numbers of arrivals has been recorded.

In the case of Serbia, despite the decrease in arrivals, the number has nevertheless remained robust. This has been mainly due to the implementation of the chain pushbacks mechanism toward Serbia from Austria, Slovenia and Croatia

In 2017 there was just a slight decrease when 6,199 people expressed their intention to apply for asylum in Serbia (AIDA - Asylum Information Database, 2017). Nevertheless, as mentioned in the precedent *Asylum and Migration Policy Monitoring Report: Serbia 2017*, the expression of intention for applying for asylum does not mean that all asylum seekers have had the possibility to effectively lodge an application and enter asylum procedure. Out of 6,199 people who expressed the intention to apply for international protection in Serbia, in fact, only 236 people actually applied for asylum (AIDA - Asylum Information Database, 2017), data which can prove that the access to asylum process is still very limited in Serbia, putting refugees at risk of *refoulement*. These data also show that in 2017 Serbia was still not capable to deal with the new challenges related to the asylum and temporary protection issues including issues of integration of those applied and obtained asylum in Serbia.

Furthermore the Policy Monitoring Report 2017 written as a part of the *LOVE* project shows that in 2017 among all the migrants residing in Serbia, a considerable percentage consisted of minor migrants, while most of them were unaccompanied children residing outside the reception centres. Minors and unaccompanied children represent the most vulnerable group among migrant population mostly exposed to risks of violence and human trafficking in Serbia. One of the main problems related to the group of UASC (Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers Children) concerns the fact that the new LATP still does not provide a successful identification mechanism for the

vulnerable group of asylum seekers, especially the unaccompanied minors, of whose age assessment still remains problematic, thus resulting in a lack of data regarding the real number of unaccompanied minors. Additionally, another important issue regarding the UASC category concerns the appointment of legal representatives. Despite the law foresees the assignment of temporary guardians to all unaccompanied minors, the appointment of those in the practice still represent a challenge, resulting problematic for what regards the lodgment of asylum application by the unaccompanied children, since they cannot express intention to seek asylum before they have been assigned a temporary legal guardian (AIDA - Asylum Information Database, 2018).

In 2018 the number of migrants who expressed intention to apply for international protection in Serbia increased to 8,436 people, of whom only 327 effectively lodged the application on the Serbian territory. Anyway, despite the increase in the number of intentions to apply for asylum, this development cannot be assessed as completely positive having in mind the gap between the number of arrivals and those applying for asylum. Those data can be interpreted in two ways: on one hand seekers of international protection still consider the Republic of Serbia a transit country, thus the intention to seek asylum is expressed also by those who are not willing to lodge an asylum application in Serbia yet want to legalize their stay in the country while waiting to migrate to other European countries (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2018). On the other hand those data indicate, similarly as in 2017, that the access to asylum procedure remains difficult, that the procedures are unclear and lengthy, including the difficult access to the territory due to the forced unlawful pushbacks which have been reported at the borders with Bulgaria and North Macedonia (AIDA - Asylum Information Database, 2018), Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The problem related to the access to the territory could be also linked to the problematic issue concerning the establishment of safe-third-country to which Serbian authorities can decide to transfer the asylum seeker. Currently Serbia considers as safe-third-countries Bulgaria and North Macedonia without sufficient ground while not taking into consideration the possibility of a chain-pushback from these countries further to Greece and Turkey (AIDA - Asylum Information Database, 2018). The same can be applied also to Serbia itself, since almost 1,839 people have been refouled from Croatia to the country (UNHCR, 2018), which is defined as a safe country by the Croatian Law on International and Temporary Protection (LITP).

Considering the difficulties for migrants in acceding the Asylum procedure in Serbia, doubts about the conception of Serbia as a safe-third-country could be raised since the risk to expose asylum seekers to chain-pushbacks is notably high.

Concerning the vulnerable groups of migrants in 2018, of 8,436 people who expressed their intention to apply for international protection, 2,475 were minors, of whom 700 were unaccompanied children, representing the 27% of the total migrant population in Serbia. The majority of them mainly arrived from Afghanistan (45%), Pakistan (31%) and Iran (8%) (AIDA - Asylum Information Database, 2018). As it will be showed in the following chapter, introduction of the new Serbian Asylum Act provides the possibility for vulnerable groups, like minors and unaccompanied minors, to receive special procedural or reception guarantees such as the accelerated procedure. Still, the main obstacle in providing the appropriate protection to vulnerable groups is related to the fact that the legislation does not provide any kind of identification mechanism for vulnerable groups, not even for unaccompanied children since it is not clear in which form will the Asylum Office determine that an asylum seeker is in need of special procedural or reception guarantees (ibid.).

Generally, the findings of this report and other relevant literature show Serbia will keep on having a role of both transit and destination country for the migratory fluxes, and having this in mind there is obvious need to improve asylum, migration and relevant integration policies. This is particularly important in the domain of safeguarding vulnerable groups, the overall access to asylum, the inclusion in the socio-economic fields, including the access to labour market and health care, since the relevant institutions have showed to be weak in managing new challenges related with asylum and migrations.

SERBIAN ASYLUM AND MIGRATION POLICY IN 2018: THE NEW LAW ON ASYLUM AND TEMPORARY PROTECTION

The legislative framework of the Republic of Serbia in the domain of asylum and migration presented remarkable changes in 2018 with the adoption of the New Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection (or the New Asylum Act), the Law on Foreigners and the Law on Borders Control. The reform of the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection (LATP), which entered into force on 4th June 2018, provides the major novelties in the following aspects: accelerated asylum and border procedure, the subsequent asylum application, the improvement of the third country provision and the introduction of the concept of first country of asylum (AIDA - Asylum Information Database, 2018), as well as the introduction of the concept of temporary protection, which is intended as a form of protection for the period of one year which is "provided in the extraordinary procedure in the case of a mass influx of displaced persons who cannot be returned to their country of origin or habitual residence if there is a risk that, due to such mass influx, it will not be possible to carry out individual asylum procedure" (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, 2018).

The introduction of accelerated asylum procedure including border and transit zone procedure implies that the Asylum Office will differ its own work from the regular procedure based on the cases provided by the law. The LATP stipulates that "The decision on the asylum application in the accelerated procedure shall be made, at the latest, within 30 days from the date of the asylum application or the admissible subsequent asylum application, whereby the entire asylum procedure shall be conducted" and that it should not be applied

for the asylum applications submitted by unaccompanied minors (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, 2018). The accelerated asylum procedure is applied in the case in which the applicant for asylum has presented only facts irrelevant to the examination of asylum application, if he/her presented false information, forged documents or destroyed or concealed documents that establish his/her identity and/or nationality in bad faith so as to provide false information about his/her identity and/or nationality, if the applicant has submitted a subsequent asylum application that is admissible as well as if the applicant presents a threat to national security or public order or in the cases in which is possible to apply the safe country of origin concept (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2018).

The article 41 of the new Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection introduced for the first time border and transit zone procedure, which stipulates that asylum procedure can be initiated and conducted at the border crossing points, transit zones or airports if “The applicant is provided with adequate accommodation and subsistence; The application can be rejected as unfounded for the grounds set out in the Accelerated Procedure. The application is a Subsequent Application” (ibid.). The introduction of the border and transit zone procedure also represent a positive improvement in the legislative framework of the asylum system, and it represent an alignment with the international and EU’s standards. The Asylum Procedure Directive of the European Union, Article 43, provides that the processing of Asylum Application can be conducted at the borders or transit zones and there decisions can be made on the inadmissibility of application, at the same time, Article 43 (2) provides that in border procedures the deadline for the decision making is at least four weeks from the lodgement of asylum application, if not the applicant is allowed to enter the territory in order to lodge the asylum application (European Parliament; Council of European Union, 2013). Considering the implementation of the article 41 of the new LATP, the alignment with European standards seems to have been found.

The Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection, in this case, also allows the representatives of civil society organisations that are mandated to provide legal aid to asylum seekers including UNHCR to have effective access to the border crossing and transit zones (AIDA - Asylum Information Database, 2018). Moreover, if the deadline of 28 days for the decision-making with regard to the asylum application is not met, the asylum seeker has the right to enter the territory of Serbia so that the asylum application could be examined through the regular procedure (ibid.).

One of the most important novelties introduced by the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection concerns the improvement of the *safe-third country* concept within the asylum procedure. In this manner, the article 45 of the new LATP set out the concept of safe third country, specifying that “a safe third country shall be a country where the Applicant is safe from persecution, as referred to in Article 24 of this Law, or the risk of suffering serious harm as referred to in Article 25, paragraph 2, of this Law, where he/she enjoys the guarantees prescribed by the *non-refoulement* principle, and where he/she has access to an effective procedure for granting and enjoying protection in accordance with the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees” (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, 2018).

Generally, the Asylum Office can decide for the inadmissibility of an asylum request on the base of the safe third country concept. Before 2018, one of the main issues related to the accessibility to the asylum procedure in Serbia concerned the automatic application of the safe third country concept. The previous Asylum Act provided a list of safe third countries, and decisions of admissibility were mainly made according to this list. One of the problems related to the listed safe third country, was that the Republic of Serbia considered safe countries such as Turkey, Northern Macedonia and Bulgaria, where asylum seekers were mainly subject to the risk of suffering persecution and serious harm, as well as being under the risk of a chain pushbacks (AIDA - Asylum Information Database, 2018).

Moreover, the LATP prescribes that in establishing the conditions for the application of the safe third country concept each asylum application should be examined, in order to understand whether a country can be defined as *safe* and whether there is a connection between the asylum seeker who lodged the asylum application and that country (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2018). This means that the abovementioned list of safe third countries that was used under the previous Asylum Act is not considered valid anymore to assess whether or not a country can be considered safe, so the application of safe third country is made considering the single cases.

The LATP, indeed, implies that the Asylum Office has to consider all the relevant facts, evidence and circumstance in order to take a decision regarding the admissibility of an asylum application. Moreover, the new Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection also refers to the specific circumstances related to persons with special needs that must be taken into account during the decision-making. This means that the safe third country concept cannot be applied in the cases in which “the applicant is a minor, unaccompanied minor, person with disabilities, elderly person, single parent with underage children, victim of human trafficking, severely ill person, a person with mental disorder and persons subjected to torture and other forms of abuse (psychological, physical or sexual violence)” (ibid.).

The implementation of these novelties in 2018 provided some improvements in the application of safe third country provision and the subsequent accessibility to the asylum procedure compared to 2017. Indeed, in 2018 the Asylum Office rejected 20 asylum applications lodged by 22 people and in 7 out of these 20 cases there was the ground to apply the safe third country provision, yet the Asylum office decided on the merits of the applications. Moreover, in 12 out of 16 positive decisions regarding the asylum applications, the ground for the application of safe third country concept was pertinent but, also in this case, the Asylum Office decided on the merits. These data show an overall positive trend in the implementation of the new LATP’s provisions in the domain of the safe third country concept, especially considering that the 35 rejections of international protection, on which the safe third country concept have been applied, were made based on the precedent Asylum Act (AIDA - Asylum Information Database, 2018).

Although the abovementioned improvements in the field of the application of the safe third country concept, it appears that the main reason for not applying the safe third country concept by the Asylum Office was related to the ill-treatment that asylum seekers received especially in Bulgaria and North Macedonia. This, according to the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, means that “the applicant needs to have undergone a certain type of ill-treatment in order to dispute the safety in one of the neighbouring states, even though the risk of *refoulement* could arise from a general situation of violence [or the dysfunctionality of asylum system]” and that the UNCHR reports concerning the state of asylum in North Macedonia and Bulgaria were not considered during the decisions upon the application of the safe third country concept except in one (AIDA - Asylum Information Database, 2018).

Other legislative novelties of the 2018 are introduced by the New Law on Foreigners, especially regarding the implementation of the “refusal of entry”. The main novelty of 2018 introduced by the New Law on Foreigners foresees that the border authorities shall refuse entry into the Republic of Serbia to a foreigner if that person: “Does not have a valid travel document or visa, if required; does not have sufficient means of subsistence during his stay in the Republic of Serbia, for return to his country of origin or transit to another country, or is not in other ways provided with subsistence during his stay in Serbia; is in transit, but does not meet the criteria for entry into the next country of transit or country of final destination; has been issued a protective measure of removal, security measure of expulsion, or a ban on entry into the Republic of Serbia, which is in effect; does not have a certificate of inoculation or other proof of good health, if coming from areas affected by an epidemic of infectious diseases; does not have travel medical insurance for the intended period of stay in Serbia” (AIDA - Asylum Information Database, 2018). Moreover, the new Law on Foreigners also set all the rules needed to guarantee the respect of the principle of non-refoulement in regard to the decision of refusal of entry. In this case, the introduction of rules aimed to improve implementation of the principle of non-refoulement in conformity with the Geneva Convention is seen as a good improvement, but at the same time the introduction of the refusal of entry and the negligence regarding the principle of non-refoulement is a reason of concern, especially if considering that guarantees of non-refoulement were already present in the Serbian legislative framework before the introduction of the new Law on Foreigners in 2018 but they were not applied during the process of forced pushbacks towards North Macedonia and Bulgaria, without taking into account the risks and dangers that asylum seekers could have encountered in these countries (ibid.)

OUTLOOK TO UNACCOMPANIED MINORS ASPECTS OF THE SERBIAN ASYLUM AND MIGRATION POLICY IN 2018

A novelty brought to the Serbian Asylum System by the New Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection is the introduction of new specific guarantees during the asylum procedure for categories who requires special procedure. These categories include minors, unaccompanied minors, person with disabilities, elderly persons and pregnant women. During the screening of vulnerability, in order to determine whether or not a specific category needs to undergo through the special asylum procedure, the process of identification of unaccompanied minors appeared to be problematic and rather unclear in practice.

In the Article 2 of the new Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection an unaccompanied minor is defined as a “foreigner under 18 years of age who was not accompanied by his/her parents or guardians, nor an adult who is responsible for him/her, on his/her arrival to the Republic of Serbia, or who found himself/herself without the company of his/her parents or guardians, or an adult who is responsible for him/her, after having arrived to the Republic of Serbia” (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, 2018). In this sense, the LATP do not provide a way to establish the age of the minor. Another problem in the identification of the unaccompanied children is that usually minors use to travel in groups of adults, making difficult for the police to determine if a minor is travelling together with parents or legal guardians or alone.

During 2018 the Serbian authorities registered a total of 2.475 minors who applied for asylum, of whom 700 were recognized as unaccompanied minors. Nonetheless, since the Serbian authorities found difficulties in identifying unaccompanied minors, the real number is supposed to be higher, while is the number of unaccompanied minors considered as irregular migrants in unknown, since the Serbian authorities seems to keep the records only of the ones who applied for asylum. The identification of a minor has proved to be particularly difficult for the Serbian authorities for several reasons: first, number of adults declared to be underage as well as a smaller number of underage asylum seekers declared to be adult. Another problem detected in the identification of unaccompanied minors is the fact that most of the minors tend to indicate an adult within the group in which they travel as their parent or guardian. Another problem concerns the fact that an effective method to determine the age of the asylum seekers still has to be implemented and developed, thus the age of the asylum seekers is still assessed on the basis of the asylum applicant’s word and the personal observations of the Serbian authorities. (AIDA - Asylum Information Database, 2018).

The article 12 of the LATP, moreover, prescribes that the unaccompanied minors should be entitled of a temporary guardian immediately after his/her identification as an unaccompanied minor and before his/her claim for asylum, since the unaccompanied minor will be able to lodge an asylum application only in presence of his/her temporary legal guardian (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, 2018).

In general, the Serbian legislation with regards to the protection of unaccompanied minors seems to be in line with the international standards, such as the EU's Reception Conditions Directive which states that unaccompanied minors should be detained only in exceptional circumstances and never placed in prison accommodation, the article 24 of the Reception Conditions Directive and the article 24 of the 25 of the Asylum Procedures Directive which state that UASC should be appointed of a legal representative before they lodge their asylum request, the Qualification Directive which sets specific provisions for unaccompanied, different from the ones destined to adult asylum seekers (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights; Council of Europe, 2015). If we consider the new provisions for the exclusion of the UASC from the application of the safe third country principle, the special guarantees destined to them unlike those intended for adults and the appointment of temporary legal guardians, the new LATP seems to be in compliance with all the guarantees destined to unaccompanied minors as defined by the EU regulation. On the other hand, there are also different obstacles in providing proper protection in the existing legislation in Serbia. Firstly, despite the fact that legislation guarantees the designation of temporary guardians to unaccompanied minors, in the practice there is a problem regarding selection of the legal representatives, since the guardianship authority lacks human resource capacities (AIDA - Asylum Information Database, 2018). The guardianship authority also lacks communication with the children, since there is not direct engagement of interpreters for the languages of unaccompanied minors. Furthermore, most of the time the interpreters are not engaged by the Serbian government but by the NGOs present in the field yet not the all territory is covered by this service as in some areas of Serbia, in some critical municipalities the temporary guardians were not even able to have a basic communication with the minors due to the lack of interpreters. This is found as one of the main challenges for the Serbian asylum system, since the unaccompanied minors cannot apply for asylum by themselves and they need the presence of a legal guardian. Therefore, the appointment of a temporary guardian is fundamental for the first step of asylum application (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2018).

As concerns the policy changes within the Asylum procedure's framework, the new LATP introduces the exclusion of unaccompanied minors from the safe third country provision. However, as it was noticed by the relevant actors in the field, in practice there are obstacles by the implementation of this law since, excluding the last quarter of 2018, there was no difference in application of this concept to unaccompanied minors and adult asylum seekers (Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2018). The Asylum Commission, according to the law, should assure that the country they wish to return an asylum seeker, especially if minor or unaccompanied minor, is safe and can successfully ensure protection. In this case, Belgrade Centre for Human Rights noted that the Serbian authorities in 2018 kept rejecting asylum application lodged by minors without taking enough attention to the specific circumstances of the single cases and the laws which are supposed to protect the child.

CONCLUSIONS

The 2018 has been a significant year for what concerns the big changes in the Serbian legislative framework in matter of asylum policies.

The reform of the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection (LATP) introduced several novelties in the Serbian asylum system such as the accelerated asylum and border procedure, the subsequent asylum application, the improvement of the third country provision and the introduction of the concept of first country of asylum. One of the main novelties introduced by the LATP is improvement in the definition of the safe third country concept through the settlement of conditions for the application of the safe third country concept, which means that each asylum application should be examined on the merits. This novelty has been applied in the cases in which the asylum request presented the ground for the application of the safe third country concept, but the authorities decided to act on the merits of the single cases. These examples of a good implementation of the reformed LATP represent a positive development in the Serbian asylum system, even though there are still factors which remain reason of concern, such as the introduction of the refusal of entry under the Law on Foreigners.

One of the main problematics of the Serbian asylum system remains the issue of the unaccompanied minors that the legislative novelties of 2018 didn't manage to solve. The main two challenges are represented by the lack of an effective system for the establishment of the age of the child as well as recognising unaccompanied minors. The second challenge represents the failure of the Serbian authorities in providing temporary guardians for accompanied minors, that are often mediated by non-governmental organisations and civil society, which lack sufficient human resource capacity and face difficulties in being present throughout the whole country, leaving many minors not covered by the law and leading very often to the expiry of the deadline for the application for asylum that can be submitted.

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MEDIA REPORTING ON MIGRANTS

POLITICAL CIRCUMSTANCES IN WHICH THE PROJECT WAS REALIZED

In 2018 many major political events took place in Serbia, with those pertaining to the solution of the Kosovo crisis and the murder of one of Kosovo Serb leaders Oliver Ivanovic at the beginning of the year attracting the most attention of the public. Prior to his assassination, which still, a year later, remains unresolved, Ivanovic was demonized by the Serbian pro-regime media and Kosovo Serb politicians close to the Serbian authorities. All this had resulted in harsh exchanges and severe reactions in Serbia.

A dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina which, with the mediation of Brussels, should lead to the normalization of their relations had reached a dead-end.

An idea on the demarcation of the border between Serbia and Kosovo had been launched, which is being negotiated by Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and Kosovo President Hashim Thaci, but the public had not been informed of any details. A stronger interest by Washington in the resolving of the crisis had been noted, but there was no specific initiative that would lead to a breakthrough. Vucic had been accusing (and still does) the opposition of undermining his negotiating efforts while the opposition response was that no one knows what the president is negotiating on. The nationalistically-oriented opposition parties, on the other hand, had been accusing the president of "betraying" Kosovo.

Reports on the demarcation negotiations had additionally heated the atmosphere in Serbia and the media close to the authorities, which hold a dominant position on the Serbian media scene, were systematically trying to lay the blame for everything happening in connection with Kosovo on the government's opponents. Toward the end of the year Kosovo introduced tariffs on goods from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, while the Kosovo parliament adopted a decision on the forming of the Kosovo army. This upped the tensions and undermined the position of the Serbian authorities. In addition, serious turmoil has begun on the Serbian political scene which, albeit not directly threatening the position of the ruling bloc, is becoming increasingly dangerous. Last year the ruling bloc won a convincing victory in the important local vote in Belgrade, but dissatisfaction (especially of the educated middle-class) began to gain momentum, resulting in a series of protests in the capital city launched at the end of the year. The protests are organized every Saturday and are expanding, with government opponents beginning to rally in other Serbian towns as well. In such atmosphere information on migrants was increasingly being reduced to routine reports, with almost no major events or gatherings concerning them.

THE MEDIA FRAMEWORK AND MEDIA FREEDOM

As far as the regulation of media framework is concerned, the year 2018 passed in preparations for the adoption of a new media strategy, while freedom of the media and expression in Serbia was assessed as "dramatically poor." An observer mission set up by the Delegation of the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)¹ visited Serbia at the beginning of 2018, recommending that the Serbian authorities unconditionally protect freedom of the media, process promptly and efficiently all cases in which the safety of journalists was endangered, and create conditions for a social dialogue in the media sphere to be established.

¹ Representatives of the EFJ in cooperation with the South East Europe Media Organization (SEEMO) and the International Press Institute (IPI) were members of the delegation.

On the World Press Freedom Index published on April 25 by Reporters sans frontières (RSF) Serbia dropped ten spots to 76th position, finding itself among the countries in which the biggest decline in media freedoms in the world was registered. RSF said that Serbia was not meeting European press freedom standards and that pro-government media are orchestrating “smear campaigns” against investigative reporters. The report adds that although Serbia wants to join the EU, “for the time being it utterly fails to meet EU press freedom standards, which is clear from the experiences of journalists working in the field.” Collusion between politicians and media, a high level of ownership concentration, and a lack of pluralism in the print and broadcast media are also all sources of concern, the report goes on to add.²

In its report on the progress of Western Balkan countries in the EU accession process, the European Commission (EC) also said that Serbia had failed to make progress in the area of freedom of expression, while political and economic influences have been causing a widespread self-censorship. Threats, intimidation and violence against journalists continue, the EC went on to say, urging the Serbian authorities to condemn hate speech and attacks against journalists. The report also said that media laws were not fully implemented and that the legal framework should provide a greater transparency in ownership and financing of the media.³

In response to numerous objections about a non-transparent work on the strategic media document, as well as on the general attitude of state officials toward the media, the Serbian government formed a working group within the Ministry of Culture and the Media charged with compiling a new strategy, as well as a Coordinating Body that would work to improve the framework of cooperation and the dialogue with the media.

After six months the working group for the preparation of the media strategy at the end of the year submitted to the Serbian government a draft media strategy for 2018-2023, which should be sent to Parliament at the beginning of 2019.

The Media Coalition⁴ on several occasions expressed its dissatisfaction as regards cooperation with the Serbian government, recalling that their demands for the improvement of the media scene had clearly set deadlines and noting that it would suspend its cooperation with the government unless these demands were met, eventually suspending its participation in the dialogue at the beginning of 2019. Even before, in a letter to international institutions and organizations, the Coalition had warned of the dramatically poor conditions in the media, adding that the goal of the government was not to improve those conditions, but to present them to the international community in a completely different light.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic had dismissed all criticism citing the stifling of media freedom and the establishing of state monopoly over the media in Serbia, stressing that his government was the first – after many years and many reforms – to renounce involvement in the media. In an article he wrote for EUobserver, Vucic responded to a commentary written by Italian journalist Matteo Trevisan in which the latter said that Serbia had not distanced itself from the era of state-run media and that the Serbian Progressive Party holds monopoly in the media sphere and systematically violates the basic media freedoms.

MEDIA REPORTS IN SERBIA

According to a survey analyzing the 2018 media content in Serbia conducted by the Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI), the central figure in all information programs last year was Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic. The analysis, which surveyed the programs aired by the RTS public service, Pink TV, Happy TV, B92 TV and N1 TV, shows that these stations were focused on the state and society, neglecting the activities of political parties.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic appeared in information programs in his capacity of president, supreme commander of the Army of Serbia and leader of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party. Pink TV was particularly active in this regard and was described as being “in the service of President Vucic, to whom it is devoting one-third of airtime in central information shows, while not mentioning the opposition, except in a negative context. Press releases account for the biggest share of the TV stations’ information content, which is to say that the media in such programs are covering the activities of state institutions, while there is very little journalistic research,” the survey concludes.⁵

Where the print media are concerned, one-third of the items published at the front pages of daily newspapers in Serbia concerns politics, and most of them feature Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, according to an analysis conducted by Mediametar agency. The survey covered the newspapers Politika, Vecernje Novosti, Blic, Danas, Kurir, Alo and Informer. The survey also shows that their front pages carried the biggest number of positive texts on Russia, and that the number of such texts was ten times higher than those that concerned the EU. Of foreign leaders, the one most frequently mentioned was Russian President Vladimir Putin, followed by U.S. President Donald Trump and, after him, German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

² The RFS report of April 2018

³ The EC report

⁴ The Coalition brings together the Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia, the Independent Association of Vojvodina Journalists, the Association of Independent Electronic Media, the Local Press business association, and the Association of On-line Media.

⁵ Zoran Gavrilovic, BIRODI

Three-fourths of the texts were reports, followed by interviews, articles and commentaries, while news items were increasingly less present on the front pages. Only 19.37 percent of all texts published were balanced, i.e. presenting both sides of a story, the least balanced texts were carried by Informer (less than two percent), and the most balanced by Vecernje Novosti (28 percent). Many texts quote unnamed sources, mostly in Informer (44 percent) and the least in Politika (15 percent).

The smallest number of impartial texts were published in Informer, while the texts in Danas were the most impartial.⁶

The analysis also surveyed the magazines Vreme, NIN, Novi Magazin, Nedeljnik and Pecat, which are “dominantly critical of the government.” NIN and Vreme are critical throughout, “from the first to the last page,” Novi Magazin and Nedeljnik are moderate, while Pecat is a specific case as it criticizes “the government’s policy toward the EU and the pro-reform opposition.”⁷

Over one-third of all texts published in Serbia on international actors, the EU, the U.S. and Russia quotes no sources, which is a fertile ground for potential misinformation, shows an analysis conducted by the Center for Research, Transparency and Responsibility (CRTA). Reports on the EU and Serbia are mostly neutral. According to the survey, the most quoted person in Serbia was President Aleksandar Vucic, and his statements concerning the EU were mostly neutral or positive.

This survey also shows that the most positive texts were published on Russia, while NATO was reported on in a negative context. Reports on the EU were mostly neutral, and the EU accession negotiations and the opening of chapters were covered largely formally, via press releases.

The press, and particularly the tabloids, showed a steady inclination toward publishing fake news in 2018. A survey conducted by the KRIK portal which surveyed the front pages of three such dailies – Informer, Srpski Telegraf and Alo – shows that the daily Informer published 351 such fake news stories, Srpski Telegraf 230, and Alo – 149. In them, these pro-regime papers dealt with death, blood spilling, war, insults, “exclusive confidential” information and pending apocalyptic events.⁸

GLOBAL TRENDS

The migrant crisis, which peaked in 2015 with the number of migrants and asylum seekers drastically dropping since, caused a political crisis in Europe. The former Communist states of Central and Eastern Europe, ruled by populist governments, refused to comply with the introduction of compulsory migrant quotas, and in mid-2018, the idea of compulsion gave way to consent. The media in Serbia frequently stressed that the migrant crisis had strongly shaken the position of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who managed to preserve its coalition with the Bavarian CSU only after accepting that transit centers for migrants be established at the border between Austria and Germany. The Serbian press frequently reported that Merkel and Europe had come out of the crisis weakened and that the mass migration had divided the continent into “a Europe of Angela Merkel and a Europe of Viktor Orban.” Instead of migrant centers and quotas, the EU eventually decided to focus on assistance in development of the countries the migrants are coming from.

A document on migrations initiated by the United Nations that was supposed to be signed by representatives of all countries of the world in Marrakech, Morocco, had shown deep differences of the world leaders over this global phenomenon. Namely, although the Global Compact for Migration is of a declarative nature and deals with human rights of migrants, their safety and cooperation of the world states, several countries, including the U.S., refused to sign it. Hungary, Austria, Italy, Bulgaria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Latvia and Switzerland were the European countries that also said no to the document. These countries hold an increasingly anti-migrant position, which is being explained as a consequence of the global regulation of migration, i.e. the inability of the national states to manage the process successfully.

The Global Compact fared better in the U.N. General Assembly, as this body adopted the document that should improve the migrant crisis management in the world with a vast majority of vote. This document was not backed by the U.S. and Hungary either, with reports on their attitude toward migrants being frequently carried by the Serbian media under bombastic titles and using foreign news agencies’ reports.

The four main goals of the adopted document are the following: to lessen pressure on the countries of migrant entry, increase the migrants’ independence, facilitate solutions that include third countries and help create the necessary conditions for their safe and dignified return home. The Serbian media covered the document only by carrying foreign news agency reports, with no analytical texts whatsoever on what Serbia should undertake in this particular matter.

⁶ Danica Laban, Mediametar

⁷ Dejan Vuk Stankovic, Mediametar

⁸ KRIK portal

REPORTING ON MIGRANTS AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

Serbia's positions and official policy toward migrants and asylum seekers were clearly presented in the Serbian media. Serbia was described almost exclusively as a transit country, and the migrants as people who are just passing through it. Statements by politicians and representative of the state institutions explaining what the government is doing to advance the position of this vulnerable social group in Serbia dominated in reports, with the government's "protective" and "caring" attitude toward the migrants and asylum seekers being underlined. This position persisted throughout the year, while President Aleksandar Vucic on several occasions criticized the attitude of Hungary and Croatia toward the migrants, promising that Serbia would never erect walls on its borders given that in the near past the Serb people themselves had experienced all the plights of refugee life.

The statements suggested that this social group is "in decent position in Serbia," without any words indicating that the position of migrants in the country should be improved.

The lion's share of reports dealt with registered migrants, while those that are outside the system were almost invisible to the press, unless incidents were involved. The media, save for a few exceptions (serious political weeklies such as *Vreme*, *NIN*, *Nedeljnik*), did not write objectively about the grave circumstances the migrants had left behind and the conditions in which they traveled.

The Western Balkan countries, which for years have been feeling neglected by European policies and through which hundreds of thousands of refugees entered the EU in 2015, show great sensitivity when it comes to migrations. The closing of the southern EU borders, primarily by Austria and Hungary, had been widely understood as a solution whereby the Western Balkans would be turned into a "buffer zone" for migrants. This topic was widely addressed by the media in Serbia, which openly criticized the EU over its obvious disinterest in how the problem of migrants would be solved south of the Sava and Danube rivers.

It is important to note that European officials had openly called on Serbia to prepare for the acceptance of a larger number of refugees, because it cannot be predicted how many of them will remain in its territory. The Serbian authorities conspicuously avoided to comment on such statements, but reacted strongly when Asylum Protection Center representatives said that Serbia could become a buffer zone, firmly rejecting any such possibility, which was reported by almost all media outlets.

In 2018 the Serbian media paid great attention to the so-called "Bosnian route" which had emerged after the legal passage from Serbia into the EU via Croatia and Hungary was precluded. The migrants who arrived in Serbia from Bulgaria, Macedonia and Montenegro (via Sandzak region) started entering Bosnia and Herzegovina last year. Most reports on the matter concerned incidents that occurred in that country and Croatia. Such reports suggested Serbia was managing the migrant crisis much better than its neighbors and that, because of that, it enjoyed enormous support from the EU.

A new law on asylum and temporary protection and on foreigners, adopted in March 2018, went into effect in June 2018. In this way Serbia was aligning its legislation with that of the EU, in an attempt to introduce a more efficient asylum procedure and define the rights and obligations of foreigners in a clearer way. The expert public had warned that the adopted laws were not likely to solve the practical problems arising during the asylum procedure as the asylum law essentially failed to offer adequate solutions to such problems, among them "the efficiency of the administrative process", its slowness, the making of timely decisions, deciding on asylum requests, and facilitating their filing.⁹

The media also focused on migrant centers through a series of reports about the life in them as well as on human-interest stories. The long-term protection and integration of migrants, however, was quite rarely a subject in Serbian society. Very few texts mentioned a lack of interpreters, teachers, social workers or job opportunities for migrants. Because of that, the refugees that are forced to stay in Serbia are facing the same problems they faced in their native countries, except for the war and the immediate threat to their lives. This, of course, motivates them to continue with efforts to reach Western Europe.

SERBIAN MEDIA AND THE MIGRANT CRISIS – ANALYSIS OF REPORTS IN 2018

During 2018, the Beta news agency continued to monitor the reports on migrants published in the national daily newspapers and by TV stations, the leading political weeklies and the local media in the border areas. A survey of what was released was being delivered to the agency on a daily basis by the Ebart Research Center, relying on the key words defined in advance, and it included 28 outlets.¹⁰

The analysis shows that the issue of migrants was addressed by the Serbian media outlets, that there were 9.7 reports on average every day, which is down from the previous year, when there were 11.8 reports on average per day. The biggest number of reports was in June – 485, and the least in April – 173.

9 Rados Djurovic, Asylum Protection Center

Statistics by month:

There were 235 reports in January, of them 23 on websites, 51 on radio and TV stations and 161 in newspapers. The highest number of reports in a single day was 17. There were no reports on January 1 and 7, and there was only one on Jan. 28. The average number of reports in January per day was 7.58. Most reports dealt with pending elections in Europe and how the migrant crisis was going to affect them (Germany, the Czech Republic, Italy) and how the other countries were treating migrants (Hungary, France). At home, an incident at the Backi Vinogradi border crossing, when the local inhabitants drove the migrants away from their village lying on the border with Hungary, attracted most attention. The news was first released by BETA, the newspapers elaborated on it later on, while the TV stations sent reporters to the spot. An announcement and videos by the Ministry of Defense on the prevention of entry of 22,000 illegal migrants were carried by all TV stations, which broadcast the videos several times in various shows.

February saw the release of 208 reports, of which 23 were on websites, 51 on radio and TV stations and 134 in newspapers. Most reports – 29 – were registered on Feb. 17, while on Feb. 14 and 26 there was only one report each day. The average number of reports in this month was 7.42 per day. The most important topic was the removal of migrants from Belgrade's streets (6 reports), the discovery of a hideout with 37 migrants in Belgrade's suburb of Mirijevo (24 reports), and the arrest and prosecution of migrant traffickers.

In March 182 reports were published, 19 on websites, 37 by radio and TV stations and 126 in newspapers. The average daily number of reports was 5.87. March 8 saw the greatest number of releases – 16, while there were none on March 11 and March 24, respectively. Migrants were most frequently mentioned within reports on the adoption of the laws on asylum, foreigners and traffic safety by the Serbian parliament. According to Serbian Interior Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic there were around 3,500 registered migrants in Serbia in March.

April was the month when the least number of reports was published – a total of 173 – of which 8 on websites, 31 by radio and TV stations and 134 in newspapers. April 26 was the day with the highest number of releases – 15, while on April 8 only one report was released. On average, there were 4.47 reports per day in this month. Most reports concerned the protests in Hungary against Prime Minister Viktor Orban, mentioning also the attitude toward migrants in that country, as well as events involving migrants at the border crossings with Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The media also reported on the Incentive for Migrants in Seven Towns campaign, as well as the granting of Serbian citizenship to the Nouri family that became known thanks to their member, a gifted boy artist.

In May 288 reports were released, of them 44 on websites, 55 by radio and TV stations and 189 in newspapers. May 31 saw the highest number of reports – 22, while two were published on May 20 and 26, respectively. The average number of releases per day was 9.29. The reports mostly tackled relations between the countries in the region where migrants were concerned, whether the countries will return the migrants to Serbia and is there a danger of a migrant bottleneck being created in Serbia. Many media carried statements by Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik on the occasion of the entry of a large number of migrants into Bosnia and Herzegovina. Migrants were also mentioned in reports dealing with the consequences of the abolishing of the visa regime with Iran, as well as concerning the draft National Security Strategy and the Defense Strategy, which the Ministry of Defense released for a public debate. An incident in Belgrade when some migrants allegedly tried to drag a girl into a car was also a topic, along with reports about the arrest and prosecution of migrants.

June was the month with the highest number of reports – 485, of which 94 were posted on websites, 88 broadcast by radio and TV stations and 303 published in newspapers. Most reports – 44 – were released on June 20, whereas the least number was registered on June 13 – six. There were 16.16 reports per day on average. This high number was due to three international events – an EU leaders' summit on the migrant crisis, a meeting of the Balkan interior ministers in Brussels also dedicated to the migrant crisis, and the 5th Fundamental Rights Forum dedicated to the same topic. Also, this month saw the arrival of a large number of migrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with an incident in Velika Kladusa in which one Moroccan was killed and another one, in Croatia, when the Zadar police wounded two children while firing shots at a group of migrants attracting the most media attention. The media also speculated about the Balkans potentially becoming a migrant center and Angela Merkel's possible fall from power over the issue of migrants.

A total of 361 reports were released in July, of them 68 on websites, 55 by radio and TV stations and 238 in newspapers. July 10 saw the release of the highest number of reports – 25, while on July 30 only six were published. The average number of reports per day in July was 11.65. During this month the media tackled the issue of migrants within reports on the happenings in the EU, which is yet to come up with a common strategy on the resolving of the migrant crisis, adding that the Western Balkans, as a transit territory, should also be included in the solution. Other reports from the EU countries concerned statements such as the one by the Czech prime minister that migrants should be assisted in their own countries and not in the EU, or a decision by the Bulgarian parliament to forbid its government the signing of any agreements on migrants. Also covered were events in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the migrant crisis provoked protests and demands that Minister of Security Dragan Mektic be dismissed. Other reports from Serbia mentioned EUR500,000 in assistance from the EU in connection with the migrant crisis and that thanks to such assistance Serbia did a lot in managing the crisis at home. Data from the Save the Children organization on the arrival of migrants from the Middle East in Serbia was cited, as well as the fact that the biggest number of migrants in Serbia come from Iran (28 percent), Pakistan (26 percent) and Afghanistan (17 percent).

10 The press clipping included items from the daily newspapers Vecernje Novosti, Politika, Danas, Blic, Kurir, Informer, Alo, Srpski Telegraf, Dnevnik, Narodne Novine Nis; the weeklies NIN, Vreme, Novi Magazin, Ekspres, Nedeljnik; the national TV stations RTS public service, Prva, O2, Pink, Happy and KCN (Kopernikus), as well as Studio B, City TV Subotica, regional TV Novi Pazar, as well as the websites Telegraf, Srbija Danas, Mondo and Juzne Vesti.

August saw the release of 301 reports, of which 41 on websites, 43 by radio and TV stations and 217 in newspapers. Most of them, 27, were published on Aug. 2, whereas on Aug. 11 only two were released. The daily average was 9.7 reports. The reports dealt mostly with incidents – the discovery of the bodies of migrants murdered near the town of Ruma and a traffic accident near Vranje, in which several illegal migrants were hurt. Borderline areas toward Bosnia and Herzegovina were also in focus due to attempts of the migrants to cross the Drina at the town of Zvornik. A large number of reports covered other migrant-related events in that country.

In September 385 reports were released, of them 66 on websites, 65 by radio and TV stations and 254 in newspapers. The biggest number of releases was on Sept. 21 – 38, while only four were published on Sept. 23 and 28, respectively. The average number of reports was 12.83. At the beginning of September the main topic was the enrolment of migrant children in Serbian schools (344 children in 33 schools across Serbia) and the introduction of the mandatory preschool program for little migrants from 5 and-a-half to 6 and-a-half years old (a total of 38 children). Most media attention was drawn by an agreement signed between Serbia and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Froter) which was the topic addressed in over 30 reports. A major topic was also the launching of the European Parliament's disciplinary action against Hungary over this country's anti-migration policies, including a new law stipulating the penalties for lawyers and activists helping asylum seekers.

October saw 364 releases – 62 online, 71 by radio and TV stations and 231 in the press. The average daily number of releases for October was 11.74. The days with the smallest number of releases were Oct. 8, Oct. 13 and Oct. 20, with 4 releases each. The day with the biggest number of releases – 34 – was Oct. 25. The media in October focused the most on a statement by Dveri MP Srdjan Nogo, that Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic had already initialed the Dublin Regulation on migrants with the EU, which was why she "should be hanged on Terazije Street along with President Vucic" – more than 20 releases. We would also like to point out the dissemination of fake news on social networks on "an attack by a group of migrants" on a girl (aged 17) in downtown Belgrade, which the Serbian Commisariat for Refugees and Migration also described as very dangerous. The media spotlight remained on events in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly on incidents at the country's border crossings to Croatia (34 releases). The media, according to news agencies and websites, predominantly reported on an accident in Izmir in which 22 migrants were killed.

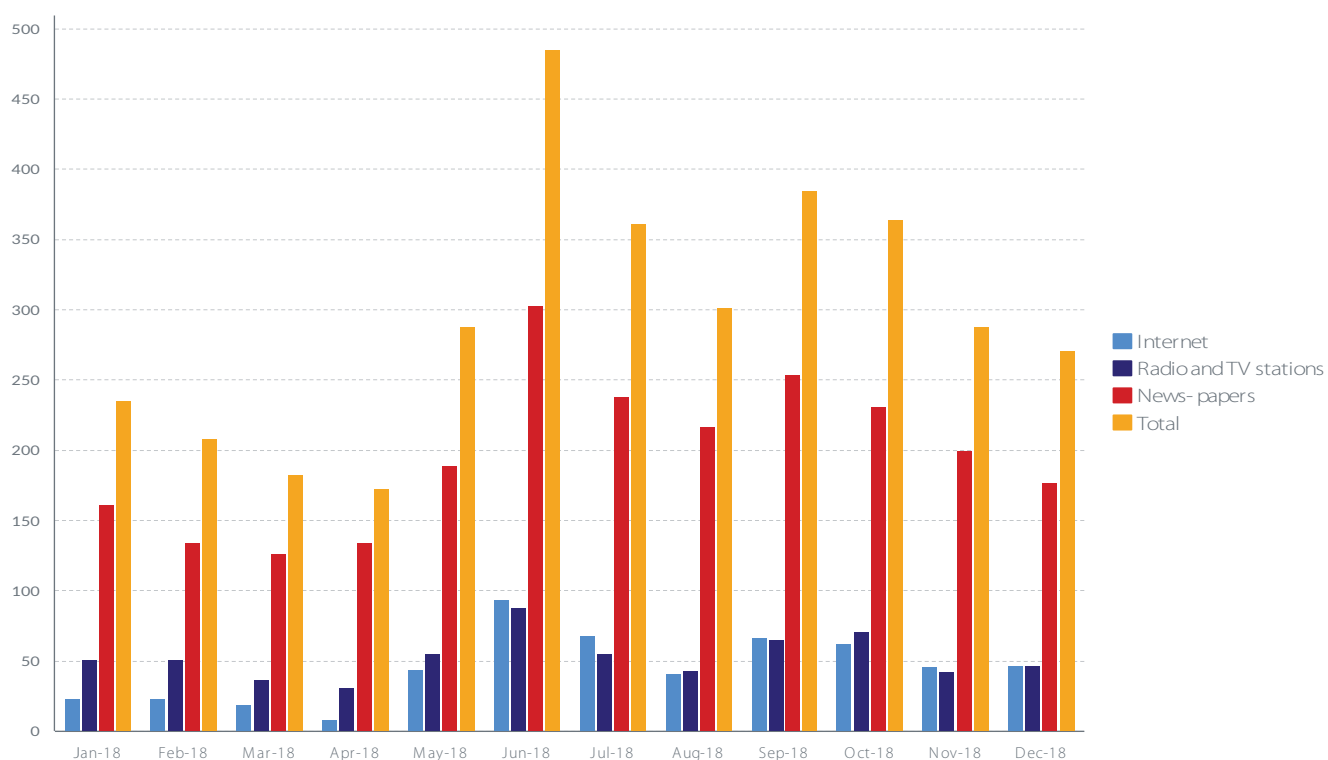
November brought 288 releases – 46 online, 42 on radio and TV stations and 200 in the press. The days with the smallest number of releases were Nov. 18 and 21 with 3 releases each. The day with the biggest number of releases was Nov. 15, with 27 reports. The average daily number of releases in November was 9.6. The central theme in November was the U.N. global agreement on migrants and the withdrawal of some EU member states from the agreement, with a special focus on Austria and the Czech Republic. The media, according to news agencies (BETA), also conveyed a statement by Angela Merkel that it was in Germany's interest to support the U.N. global agreement on migration. TV stations also devoted attention to a statement by Serbian Minister of Defense Aleksandar Vulin on the migrant crisis "which is not over."

December saw 271 releases in total – 47 online, 47 on radio and TV stations and 177 in the press. The average daily number of releases in December was 8.74. The day with the smallest number of releases was Dec. 24, with one (1) release. The day with the biggest number of reports was Dec. 19 with 24 releases. The central theme in the Serbian media in this month was the situation concerning the migrants on the Bosnia and Herzegovina – Croatia border, with special attention drawn by a feature made by German public service ARD, containing footage showing Croatian police sending migrants back to Bosnia with the use of batons. The media also focused on International Migrants Day, stating the number of migrants in Serbia, what percentage of them plans to seek asylum and assessing the extent to which Serbia is interested in integrating refugees.

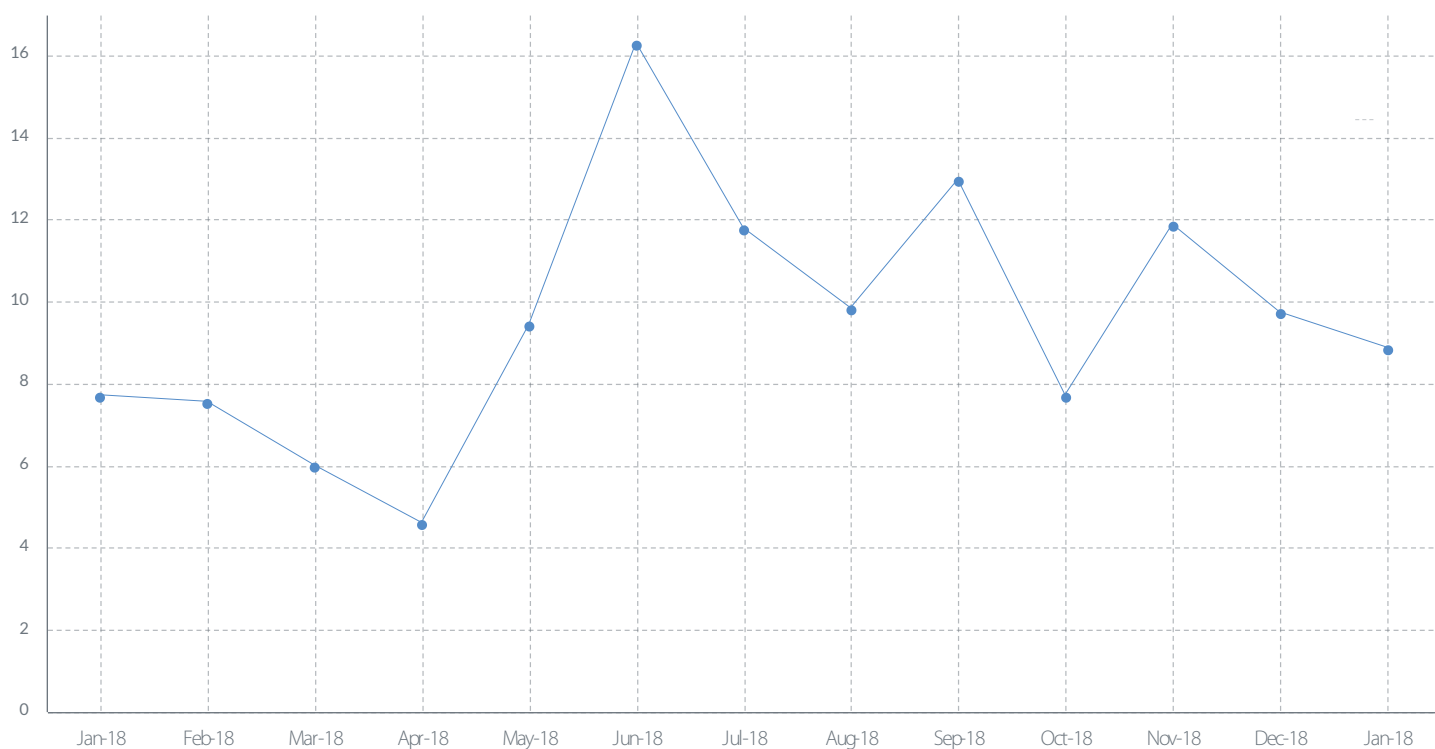
Attached are charts with a detailed presentation of daily releases of the analyzed media in the course of 2018 and a comparative chart with data for 2017 and 2018.

OVERVIEW OF REPORTS

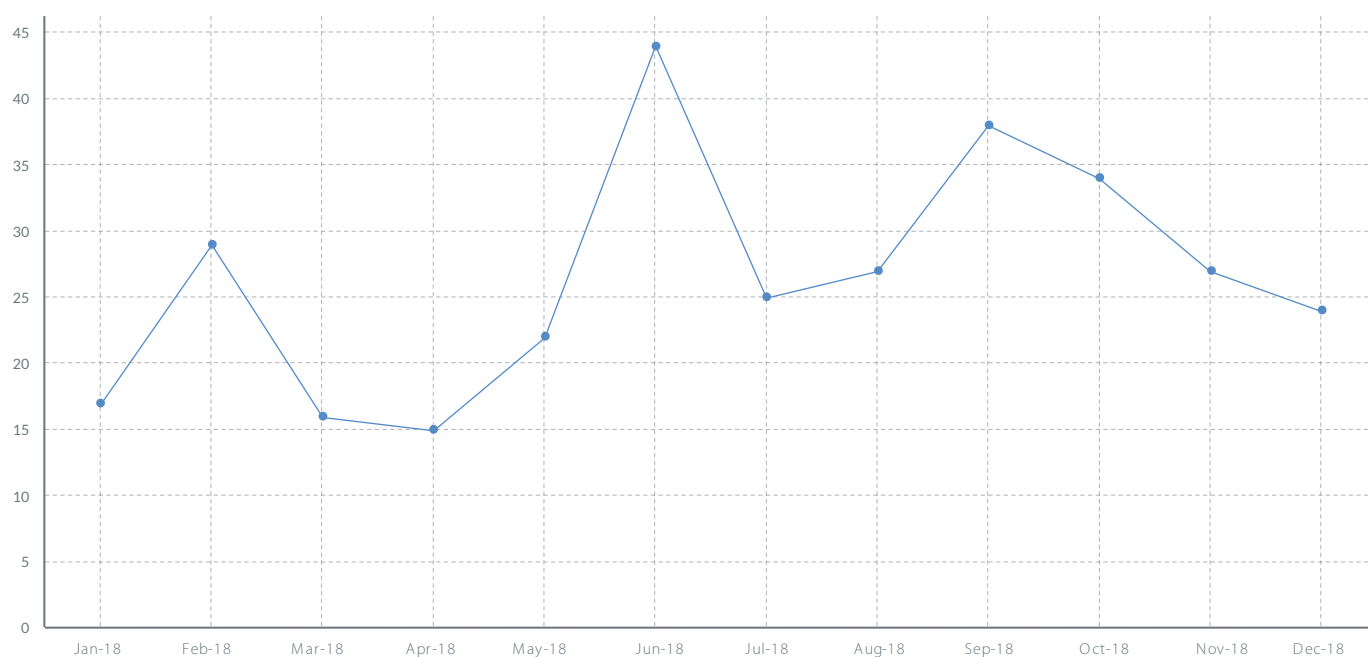
REPORTS	INTERNET	RADIO AND TV STATIONS	NEWSPAPERS	TOTAL	AVERAGE NUMBER	HIGHEST NUMBER OF REPORTS IN ONE DAY
Jan-18	23	51	161	235	7,58	17
Feb-18	23	51	134	208	7,42	29
Mar-18	19	37	126	182	5,87	16
Apr-18	8	31	134	173	4,47	15
May-18	44	55	189	288	9,29	22
Jun-18	94	88	303	485	16,16	44
Jul-18	68	55	238	361	11,65	25
Aug-18	41	43	217	301	9,7	27
Sep-18	66	65	254	385	12,83	38
Oct-18	62	71	231	354	11,74	34
Nov-18	46	42	200	288	9,6	27
Dec-18	47	47	177	271	8,74	24



AVERAGE MONTHLY NEWS REPORTS



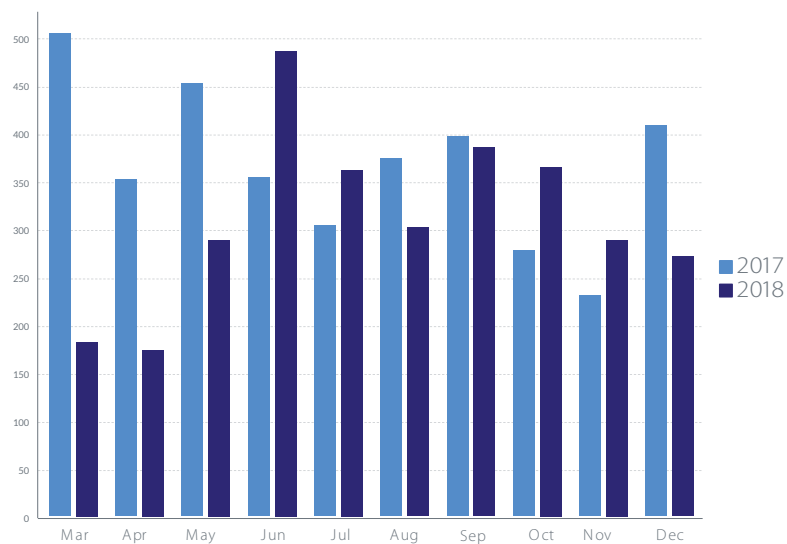
HIGHEST NUMBER OF REPORTS IN ONE DAY



COMPARATIVE REPORTS / MARCH - DECEMBER 2017/2018

Comparative monthly TOTAL REPORTS March-December 2017/2018

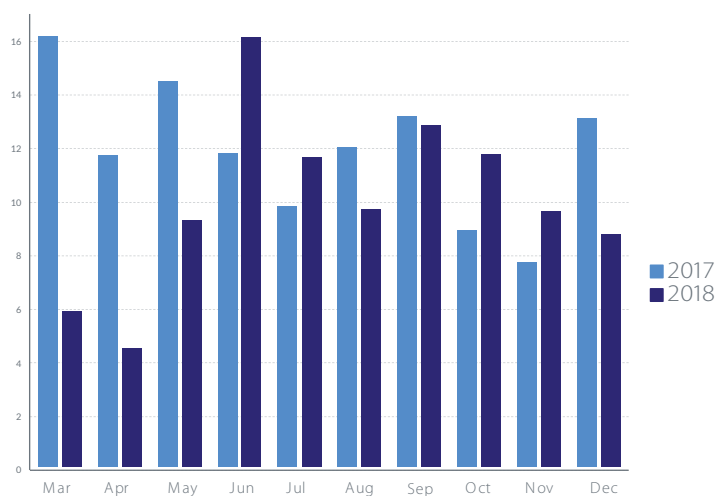
MONTH	2017	2018
March	503	182
April	351	173
May	451	288
June	351	485
July	303	361
August	373	301
September	396	385
October	277	364
November	230	288
December	407	271



COMPARATIVE REPORTS / MARCH - DECEMBER 2017/2018

Comparative AVERAGE MONTHLY REPORTS March-December 2017/2018

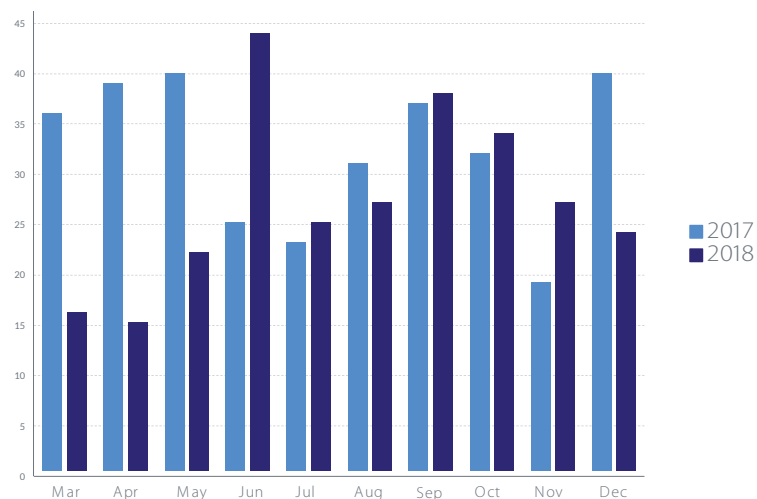
MONTH	2017	2018
March	16,2	5,87
April	11,7	4,47
May	14,5	9,29
June	11,8	16,16
July	9,8	11,65
August	12,0	9,7
September	13,2	12,83
October	8,9	11,74
November	7,7	9,6
December	13,1	8,74



COMPARATIVE REPORTS / MARCH - DECEMBER 2017/2018

Comparative HIGHEST NUMBER OF REPORTS IN ONE DAY March-December 2017/2018

MONTH	2017	2018
March	36	16
April	39	15
May	40	22
June	25	44
July	23	25
August	31	27
September	37	38
October	32	34
November	19	27
December	40	24



The topics covered the most in 2018 may be divided into the following groups:

1. Serbia's official policy on migrants, migrant accommodation and inclusion;
2. Incidents involving migrants;
3. Migrant crisis in neighboring countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary and Montenegro;
4. EU member states and the migrant crisis;
5. Causes of migration, events in the countries migrants are coming from, Trump's policy on migrants;
6. Activities of the civil sector in Serbia where migration is concerned.

What attracts attention is that the first topic was covered mostly through the press releases and statements of officials of the competent ministries and institutions. Even when press conferences were organized, reporters rarely asked questions focusing on migrants' accommodation conditions or the regulation of their stay or asylum procedure. These articles dealt exclusively with registered migrants.

The second topic was also frequently present in all media and, as a rule, was the favorite subject of the tabloids and websites that cover such events with sensationalist headlines. They aimed to describe incidents arising from a conflict between migrants in detail, with additional fabricated implications, and if an article only conveyed official reports on an event, then the headlines were bombastic. Incidents between migrants and Serbian citizens were reported on in a sensationalist manner, accompanied by headlines and photographs that most frequently were not in accordance with the text. Articles reveal a glaring lack of knowledge of the cultural and social milieu the migrants come from, the historical heritage of their countries and the current political and economic situation in those countries. The Serbian citizens' views conveyed on that occasion were mainly burdened by prejudice, with a strong lack of acceptance and fear of migrants.

The third topic was also frequently present in the Serbian media, especially during the warmer months marked by increased migration. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia were particularly in the spotlight and some events saw the biggest number of releases. This topic was usually covered online and via the media in those countries and news agencies, and researched articles were rare. This subject was also marked by "strong" headlines suggesting that the neighbors treat migrants inhumanely. Serbia's role in all those processes, as well as the fact that a large percentage of migrants entered those countries from Serbia, was hardly mentioned. An integral part of the Serbian media reports were also statements by the official institutions in these countries (the police, ministries, organizations in charge of migration).

Many articles in the media focused on the EU and its migrant policy, as well as on migrant-related events in Germany, Hungary, Austria, the Czech Republic and France. This topic was covered through agency articles and the European press as sources, while a large number of researched articles was also registered in periodicals (weeklies). The basic conclusion of almost all articles was that the migrant crisis had caused a rift in Europe.

The fifth theme was not represented in the media to any great extent, where the causes of migration and events in the countries the migrants come from are concerned. However, Trump's policy on migrants was noticeably more widely represented and all events in the U.S. on that occasion were covered in considerable detail. Agency articles were dominant on the subject, as well as researched stories from the U.S. press, along with analytical articles on trends in Europe and America regarding the migrant crisis.

The sixth subject, which follows the activities of Serbia's civil sector, was more visible than in the previous year, although it still accounted only for around two percent of all reports and articles. The person from the sector most present in the Serbian media over the course of 2018 was Rados Djurovic, director of the Asylum Protection Center.

As for the tone of reporting, the position of the media and journalists remains predominantly positive or value-neutral as to the fate of migrants and asylum seekers. Exceptions to such reports mainly occurred in the coverage of incidents involving refugees. Statistics, nevertheless, show that incidents were rare, that clashes mostly happened within migrant groups, and that instances of negative interaction with the Serbian population were rare.

TRENDS AND CONCLUSIONS

Over the course of 2018 the migrant crisis continued to be an unavoidable topic in Serbia's media, only slightly smaller in volume relative to the year 2017. The overall production still showcases few journalistic analytical articles and features, with press releases and officials' statements accounting for more than 80 percent of the production.

The noticeable differences relative to 2017 are:

- greater media interest in events in neighboring countries and the EU;
- a slight increase in analytical articles, especially when it comes to European migration policies
- a reduced volume of production.

The manner and tone of Serbian media reporting on migrants and asylum seekers in 2018 had all the same characteristics as the reporting in 2017. In most cases production suffered from a deficit of substance, because real issues were rarely raised and real problems rarely addressed. Practice shows that per one warning by NGOs that there was no concrete plan, institutional capacity and long-term strategy for the reception of refugees, about a dozen statements by government officials on the humane attitude and good treatment of the members of these endangered groups by citizens and institutions were published.

Since the beginning of the migrant crisis in 2015, more than a million migrants have passed through Serbia and the entire time the public has been presented with contradicting information about their accommodation and stay, coming on one side from the official institutions and, on the other, from the NGO sector. Namely, the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration continuously claims that migrants and their problems are being handled, while the CSOs working in the field point to the myriad problems facing migrants in Serbia. The main objection of civil sector representatives is that the Serbian government is not dealing with problems or taking a serious look at the position Serbia may well find itself in, bearing in mind that migrants have an increasingly difficult time continuing their journey north, while to the south are countries which do not fully cooperate in the suppression of migration, meaning that Serbia is under a real threat of becoming a buffer zone.

In Serbian media one can seldom find criticism of the Serbian government's policy on the migrant crisis. The reason should be sought within the media themselves, which cover the topic through statements, press releases and agency news and which have few journalists with expertise for reporting on these issues. The print media, primarily the weeklies, as a rule deal with a broader range of migrant-related topics in a more thorough and comprehensive way, which implies the existence of advanced knowledge and experience of journalists in the matter (regardless of the fact that it is precisely the press that is the field in which the media crisis is manifested the most), while websites and TV stations do not tend to do that.

The media production continues to conspicuously perpetuate prejudice toward the migrant population, specifically by evaluating its education, lifestyle and customs, as well as the cultural patterns of their home countries. Articles on violence, sexual harassment or physical assault are especially dangerous, depicting migrants as people with a very low tolerance level, unpredictable and socially backward. There is also an evident fear of a large number of migrants who might become competition on the labor market, or as a source of potential infectious diseases which they might carry. The majority of media report on these themes in a sensationalist way, without empathy or understanding for the migrants' problems and the circumstances they are in.

Finally, it should be noted that in the course of 2018 the Serbian public was clearly confronted with the fact that the borders to the European Union are practically closed and that there is a realistic possibility that a number of migrants currently waiting to cross the borders will end up permanently staying in Serbia after all. However, the Serbian government still maintains the position that the migrants are in the country temporarily and will very soon move toward attractive or desired destinations in EU member countries, depicting the issue as not a priority one. It will be very challenging to monitor how the attitude of the media, but also of the Serbian public toward migrants and asylum seekers will change once the realization that some of those people will stay in Serbia forever becomes dominant.



The European Union is made up of 28 Member States who have decided to gradually link together their know-how, resources and destinies. Together, during a period of enlargement of 50 years, they have built a zone of stability, democracy and sustainable development whilst maintaining cultural diversity, tolerance and individual freedoms. The European Union is committed to sharing its achievements and its values with countries and peoples beyond its borders. The European Commission is the EU's executive body.

Delegacija Evropske unije u Srbiji - <http://europa.rs/>
EuropeAid Cooperation Office - https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/index_en.htm
Civil Society Facility Programme 2015
<https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/europeaid/online-services/index-.cfm?ADSSChck=1472572570252&do=publi.detPUB&nbPubliList=15&page=1&orderby=upd&se>

Partneri na projektu

Centar za zaštitu i pomoć tražiocima azila APC/CZA - <http://azilsrbija.rs/>
<http://apc-cza.org>
BETA novinska agencija - <https://beta.rs/>
Centar za istraživanje javnih politika - <http://www.publicpolicy.rs/>

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Smartphone Application
Asylum in Serbia:

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