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“Journeys to a New Life: Understanding the role of youth work in integrating young refugees in Europe”

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The Role of Youth Sector in the Integration and Empowerment of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Serbia

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1. Background

Serbia has been traditionally a country of emigration, and before 2015 not a significant number of asylum seekers applied for asylum in the country.¹ In fact, Serbia began to develop a relevant legislative framework as a requirement of the process of negotiations for the EU membership since 2008. At the moment, the asylum system is regarded as dysfunctional. To illustrate, in the first five years of the application of the Law on Asylum, from 2008 until July 2013, only ten people were granted asylum.² 53 people applied for asylum in 2008, 275 in 2009, 522 in 2010, 3134 in 2011, 2733 in 2012, 2232 in 2013, 16.490 in 2014, whereas, according to the evidence of the Commissariat for Refugees in Migration, 579.518 expressed an intention to apply for asylum in 2015. However, there is an enormous discrepancy between a number of individuals who express an intention to ask for asylum and an actual number of people who receive it. To illustrate this, in 2012 there were 1806 recorded asylum seekers, 465 of them were registered, 261 submitted a request for asylum, and the Asylum Office brought 42 decisions. All 42

¹ This paper does not consider immigrants in Serbia who have temporary residence permits based on work and marriage.

² Djurovic, R., Dedakin, J., & Jancic, I. (2013). *Azil Info*. Retrieved from Asylum Protection Centre website: http://apc-cza.org/azil-u-srbiji/images/publikacije/azil_info.pdf

requests were denied based on the concept of the safe third country.³ A high number of refusals are related to the fact that Serbia considers all neighboring countries to be safe third countries and asylum seekers arrive from these countries. Another reason is that the clear majority of asylum seekers leave Serbia to continue their journey to Western Europe before the procedure is over because it is not their preferred destination.

Nevertheless, the inefficiency of the asylum system is in striking contrast to the efforts that the Serbian government has put into the handling of the current humanitarian refugee crisis since summer 2015. The Serbian authorities have refused to stop the arrival of refugees by building a fence or closing the border. They closely cooperate with foreign governments and donors and local and international civil society organizations in providing humanitarian aid and health care, and they embarked on different infrastructural projects to facilitate the temporary stay, such as the provision of temporary housing in border areas, however, if those people do not intend to remain in the country. The official insists that refugees are only transiting to Serbia and negate the rumors circulating in the public and the press that Serbia will build a large asylum center with the funds of the EU. The efforts of the Serbian authorities aim at accommodating the needs of people passing through Serbia and ensuring that Serbia remains a transit country. The explicit goal of the Serbian government and state institutions has been to ensure safe passage and the fulfillment of the immediate needs of people in the transit. However, following the opening of negotiations on Chapter 24 for accessing the European Union, Serbia is obliged to increase the reception capacity and accept up to 6,000 people.⁴ Hence, the rationale behind this paper is that due to its international obligations, Serbia will eventually have to accept permanently a certain number of asylum seekers and conduct integration programs.

Since the establishment of the independent asylum system in 2008, civil society has been active in assisting asylum seekers. Although Serbian authorities had had experience in accommodating the ethnic Serbian refugees from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina during the 1990s, and the state responded to the increased number of asylum seekers, first by opening five permanent asylum centers since 2008, and by opening 17 transit centers at the borders during 2015, financed by the central budget, the civil sector has had a role in providing legal advice and all kinds of humanitarian aid. However, the relationship between the state institutions and CSOs has been ambivalent at best.⁵ Until recently, the state did not aspire to control, coordinate, and manage activities of CSOs. Nevertheless, because of an obvious policy

³ Andjelkovic, M., Brajkovic, R., Jelacic, M., Krkobabic, D., Malbasa, D., Milenkovic, B., Rakic, D., Savkovic, M., Sobic, M., Tilinke, Z., & Zoric, J. (2012). *Izazovi prisilnih migracija u Srbiji*. Retrieved from Grupa 484 website: http://www.nexusvranje.com/dokumenti/sr/7_20_izazovi_prisilnih_migracija_srp.pdf

⁴ Lilyanova, V. (2016). *Serbia's Role in Dealing with the Migration Crisis*. Retrieved from European Parliament Think Tank website: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2016\)589819](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2016)589819)

⁵ For the relationship between the state institutions and CSOs and identified problems see Gojkovic Turunz, N. (2016). The cooperation between the state institutions and civil society organisations in Serbia in the refugee crisis. In H. Guisto & E. Laino (Eds.), *From Europe to Local: Migrating Solidarity* (pp. 201-220). Retrieved from <http://www.feps-europe.eu/assets/6c3a68df-00ef-47eb-9eac-b840470a9943/2016-09-27-solidar-publication-migration-online-versionpdf.pdf>

and discursive shift from humanitarianism to securitisation, the Ministry of Work sent an open letter to humanitarian and international organizations on November 4, 2016. In the letter, state secretary Nenad Ivanisevic underlines that the provision of food, clothes, and shoes to migrants is no longer acceptable. It is yet unknown how this decision will affect the activities of the CSO, albeit the conditions among asylum seekers will worsen due to insufficient accommodation capacities in asylum centers. The rest of the paper evaluates the current initiatives and activities of the CSOs; identifies the obstacles for integration; and proposes the recommendations for the fostering of integration.

2. Current projects and initiatives⁶

The Serbian civil sector has been active in assisting refugees and IDPs since the *en mass* arrival of ethnic Serbs from Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, and Kosovo in the 1990s. Hence, some organizations continued to use their expertise to assist non-ethnic refugees. To illustrate, [Group 484](#), established in 1995 to directly assist Serbian families from Croatia, has been having diverse activities targeting non-Serbian migrants for several years already, including direct distribution of aid, policy making and advocacy activities, trainings for the state employees, and projects directed at raising awareness and intercultural dialogue. What is more, Group 484 coparticipated in organizing the exhibition "[Border is Closed - First Steps](#)", displayed in the Museum of African Arts in 2015 and The Belgrade Youth Center in 2016, whose aim was to raise awareness on the current historical moment of migration. Further, [Belgrade Center for Human Rights](#) (BCHR), [Asylum Protection Center](#) (APC), and [Praxis](#) offer legal aid to asylum seekers and guide them through the entire asylum process.⁷ In addition, [Asylum Info Centre](#) (AIC), a joint initiative of the municipality Savski Venac and NGOs [ADRA](#), BCHR, and KlikAktiv, provides first psychological aid, legal aid, cultural mediation,⁸ provision of information, communication (WiFi and computers), non-food aid (clothes, shoes, blankets, and hygienic packages), and safe corner for children.

Apart from legal aid, the civil sector has been exceptionally active in providing food and other humanitarian aid. The main distribution center in Belgrade is [Refugee Aid Miksaliste](#), which has helped 150,000 people since its establishment in August 2015. It gathers local and international volunteers, and so far, more than 1,300 people volunteered there. Volunteers of Miksaliste conduct different kind of workshops (e.g. Language and arts and crafts) and activities for children. Furthermore, [Info Park](#), a grass root initiative of activists, was based in the so-called Afghan Park next to the main bus and train station in Belgrade. It distributes 1,500 meals daily and provides legal and logistical information, communication,

⁶ This section does not cover activities of large international organizations such as Doctors without Borders, Danish Refugee Council, Save the Children, and Women and Children International (WAHA). Rather, it focuses on local organizations and formal and non-formal groups of international volunteers.

⁷ As a part of working group which included Ministry of Interior, Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (KIRS), Ombudsman, UNHCR, IOM, the EU Delegation in Serbia, Group 484, BCHR, and APC prepared a draft of a new law on asylum, but it is yet to be adopted.

⁸ 12 cultural mediators serve as translators for Arabic, Urdu, and Farsi, but also mediate between "beneficiaries" and state institutions and a new culture.

and assistance in obtaining medical aid. Info Park's team of volunteers includes Serbian, Moroccan, Egyptian, Iranian, and Syrian volunteers. However, the activities of Info Park suddenly ceased because the authorities of Belgrade ordered on October 25, 2016 the removal of their object.

When it comes to conventional youth work, [Center for Civil Society Strengthening](#) will organize training course "Social Entrepreneurship with/for Immigrants, Refugees, and Other Marginalized Groups" in Novi Sad in December 2016 within the Erasmus+ Youth in Action Program. It targets "youth workers willing to further develop (social) entrepreneurship skills of youngsters and support establishment of different social enterprises by, with, and for immigrants, refugees, and other youth with fewer opportunities."⁹ Further, Agora Aveiro from Portugal organized [Human Library "A Mile in My Shoes"](#) in [KC Grad - European Center for Culture and Debate](#) in March 2015, funded by Erasmus+. At this event, Syrians and Indians acted as books, as well as people working with refugees.

An innovative approach was taken by [StartIt](#), a grass-root NGO that provides support to Serbian technology and startup scene, in cooperation with Refugee Aid Miksaliste. They organized [Belgrade Techfugees Hackathon](#), an event that gathered NGOs, tech-engineers, entrepreneurs, and startups to develop a "tech response to the refugee crisis." However, out of proposed six solutions, none has been implemented so far.

Finally, formal and non-formal international groups of volunteers play a vital role in Serbian civil sector, not only in providing aid, but in particular in raising awareness and bringing together local community and asylum seekers. [Refugee Aid Serbia](#), active since summer 2015, apart from providing humanitarian aid in cooperation with Info Park, organized several events for increasing the visibility and bringing together asylum seekers and local population, such as "[Humanity in Motion - Volunteers' Stories - Belgrade-Berlin Connection](#)" and [Routes Festival](#). Routes Festival is of particular importance as it was open to a wide public and included a large variety of activities, such as: discussions (testimonies of refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yugoslav wars); workshops and activities for children (Serbian and Afghan dances, traditional henna hand-painting, and Hamsa/Hand of Fatima), and live music performance. What is more, they formed a "Refugee Aid Team" for the Belgrade Marathon in April 2016. Also, photographer Jerome Cid staged the exhibition [They are Only Men](#) in UK Parobrod to raise funds for Refugee Aid and raise awareness on the situation of children in Sid, a small town at the Serbian-Croatian border.

Moreover, [Refugee Foundation](#) established in August 2016 runs the Daily Center in Belgrade, space in which people can read, watch movies, listen to music, use the Internet, and meet the locals. [North Star](#) and [I'm Human Organization](#) run a [Kelebija Community Center](#), at Serbian-Hungarian border. In the community center, people have access to the Internet and warm showers, they receive food and clothes, but also there is an educational center offering English and German classes for adults and activities for children (story-telling, games, drawings). In fact, IHO was established by Tarek Muhrat, a refugee from

⁹ The participants will be from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovakia, and Turkey.

Syria, to support refugees arriving from Bulgaria to Serbia and later expended activities to Hungarian-Serbian border, providing hot meals, drinks, and non-food items. So far, 1200 international volunteers participated in IHO's activities and it is estimated that they helped 35,000 people. Lastly, [Eat, Pray, Love Volunteers of Belgrade](#) is the international initiative established in October 2016. It serves as a platform for connecting all international and local volunteers and activists working in Belgrade, and organizes small story-telling events gathering asylum seekers, local population, foreigners residing in Serbia, and international volunteers to share stories and get together.

To summarize basically, there are three main types of organizations active in Serbia in the field of migration. First, well-established NGOs that have been specialised in assisting refugees, IDPs, and asylum seekers long before summer 2015. Second, providers of aid that emerged primarily as a local, grass-root, civic response to the humanitarian crisis during summer 2015 (i.e. Miksaliste and Info Park). Third, non-formal and formal groups and organizations of international and Serbian volunteers and activists that have been emerging since summer 2015. These groups do not only include foreigners residing in Serbia, but also those who came with an intention to help and decided to stay, such as founders of North Star and EPL. However, it is striking that otherwise well-established and very active youth sector operating within the Erasmus + program is largely absent, apart from the upcoming training course of CJCD, as well as members of the [Roof Organization of Serbian Youth](#).

3. Obstacles to integration

When planning the settlement of asylum seekers and integration programs, it is crucial to take into account attitudes of local self-governments and population as well as economic prospects and possibilities for inclusion. More precisely, it means choosing urban centers such as Belgrade and Novi Sad with a developed civil sector ready to assist in integration and possibilities for the education and employment and self-employment over deprived rural and urban areas. Hence, this section reviews research on the attitudes towards asylum seekers and immigrants.

So far, except in Sjenica and Tutin, municipalities in the Sandzak region, where the population of Muslim faith exceeds 90%, openings of asylum centers were followed by vocal protests of local authorities and inhabitants. In some cases, representatives of local authorities even led the protests. The protests broke out in Banja Koviljaca in summer 2015, and similar protests occurred in Mladenovac (Meanwhile, this center was closed) and Bogovadja. As Stojic Mitrovic argues, the core of these protests is that, in Mladenovac "Similarly as in Banja Koviljaca earlier (and Bogovadja during the autumn 2013), the international obligation of Serbian state to accept the asylum seekers have been perceived as an unfair pressure on a local community, who "has to bear the burden of the presence of migrants alone."¹⁰ The protesters typically pointed out that they are afraid of diseases, foreign culture, and habits, for security of their property, women and children. According to UNHCR research, the main reasons for

¹⁰ Stojic Mitrovic, M. (2014). Presenting as a Problem, Acting as an Opportunity: Four Cases of Socio-Political Conflicts Taking the Presence of Migrants as a Focal Object in Serbia. *Glasnik Etnografskon instituta SANU, 1*, 67-83. Retrieved from <http://www.doiserbia.nb.rs/img/doi/0350-0861/2014/0350-08611401067S.pdf>

protests against the opening asylum centers are fear for personal and family safety, different cultural patterns, increased criminality rate and illnesses and diseases.¹¹ The research also showed that inhabitants of Bogovanja, Banja Koviljaca, and Obrenovac are against having the asylum center nearby. Such incidents indicate the isolation of the asylum seekers in the asylum centers, and in particular, the isolation of women and children, and illustrate non-willingness of local self-governments and communities to assist asylum seekers and promote integration.

Furthermore, it is important to underline a discrepancy between the different levels of the government, particularly between the national and the local level. At the national level, Serbian government, as in the case of passing relevant laws in line with the EU legislation, was obliged to establish asylum centres. The primary goal behind the passing of relevant legislation and signing the international convention was to ensure the visa liberation for Serbian citizens and further progress in the EU integration process. The protests in local communities have been typically supported by the local authorities led by the opposition parties. Hence, their goal is to use the issue to attract the voters. In the Serbian public discourse on asylum issues "Human rights and humanness are evoked only up to the point where they explain the motifs for specific behaviour: the universal human right to asylum serves as a pretext and excuse to open asylum centres, the right to live as an excuse for inaction by the state to prevent break-ins, the right to privacy as an excuse not to let foreigners into the neighbourhood"¹²

The research of Vladimir Vuletic (2016) for UNDP revealed that politicians from local self-governments in Serbia commonly associate the work "migrant" with problems, whereas citizens express much higher degrees of empathy and describe migration experience through terms such as "suffering, sadness, eradication."¹³ Vuletic (2016) argues that there is a fear of permanent settlements of migrants in Serbia among Serbian citizens, albeit, the humanitarian perception persists. The research of Vuletic (2016) revealed that the factors considered to hinder the integration are cultural differences between the local population and newcomers; a widespread fear that the demographic ethnic structure would change due to the higher birth rate of new-comers; overall poverty and unemployment; an expectation that only the poorest and less educated people will eventually stay in Serbia; and "the positive discrimination" of migrants stemming from potential integration programs. Vuletic accurately captures the essence of resistance to integration by local population in Southern Serbia by arguing that "local level resistance to

¹¹UNHCR. (2014). *Stav gradjana Srbije prema traziocima azila*. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.rs/media/CeSIDUNHCR201014FINAL.pdf>

¹² Stojic Mitrovic, M. (2014). Presenting as a Problem, Acting as an Opportunity: Four Cases of Socio-Political Conflicts Taking the Presence of Migrants as a Focal Object in Serbia. *Glasnik Etnografskon instituta SANU*, 1, 67-83. Retrieved from <http://www.doiserbia.nb.rs/img/doi/0350-0861/2014/0350-08611401067S.pdf>

¹³ Vuletic, V. (2014). *Impacts of the Migration Crisis on Local Governments and Communities in Serbia and Possibilities for Integration*. Retrieved from UNDP website: http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNDP_SRB_Advocacy_Report_EN_Crisis_fin2_0.pdf

migrant integration isn't just based on culture or religion as much as it is based on a perceived feeling of deprivation among local citizens.”¹⁴

4. Conclusion and recommendations: Future role of youth sector

Taking into account the well-developed Serbian civil sector and the relatively small number of people that Serbia should accept, it is reasonable to assume that co-operation of all relevant stakeholders can result in successful integration and empowerment, in spite of general economic hardships and possible resistance towards the acceptance of asylum seekers. However, the critical prerequisite is that Serbian state officials decide to conduct the integration and support the civil sector, primarily with infrastructural in this process. The most pressing issues to be addressed by the Serbian civil sector with the assistance of the state, the European Union, and large organizations (WAHA, Red Cross, Caritas, Doctors without borders, etc.) are: funding, available space, dealing with trauma, empowerment, integration, and raising employability of asylum seekers; and raising awareness and intercultural dialogue.

The most pressing issue to be addressed is funding. Currently, the funding is either project-based or donations-based (typical for international volunteer groups). The ideas developed by individuals who are not members of well-established NGOs do not have much chance to be executed. What is more, there is a serious lack of structured, long-term, stable programs (not single events or short-lived, temporary projects), primarily because of the lack of funding. The workshops and activities organised in asylum centers are sporadic, depending on current grants. Hence, there are no continuously provided integration classes, language classes, nor therapy for dealing with trauma. The solution for this problem is to allocate funds for long-term, structured activities to be conducted at asylum centers for carrying out aforementioned activities.

Second, there is a pressing problem of available space for carrying out activities. To illustrate, workshops in Miksaliste take place in the same space where approximately 400 people a day receive food and clothes. EPL depends on a good will of the owner of the Sun Art Hostel to use its cafe for the events. Asylum Info Centre basically has own room with info Pult and a couple of computers and a safe corner for women and children. Neither city authorities nor the central government have so far recognized the need to financially or by providing facilities support the vitally important work of the civil sector. Remarkably, city of Belgrade has its [Office for Youth](#), which has facilities and provides training courses on creative writing, foreign languages, Photoshop, entrepreneurship and organic production of vegetables; make up; online school of entrepreneurship; IT courses; art workshops, etcetera. However, none of the activities target migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. The same goes for municipal offices for youth at three central municipalities Savski Venac, where are the bus and train station, Stari Grad, and Palilula,

¹⁴ Vuletic, V. (2014). *Impacts of the Migration Crisis on Local Governments and Communities in Serbia and Possibilities for Integration*. Retrieved from UNDP website: http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNDP_SRB_Advocacy_Report_EN_Crisis_fin2_0.pdf

where Asylum Center Krnjaca is located. For instance, [Office for Youth Stari Grad](#) runs free of charge psychological counselling, but only for youngsters residing in the municipality. It is important to underline that, according to the Law on Youth¹⁵ Offices for Youth are funded by the units of local self-governments. To be able to empower asylum seekers and to bring them together with the local community, it is necessary to establish community centers. It should be done in a cooperation with the city council, similar to municipal offices for youth. Alternatively, current Offices for Youth should open their doors and extend to activities to asylum seekers.

Upon receiving asylum, individuals are allowed to remain in an asylum center only up to one year. Hence, the issue of permanent housing by modifying the experience of [Il Dado: Residential Community for Roma Families](#), chosen as a good practice by Council of Europe. The idea is that empty spaces owned by the state are reconstructed by the support of large donors, and transformed into small flats for asylum seekers, homeless, and Serbian returnees from the EU on the basis of the readmission agreements. In addition, it would include offices for psychological support and a community center.¹⁶

Further, Serbian advantage is that it will receive a relatively small number of asylum seekers. Hence, it is both feasible and necessary to conduct skills-assessment prior deciding what is the best way to ensure that they continue their education and professional careers. Besides, upon the skills assesment, youth organizations can include asylum seekers in their regular activities as language teachers, workshops leaders, while organizations focused on social entrepreneurship could include them into professional activities. In fact, youth organizations should serve as mediators between individuals and socially responsible companies to offer interships and training courses that does not require high level of profficiency in Serbian.

Regarding raising awareness and intercultural diaglogue, it is imperative to establish co-operation with schools and sensitize the youth through events such as story-telling, visits to asylum centers, exhibition, screening of movies, cooking nights, and human libraries. Community centers in Belgrade and Novi Sad could serve as spaces to host such events and bring the public closer.

To conclude, the integration and empowerment of refugees in Serbia will not be possible without the state's decision to conduct it and abandoning of the principle that Serbia serves only as a transit country. It also requires much greater involmment of local authorities. Without it, and in particular when considering that a large part of the civil youth sector does not participate in it, the rest of the CSOs funded through grants and donations will not have sufficient capacity for it.

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¹⁶ The idea belongs to young researchers Lana Radovanovic and Katarina Kosmina.

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