

# ATTITUDES TOWARDS MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN SERBIA

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According to the report of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, in June 2020 approximately 3,000 refugees, migrants and asylum seekers from the Middle East and Africa were located in five asylum centers and 11 transit centers in Serbia. Despite the fact that the number of people seeking international protection has decreased in 2020, the topic of migration has become more prevalent in the public sphere and an increase in the proliferation of negative attitudes and/or incorrect information concerning the migrant and refugee population in Serbia has been noted. This trend had been particularly striking during the two-month State of Emergency introduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also in political campaigns for the 2020 parliamentary elections. With the aim of better understanding the views of citizens of Serbia towards refugees and migrants, as well as the socioeconomic and psychological factors contributing to the formation of negative views towards refugees and migrants, a research was conducted on a representative sample of citizens of the Republic of Serbia shortly after the State of Emergency was lifted. This report will present the research findings in the context of the attitudes of the citizens of Serbia towards various minority groups and socio-psychological factors relevant to greater or lesser acceptance of marginalized groups in our society.

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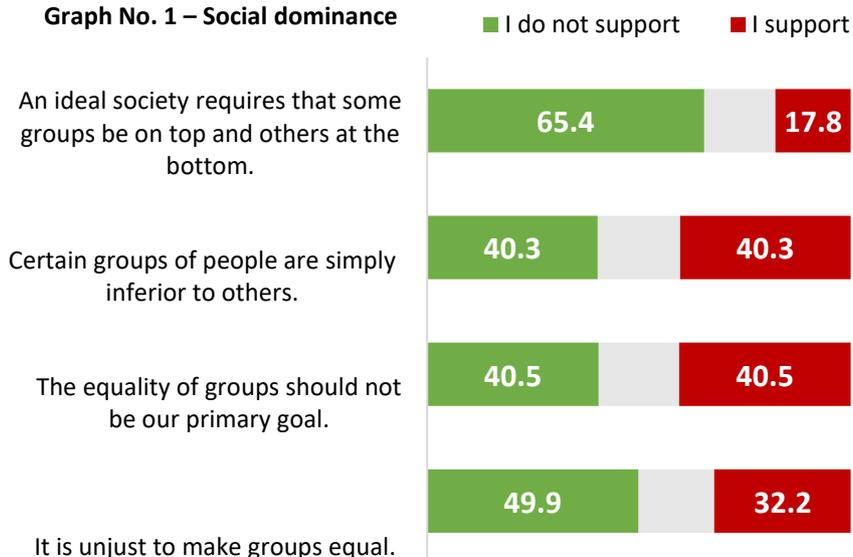
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# Views on the position of different social groups in society

In order to understand attitudes towards any minority group in a society, it is important to understand the ways in which citizens perceive equality among social groups, that is, their orientation to social domination. The orientation to social domination presents a measure of preference of hierarchically ordered social systems in which groups of “higher status” dominate, while groups of “lower status” are subjugated and perceived as being of lesser value. Regardless of the formal social system, the substantive equality of various social groups depends upon the reception of the population. Therefore, societies where the majority have a need for social dominance will be more prone to authoritarian regimes, discrimination and limiting access to or obstructing the realization of rights of minority groups. Graph No. 1 exhibits the percentage of citizens who are against, or rather, who support social dominance in society.

**Graph No. 1 – Social dominance**

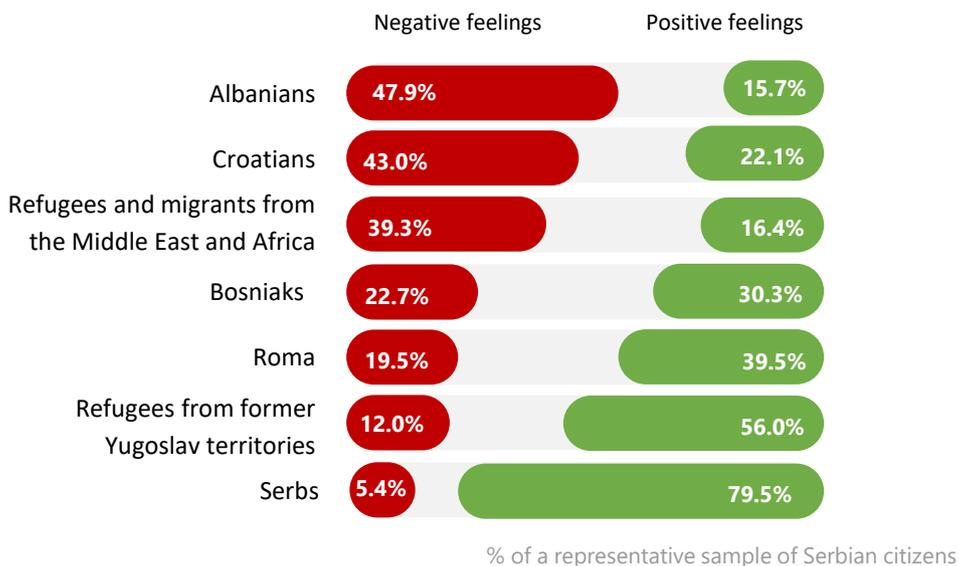


% of a representative sample of Serbian citizens

The result indicated that the citizens' attitudes towards social equality are highly divided, as well as that more than a third of Serbian citizens consider certain social groups to be of lesser value. Such social perceptions present a basis for the development of strong discriminatory views and negative attitudes towards different social, ethnic and other minority groups. In order to gain insight into the attitude of Serbian citizens towards various minority groups and understand their attitudes towards migrants in the context of other minority groups but also the dominant ethnic group, we asked citizens' about the kinds of feelings they have towards different groups (Graph No. 2).

### Grafikon No. 2 – Emotional attitude towards different ethnic groups

Now I will read the names of several ethnic groups. Please express your emotions towards each of them using numbers from 0 to 100, where 0 signifies very negative feelings, 50 neutral feelings, and 100 very positive feelings.



Almost one half of citizens state that they have negative feelings towards members of the Albanian ethnic group, followed by Croatians, while migrants and refugees from the Middle East and Africa are in third place. Expectedly so, Serbian citizens harbor most positive emotions towards members of the dominant group, i.e. their group, but it is interesting that the emotional attitude towards refugees from former Yugoslav territories is more akin to the one held towards Serbs than to refugees from other countries. Therefore, it seems that the emotional attitude is less contingent upon legal status and more upon ethnic belonging and cultural similarity of persons coming to Serbia.

*In a society which fosters equality and acceptance of different ethnic groups, and in which multiculturalism is a widespread value, the majority of citizens would have a **neutral-to-moderately-positive attitude** towards different ethnic groups. In Serbia, that is the case with slightly less than 20% of citizens.*



# Citizens' attitudes towards refugees and migrants

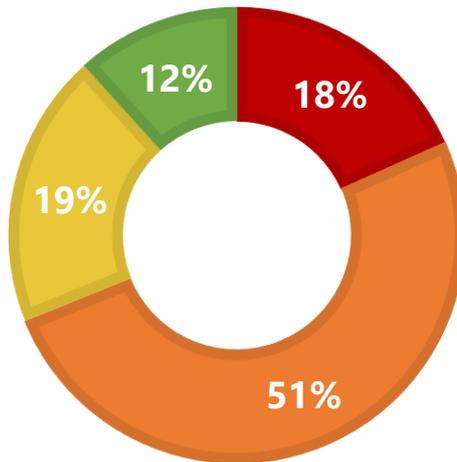
The negative feelings towards refugees and migrants from the Middle East and Africa – which more than a third of Serbian citizens reportedly harbor – can rather be ascribed to inter-ethnic differences and the unwillingness to accept people of different ethnic backgrounds than to economic and social concerns related to migration. However, the emotional attitude towards different social groups, including migrants and refugees is closely connected to socio-political attitudes regarding migration.

Therefore, the attitude of citizens towards migration policies is a central issue (Graph No. 3). The results indicate that 18% of citizens are of the view that Serbia should adopt a “closed border” policy, that is to say that borders should be protected against refugees and migrants crossing them. The majority of citizens, a little over a half, consider that the open border policy should continue to be pursued, but that the retention of refugees and migrants should be limited to only several days or weeks. This attitude mostly corresponds to the ways in which migration policies have thus far been communicated to the public – Serbia is most often presented as exclusively a transit country through which refugees and migrants only transit on their way to countries of Western Europe. Along those lines, but slightly more liberal is the attitude of the 19% of citizens who consider that a limited number of people should be allowed permanent residence in Serbia, but barring any encouragement, that is, without the provision of any support for such a decision. This attitude to the greatest degree corresponds to objective indicators – in the last years between 3,000 and 15,000 migrants and refugees resided in Serbia at any given time, but barely several tens of those realized the right to reside in Serbia.

Finally, 12% of Serbian citizens believe that the State should be open to migration and enable all individuals who so wish to come to Serbia, and impart upon them all the rights enjoyed by the citizens of Serbia.

### Graph No. 3 - Attitudes towards migration policies

What attitude should Serbia take towards migrants?



% of a representative sample of Serbian citizens

- Its borders should be secured in such a way as to prevent migrants from entering.
- Its borders should be open, but retention should be allowed for only up to several days/weeks.
- Its borders should be open and some should be allowed to permanently stay, but without any particular support to that end.
- It should enable all those who wish to come to Serbia to do so and impart upon them all the rights Serbian citizens enjoy.

It is particularly interesting that the attitudes towards the migration policy are in no way connected to the characteristics of the respondents such as socioeconomic status, age, level of education, etc. It is also important to emphasize that differences according to place of residence were not noted – including whether the person interviewed resides in a place wherein one of the refugee and migrant accommodation centers is located. The only persistent difference is that women have the tendency to hold somewhat more liberal views than men. That being the case, men are more likely to advocate for closed border policies than women, while a higher percentage of women chose the most liberal migration policy. Furthermore, conservative attitudes in relation to migration policies are accompanied by conservative attitudes in other spheres, as well as by a more pronounced tendency to social domination. Finally, it seems that attitudes regarding migration policies mirror to the greatest degree the emotional attitudes towards refugees and migrants from the Middle East and Africa – 75% of those who are of the view that Serbia should completely close its borders harbor negative feelings towards migrants and refugees, while among those advocating for the most liberal migration policy only 6% have a negative emotional attitude towards this group (the majority in fact are neutral).

In order to understand how feelings towards migrants and refugees are reflected in social distance, we asked citizens to express their acceptance, or rather rejection of migrants in different social relations (Graph No. 4). As expected, the greatest number of citizens (60%) accepts migrants temporarily residing in their town until the conditions for the continuation of their trip towards Western European countries are established. As Graph No. 5 illustrates, less than one half of citizens accept all other forms of social contact with members of the migrant population. Therefore, it can be concluded that the social distance towards migrants in Serbia is relatively pronounced. The thing that is particularly interesting in this case is that the results indicate a significant deviation from the usual steps on the social distance scale. Namely, the acceptance of a certain group on a social distance scale is necessarily accompanied by a decline of acceptance in the function of “closeness”, and therefore the greatest degree of acceptance is related to living in the same city, followed by neighborhood, and then work and finally, the least degree of acceptance is expected in close relationships such as friendly or family relationships.

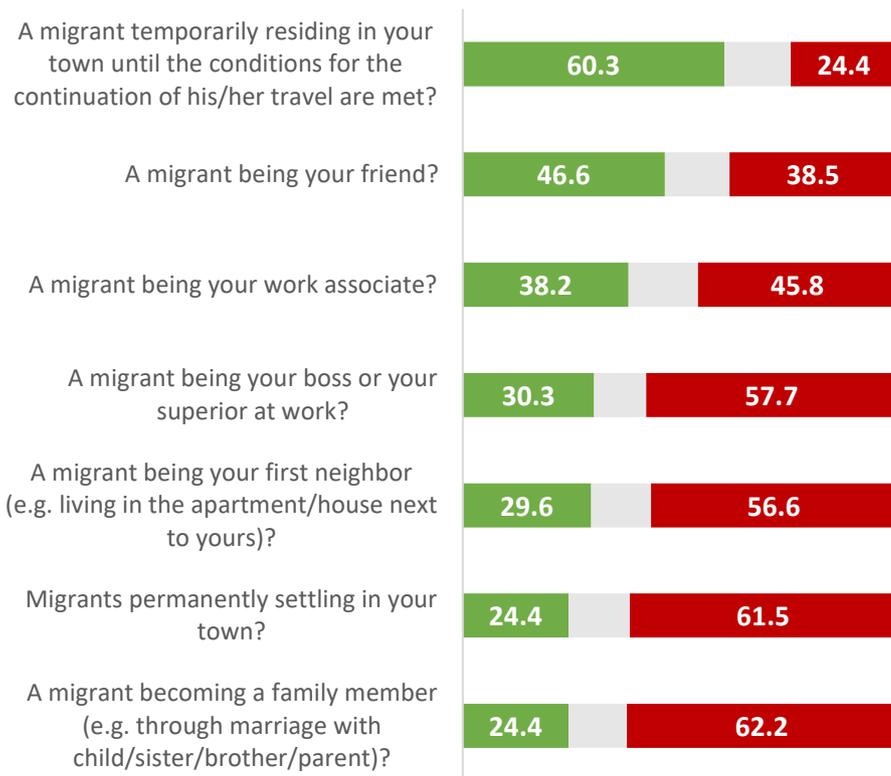


*Throughout this research, the questions most often contained the term “migrant” in order to mark refugees, asylum seekers and migrants from the Middle East and Africa. Although there is a clear and important difference between refugees and migrants, especially from a legal perspective, the term “migrant” was used here to describe all individuals who entered Serbia from the Middle East and Africa in the previous years, in order to ensure the validity of the data gathered from the representative sample of Serbian citizens. The term “migrant” was chosen because certain earlier qualitative research showed that the general population primarily associates the term “refugees” with refugees from former Yugoslav territories, while they use the term “migrant” to describe people from the Middle East and Africa, regardless of their legal status. Therefore, the only way to ensure that the respondents answers are referring to the same group of people – refugees, asylum seekers and migrants from the Middle East and Africa – was to use this term.*

### Graph No. 4 – Social distance towards migrants

Now I will ask you about your attitude towards migrants. Please tell me whether you agree to:

■ I agree    ■ I am uncertain    ■ I disagree



% of a representative sample of Serbian citizens

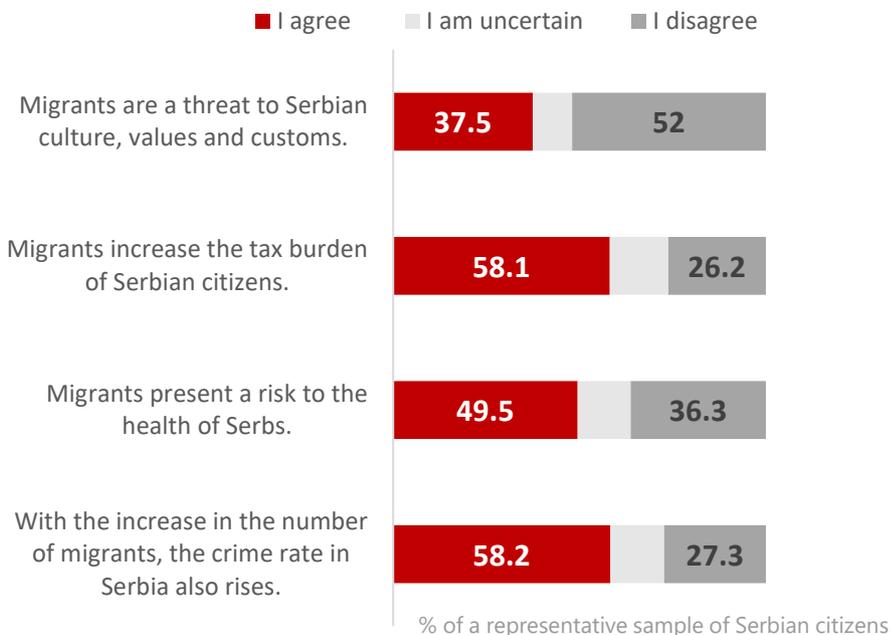
It is unusual that practically one half of the citizens report that they agree to migrants being their friends, but that only a quarter agree to migrants permanently settling in their town. Furthermore, it is important to point out that the same number of citizens accept the permanent settlement of migrants in their town as they do migrants becoming their family members through marriage with their brother/sister/child/parent. The reasons for such findings can be multifarious – one of the possibilities is that friendly or work relationships are considered as being temporary, while permanent settlement and acceptance into family are considered as being an “abiding” commitment to contact. Likewise, it is possible that friendly and work relationships are perceived as contact with a smaller number of individuals from the migrant population, while permanent settlement, as perceived by citizens, implicitly requires the settlement of a larger number of people. However, the most probable explanation behind the results could lie in the narrative that has been highly prominent in the public sphere in the previous months, particularly on social networks, and that is a narrative wherein the permanent settlement of migrants in Serbia is equated with close contact and the inevitability of interethnic familial relationships.

In order to understand the reasons behind the relatively meager acceptance of migrants among Serbian citizens, we examined convictions, i.e. the reasons why citizens might not be prepared to accept migrants and refugees from the Middle East and Africa into their communities. Graph No. 5 exhibits the percentage of citizens of Serbia who believe that migrants present a threat to the Serbian culture and customs, an economic and health risk, and finally a danger to order and peace, or rather an expectation that migrants will cause an increase in the number of crimes committed.

The results have shown that the dominant fears of Serbian citizens are of an economic nature. This finding can be understood in the context that more than half of the citizens see their personal economic situation as being unfavorable (10% of citizens claim they have serious financial problems, while 44% claim that they regularly run out of money by the end of the month despite abstaining from buying certain things they need). Likewise, approximately two thirds of citizens believe that an increase in the number of migrants would lead to an increase in the crime rate in Serbia. It seems that this conviction is primarily based on emphasizing illegal border crossing and on a rhetoric of criminalization of migrants rather than on objective data, which in fact show that migrants are responsible for an essentially negligible number of crimes in the Republic of Serbia.

### Graph No. 5 – Perception of migrants as threats in different domains

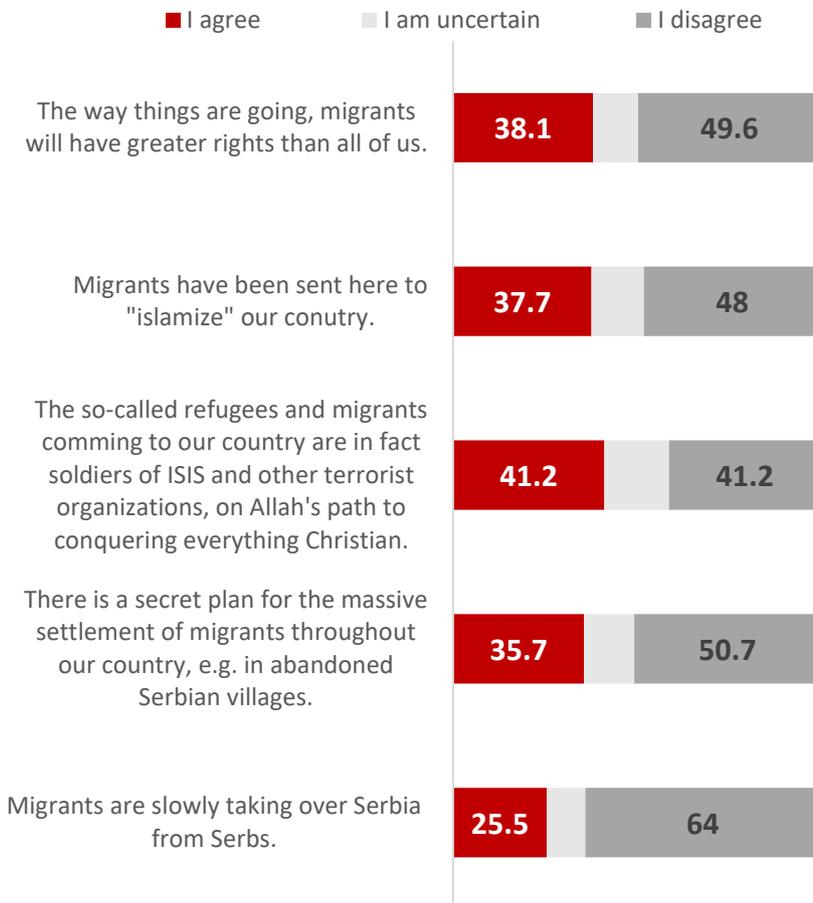
Please express your agreement or disagreement with the following statements:



Almost one half of citizens perceive migrants as a health risk, which is to be expected considering the current COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, contrary to expectations, only a third of citizens perceive migrants as a threat to Serbian culture, values and customs. Namely, it seems that cultural differences and negative impacts on culture and customs, which are often singled out as the main argument for not accepting migrants from the Middle East and Africa are not dominant factors shaping negative views. However, it seems that such highly emotionally saturated rhetoric has a strong impact on shaping views and their content. The results illustrated in Graph No. 6 wherein the percent of the citizens who agree with some of the most common examples of anti-migrant rhetoric are presented speak to this.

### Graph No. 6 – Perception of migrants as threats in different domains

Please express your agreement or disagreement with the following statements:



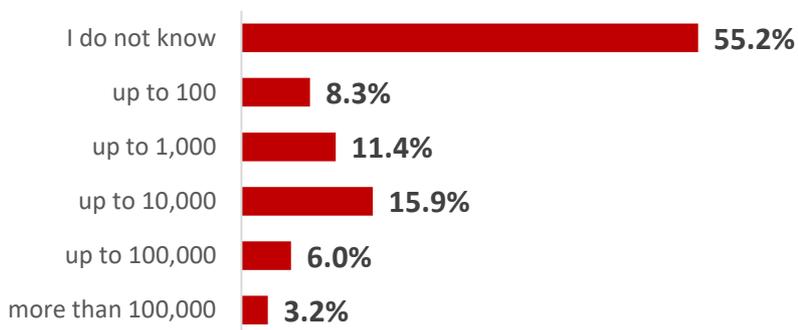
% of a representative sample of Serbian citizens

A worrying piece of data is that 40% of citizens harbor a prejudice that migrants and refugees are members of terrorist organizations, as is that more than a third of citizens believe in conspiracy theories concerning secret plans for settling migrants and coordinated plans for spreading Islam in Serbia. Fears that migrants will “take over” Serbia, which a quarter of the respondents report having, also contribute to a distorted perception of the number of refugees and migrants who were granted permanent residence in our country in the previous two years. As can be seen in Graph No. 7, more than one half of citizens declare that they do not know how many individuals received asylum in Serbia in the past two years, while equally many cannot estimate how many will be granted international protection in Serbia in the coming two years.

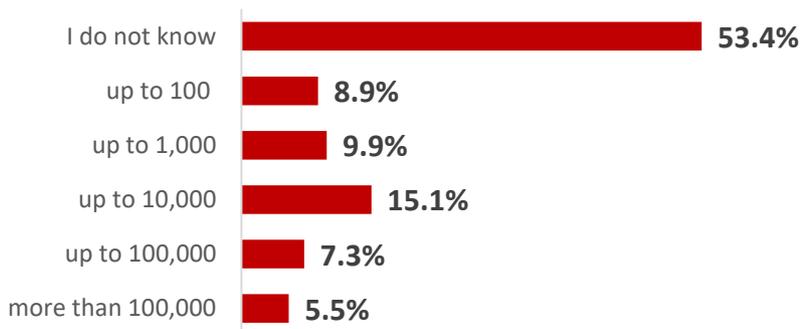
However, as the official data indicates that the number of people who have been granted legal status enabling them to permanently reside in Serbia is quite small (less than 20 individuals in the past two years), it is clear that unsubstantiated information and conspiracy theories that have been spreading over social networks in the past months distort perception so as to create an impression of drastically greater numbers. Thereby, more than a third of citizens believe that number to be between 1,000 and 100,000 people just in the previous two years, while as many as 3,2% believe that number to be in the excess of 100,000. Such findings speak to two important things – that a very small number of citizens know or have access to realistic data on the number of individuals who have been granted asylum in Serbia, and that a significant number of citizens lack a realistic perception and understanding of the numbers they invoke. Subjective estimations that approximately 100,000 people were granted the right to permanent residence in Serbia give credence to this – for purposes of comparison, that number would be equal to the number of residents of Subotica, or to the combined number of citizens of Šabac and Sombor. With that in mind, it is understandable how false information is easily disseminated and accepted without critical reflection and evaluation of the content itself.

### Graph No. 7 – Perception of the number of refugees/migrants who remain in Serbia permanently

What do you think, how many people have been granted asylum in the Republic of Serbia, that is, the right to legally reside in the Republic of Serbia, in the previous two years (2018 and 2019)?



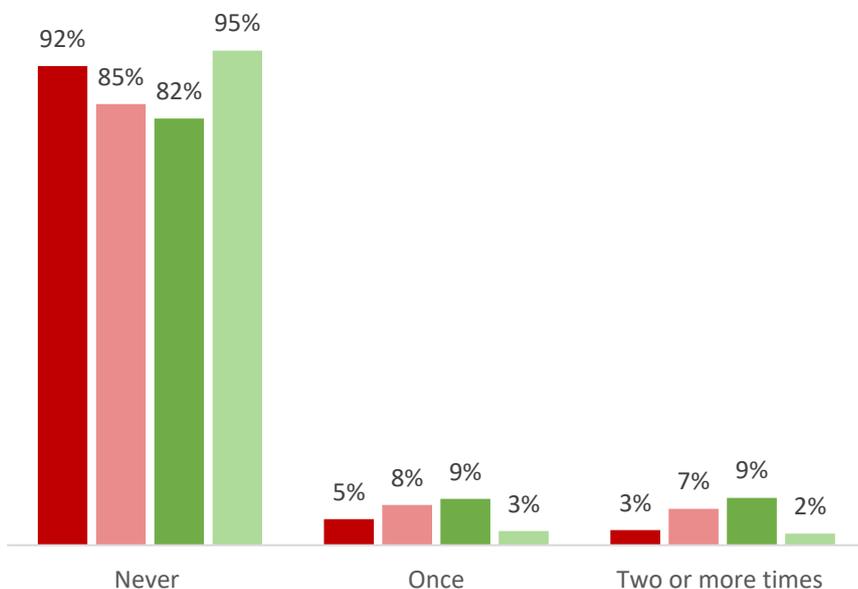
And how many people do you think will receive asylum in the following two years (2020 and 2021)?



When the approximations for the previous two years and the coming two years are compared, 48,5% believe that a greater number of people will receive asylum in the following two years than was the case before, while 27,5% are of the view that this number will decrease; while 7,2% of the population think that the number of refugees and migrants that reside in Serbia will increase by 100,000 or more in the following two years.

An additional precondition for the development of unrealistic perceptions and prejudice towards refugees and migrants is an absence of contact with members of this population. Namely, contrary to the widely accepted belief that a large number of people had personal negative experiences in their interaction with migrants, and therefore have objective reasons for harboring negative emotions and fearing migrants, the results illustrated in Graph No. 8 actually show the opposite being the case.

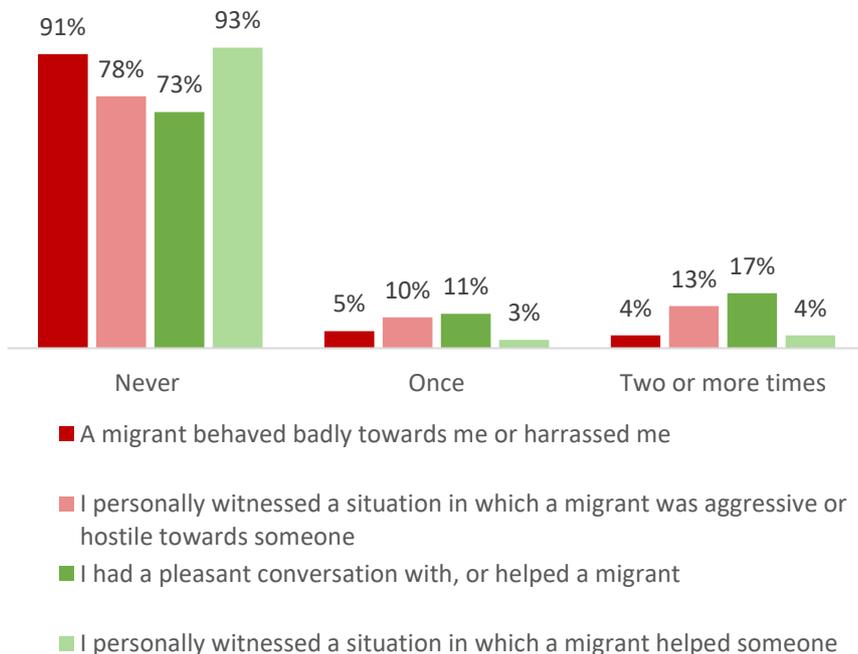
**Graph No. 8 – The frequency of direct and indirect contact of the local population with migrants**



- A migrant behaved badly towards me or harassed me
- I personally witnessed a situation in which a migrant was aggressive or hostile towards someone
- I had a pleasant conversation with, or helped a migrant
- I personally witnessed a situation in which a migrant helped someone

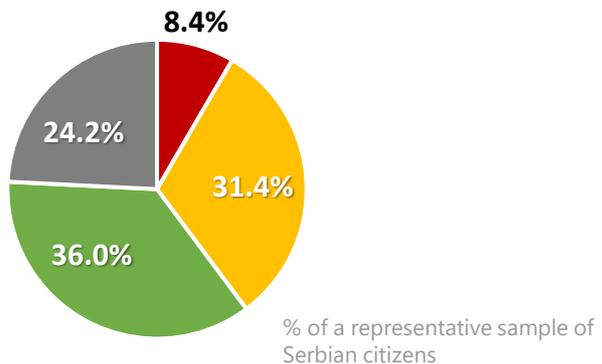
Namely, the results indicate that the average Serbian citizen did not interact with refugees and migrants, neither directly or indirectly. It is additionally interesting that those few citizens who have had contact, in a slightly higher percentage reported their interaction as being positive. It is also interesting that the negative interactions were more commonly indirect (i.e. that the person witnessed a situation wherein a migrant was hostile or aggressive towards someone else), while the positive interactions were more commonly of a direct nature (i.e. the person him/herself had a pleasant conversation with or helped a migrant). In other words, it seems that news of unpleasant experiences of the local population with migrants and refugees were significantly exaggerated, even when only cities wherein refugee and migrant accommodation centers are located are taken into consideration (Graph No. 9).

**Graph No. 9 – The frequency of direct and indirect contact of the local population with migrants in cities in which refugee and migrant accommodation centers are located.**



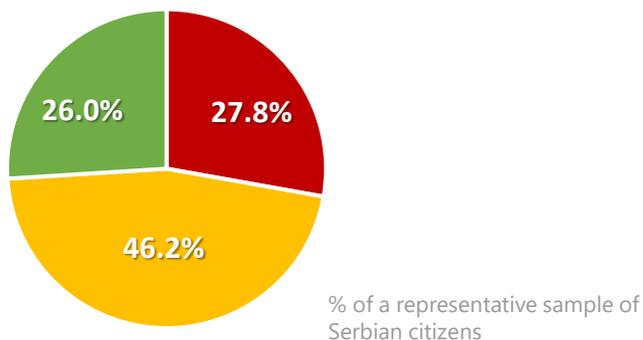
It is particularly important to point out that citizens residing in areas in which migrant and refugee accommodation centers are located reported a higher frequency of single positive direct interactions as opposed to single negative direct interactions (5% of residents had personally had a negative experience as opposed to 11% who had had a positive experience), while this difference is even more stark in the case of multiple interactions (4% had personally had negative experiences on two or more occasions, as opposed to 17% who had had positive experiences on two or more occasions). Such results directly disprove the anti-migrant rhetoric, which is based on the argument that the local population fears for its safety due to frequent incidents with migrants.

**Graph No. 10 – How Serbian State officials present the issue of migration to the public**



- They emphasize the dangers that migrants pose to our society
- They openly discuss the positive and negative effects of migrants on our society
- They create a climate conducive to the acceptance of migrants in society
- They do not speak of migrants

**Graph No. 11 – In what way does the Serbian media present the issue of migration to the public?**



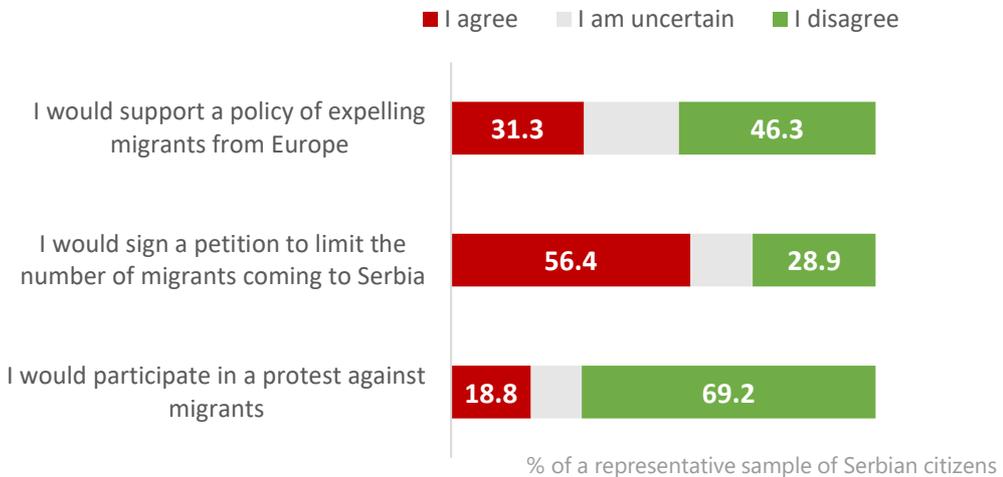
- They emphasize the dangers that migrants pose to our society
- They openly discuss the positive and negative effects of migrants on our society
- They create a climate conducive to the acceptance of migrants in society

As can be seen in Graph No. 10, a relatively small number of citizens are of the perception that politicians speak negatively about migrants. Approximately one third of citizens feel that politicians speak on the question of migration in a balanced manner, pointing out the positive and negative aspects thereof; while slightly more than a third consider that the narrative politicians use is primarily focused on establishing a social climate conducive to the acceptance of migrants. The situation is fairly similar in the case of media (Graph No. 11), where it is perceivable that almost one half of citizens think that the media report in a balanced manner, while a quarter of the population feel that the media, much like politicians, create a positive social climate through their reporting, conducive to the acceptance of refugees and migrants in Serbia. The only significant difference in relation to the perception of media and politicians is in the number of citizens who consider that an anti-migrant rhetoric permeates the media. Therefore, slightly more than a quarter of citizens perceive media reporting as accentuating the danger migrants pose to our society.

Although citizens perceive the attitude of State officials towards migrants as being more positive than that of the media, it seems that the central issue lies in the fact that as many as a quarter of citizens think that government representatives do not discuss the issues of migration and migrants. It is that very perception, that those governing the country fail to openly discuss a certain socially relevant topic, that leaves space and creates grounds for different conspiracy theories (such as the one about a secret plan to settle migrants in Serbia, which more than a third of citizens believe). Additionally, the perception that political representatives provide insufficient information leads citizens to seek information they feel is relevant outside the official channels of information — on social networks, websites of various associations and organizations, etc. Unfortunately, such information is often unverified, one-sidedly framed and is not subject to public scrutiny the same way that the media reports and politicians' statements are.

However, there is indication that negative attitudes and false convictions concerning refugees and migrants from the Middle East and Africa have the potential to turn into organized actions against members of this population, and this indication stems from the data on the readiness of the citizens of Serbia to undertake various forms of actions.

**Graph No. 12 – Readiness to take action against migrants**



Namely, as can be observed in Graph No. 12, more than a half of Serbian citizens would sign a petition to limit the number of migrants in Serbia, while every fifth citizen would participate in a protest against migrants. Finally, almost a third of the population claims that they would support policies aimed at expelling migrants from Europe. Once again, it is important to point out that the readiness to action does not differ according to demographic characteristics, i.e. the readiness to action is not characteristic of specific groups of our society, as is often assumed. For example, both men and women, older and younger citizens, from different parts of Serbia, report that they would take various actions aimed at migrants at the same frequency. The only factor that does seem to play a relevant role is the socioeconomic status, and in such a way that citizens who view their own social and economic status as being unfavorable show greater readiness to take different actions against migrants.



# CONCLUSIONS AND MAIN FINDINGS

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Viewed collectively, all results indicate a presence of negative attitudes towards refugees and migrants, but also towards all other social groups, in a non-negligible segment of the population. Different psychological and social factors play a relevant role in the formation of such attitudes, which, as can be seen from the present data, present a basis for preparedness for various actions aimed against migrants and refugees, and potentially minority and/or marginalized social groups.

## **Main findings:**

- One third of the citizens of Serbia do not support social equality
- 40% of citizens foster negative emotions towards refugees and migrants from the Middle East and Africa
- More than one half of citizens considers that refugees and migrants should only be permitted to sojourn in Serbia for no more than several days/weeks, while 18% believe that borders should be completely closed off
- Migrants are primarily perceived as economic baggage and a risk to the safety of citizens
- Approximately 40% of citizens believe in different conspiracy theories pertaining to migrants
- One half of citizens do not know how many refugees and migrants enjoy the right to permanent residence in Serbia, while the other half significantly exaggerate that number.
- Less than 20% of citizens had either direct or indirect contact with migrants and refugees. The interactions are more commonly characterized as being positive than negative.

- 24% of citizens believe that politicians do not speak of migrants, while less than a half consider that the media report on the question in a balanced manner
- More than one half of citizens would sign a petition to limit the number of refugees and migrants in Serbia, while 19% would actively participate in protests against refugees and migrants
- Attitudes towards refugees and migrants differ according to regions and demographic characteristics such as gender, age, education and similar

# Recommendations

Such results emphasize a need for creating and implementing programs aimed at:

- Increasing cross-cultural and interethnic sensitivity and tolerance.
- Acquainting individuals with relevant legal frameworks and international conventions that introduce the prohibition of discrimination, incitement of hatred and intolerance, attacks and expulsion, and other inhuman acts based on national, ethnic, racial, religious and other forms of belonging, as well as with the consequences such violations incur.
- The advancement of skills related to critical evaluation and independent search for relevant sources of information, as well as of a critical approach to information disseminated through various formal and informal information channels.
- The development of spaces/platforms that would enable the realization of inter-group contacts, which would result in a greater number of personal experiences and therefore lead to a decrease in distance, prejudice and discrimination.
- Creating campaigns to promote multiculturalism as a value of modern democratic societies, and the positive economic, social and cultural effects that are thus achieved.