

Refugees in Serbia: on the way to a better life

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More than 450,000 people passed through Serbia from the beginning of 2015 until the middle of November. However, even in 2014 the numbers were large, and growing.

There were three shelters for refugees who were just passing through Belgrade, the Serbian capital, in 2014, and five asylum centres for those who wished to apply for asylum. However, the capacities were insufficient, as more than 2,500 people were entering Serbia daily. Up to 600 people, including families with little children, were sleeping in a park by the main bus station. The Belgrade City Council was providing them with water and tents as well as some basic hygiene supplies. Serbian NGOs and citizens of Belgrade brought food and clothes for them every day. The majority stayed in Serbia for no more than a few days.

From a 2014 study¹ it appeared that the typical refugee in Serbia is a 27-year-old man. He is likely to be unmarried, to be travelling alone, to have 12 years of schooling

and to have left his family in his country of origin. He has probably spent over a year in transit in his attempt to reach a better life. Men comprise almost 90% of refugees in Serbia and fewer than a third of them are married. The women who seek refuge in Europe, on the other hand, are married in two thirds of cases. Widows or widowers and divorcees are not very common. Half of the refugees are under the age of 26. Many of them are highly educated and their professions vary considerably. One may as easily come across doctors, engineers, teachers and students as mechanics and manual workers. The variability, however, only exists among the males, whereas women are predominantly housewives or teachers and students. Women are equally as educated as men but there does not seem to

be a similar gender balance in employment opportunities in their countries of origin.

The refugees arriving in Serbia mostly originate from Syria (nearly 50%), followed closely by Somalia and Afghanistan. However, there are also people from other countries, such as Eritrea, Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Egypt, Ghana, Bangladesh, Palestine and Ethiopia. Ethnically, they are very heterogeneous. Almost all refugees are of an Islamic religious denomination. The number of Christian, whether Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant, and atheist refugees is marginal.

The journey

The typical transit route to Serbia goes through Turkey, Greece and the Republic of Macedonia. In transit, refugees have to pay money to smugglers and are often taken advantage of. They get robbed, beaten up and humiliated by the local population. Often, they get unlawfully arrested or put in prison in very bad conditions. The police often fail to provide them with valid information as to why they are in detention or how long they will be there. Illegal deportations frequently take them a step back.

The majority of refugees undertake this journey alone. However, families with children and elderly family members are also a common sight. Most of them still have immediate family in the countries of origin (almost 90%). About one in eight of the refugees who arrive in Serbia has been separated from a family member during transit, usually a sibling or a parent. Most of those still have not been able to track down their lost family members.

Faced with deliberate obstacles to their further progress such as the wall being built on the Hungarian border, they feel they are victims of injustice and lack of understanding. Reminded of persecution, they are overwhelmed with an increased fear for their future. This causes panic, making them rush into deals with smugglers, placing themselves at great risk. Smugglers are often involved with human traffickers and this panic is a golden

opportunity for them so that the refugees are at increased risk of becoming victims of human trafficking. Our study showed that most refugees have a low understanding of what human trafficking is, although a significant proportion of them have experienced human trafficking themselves. They have little understanding that they can be used and pushed into slavery and the fact that they depend on people smugglers to cross borders and reach Western Europe makes the situation even more dangerous.

Bearing in mind the multiple traumatic events they have experienced and the uncertain future ahead of them, the psychological state of the refugees is just as would be expected. Many are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression. They feel lonely, abandoned and rejected. They experience guilt, hopelessness, excessive worry, thinking about why all this has happened to them, repeated thoughts about the most difficult events, exhaustion, loss of appetite and sleep, and sudden emotional or physical reactions when reminded of traumatic events.

In line with the results of this study, new programmes of psychological support have been developed and existing ones have been adjusted to better respond to the needs of the refugee population. The questions the refugees ask the most often: Who can we ask for help? Who will take responsibility for what is and what is not happening? Who is making the final decision about whether we will get our chance for a normal life? Will there be anyone prepared to listen and react when we reach our destination?

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