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SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Impact of Covid-19 on migrations and
mobility in Serbia

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION
FOR MIGRATION

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ABBREVIATIONS

AVRR	Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CTHB	Combating Trafficking in Human Beings
EU	European Union
GCM	Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPA	Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance
LAP	Local action plans for refugees, IDPs, and returnees under the Readmission Agreement
LSG	Local self-government
MESTD	Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
RTC	Reception-Transit Centres
RTS	Radio Television Serbia
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SORS	Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia
SRCM	Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration
THB	Trafficking in Human Beings
ToR	Terms of Reference
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations' Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognized that human mobility is inextricably linked to sustainable development and within the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) Member States have committed to ensure that all migrants, regardless of their status, can exercise their human rights through safe access to basic services. However, the ongoing Covid-19 crisis has caused a combined human mobility and human development crisis¹ with secondary impact of pandemic so pronounced that it requires bringing to the forefront migrant issues and additional efforts to mitigating social and economic impact of Covid-19, in order to remain steadfast to provisions of the GCM framework.²

This report examines different ways that various categories of migrants in Serbia have been affected by the pandemic. Series of measures and state led responses are scrutinized to properly assess how migrants were affected - ranging from access to medical care, information, free movement, asylum procedure to employment, education, housing and social protection. The report employs data informed approach to map existing vulnerabilities where it was possible. In areas where it was not possible (students, Serbian citizens working abroad) it provides a description of the existing situation and suggests steps that can be taken forward to fill data gaps in order to formulate evidence based Covid-19 responses.

There have been two peaks to the COVID-19 outbreak in Serbia, in April 2020 and July 2020. State of emergency in Serbia was introduced on 15 March and lifted on 7 May.

During the pandemic migrants in Serbia have enjoyed non-discriminatory access to healthcare. Since the beginning of the pandemic only four cases have tested positive for COVID-19 among migrant population, and they have all successfully recovered. As in other countries, migration management measures were focused on movement restrictions and quarantine. Registration of asylum seekers and intake of new asylum applications was discontinued during the State of emergency and provision of all state administration services extended in person suspended. Access to information on COVID-19 risks and public health prevention measures was provided, including PPE in centers. At the time of Covid-19 outbreak, 5,912 migrants were accommodated in 17 centers and with the increase of number of migrants, accommodation capacities were extended and adjusted to provide care for additional 3,000 persons. Migrants were quarantined in centers which affected their well-being, marking the need for increased psychosocial support.

At the same time migrants have shown high degree of readiness to participate in the Covid-19 response in line with their opportunities, demonstrating an example of solidarity that should be utilized to counteract increased xenophobia in society and prejudice against migrants.

After analyzing the state response, the report highlights impact of the Covid-19 on education of migrant children, loss of income and housing for vulnerable migrants – IDPs, refugees from former Yugoslavia, returnees under the Readmission agreement. Although Serbia has taken important steps to provide migrants' inclusive education, notable problems remain when it comes to online schooling of vulnerable groups and education efforts need to be reinvigorated in the face of Covid-19. Loss of employment and income of different vulnerable migrant groups are prominent, as well as problems in access to housing. 21,000 IDPs were unable to earn income or have lost their jobs during the pandemic as well as 4,000 refugees from former Yugoslavia. Several challenges in social protection sector are identified: from existing cuts in social assistance and programmes targeting vulnerable migrants, to stretched capacities of those providing social assistance and loss of human resources working to ensure service delivery.

Remittances to Serbia in 2020 declined for 19 % compared to the first six months in 2019. While this will have a detrimental effect on poor households which rely on remittances, more research is needed to determine to which

¹ IOM Brief. Why migration matters for “recovering better” from Covid-19. 4 June 2020To

² United Nations Network on Migration: Working Group on Access to Services. Policy Brief. Enhancing Access to Services for Migrants in the Context of COVID-19 Preparedness, Prevention, and Response and Beyond.

extent did Covid-19 economically affect Serbian diaspora and how will this translate on future scale of incoming remittances. The same goes for the number of Serbian citizens living abroad which have returned to Serbia.

The report concludes with recommendations on the effective inclusion of migrants in COVID-19 response and recovery. Including migrants in socio-economic response plans, particularly vulnerable categories and implementing targeted measures to improve their access to education, employment and social protection will pave the way for achievement of the SDGs³.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Objectives

Faced with the pandemic, governments around the world have been using new migration management toolkit to prevent spread of disease consisting of exceptional measures such as border closures, travel bans, prohibition on arrivals from certain countries or restricting entry only to its citizens. By the end of March over 150 countries have implemented such measures, making this period a most restricted in the history of international travel and stranding hundreds of thousands of migrants. Moreover, secondary impact of Covid-19 has laid bare structural inequalities and vulnerabilities of migrants across the world, affecting the attainment of many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and provisions of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

Against this backdrop, the United Nations (UN) Framework for responding to the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 calls for developing responses that mitigate the negative impacts, protect people on the move and their communities and harness the positive power of migration for recovering better.

In line with this approach and as a response to Covid-19 crisis, the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) in Serbia established the Task force in order to assist the Government of Serbia to: (i) compile the fact-finding report based on available data to assess the effect and impact of COVID-19 on Serbian society and economy and (ii) conduct an in-depth comprehensive analysis of socio-economic impact, including recovery options.

As part of the UNCT endeavour and in order to examine how migration-related issues were affected by the pandemic, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) commissioned an assessment on impact of Covid-19 on migration and mobility in Serbia, similar like in other countries⁴. Consultancy has been carried out within the IOM-UNDP Global Programme “Making Migration Work for Sustainable Development (Phase III)” funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

In line with the Terms of Reference, objectives of the report are to assess:

- impact of economic, financial and social disruptions on migrants and host communities;
- social cohesion statements/policies specific to COVID-19 and migrants' inclusion (including access to health system, access to information, etc.) as well as exclusion (such as loss of status, discrimination, anti-migrant hate speech);
- implications of COVID-19 on nationals working abroad (noting changes of policies of destination countries, loss of status/employment, living conditions, etc.), as well as on students abroad/or in the country;
- impact on mobility dimensions – nature of current entry restrictions to the country and information on exceptions (e.g. for nationals, migrants/asylum seekers);
- impact of COVID on remittances – current reliance on incoming remittances;
- contributions of migrants to pandemic response (e.g. health-care workers, diaspora engagement)

³ Enhancing Access to Services for Migrants in the Context of COVID-19 Preparedness, Prevention, and Response and Beyond. UN Network on Migration, Policy brief, available at https://www.migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/default/files/docs/final_network_wg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_access_to_services_1.pdf

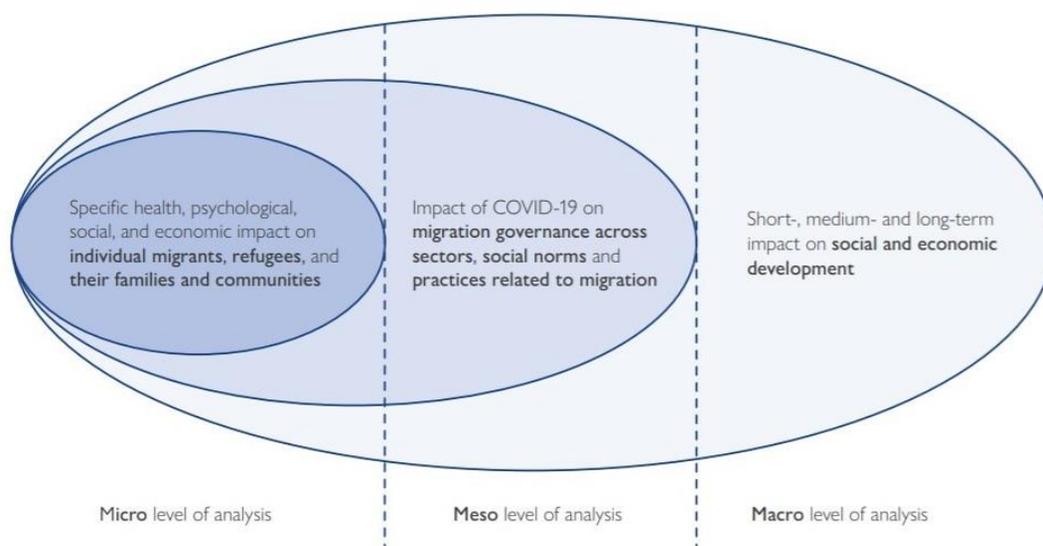
⁴ Across the world, IOM has been initiating the assessment of COVID-19 socio-economic impact on migrants, with specific focus depending on the country context and its migration characteristics.

As the assessment intends to inform relevant stakeholders for their recovery interventions to help minimize the negative impacts on migrants, the report also presents possible recovery scenarios for most affected migration groups in Serbia in order to ensure migrant-inclusive approach as guaranteed by the GCM.

1.2. Methodology

Approach to developing this report was informed by the UN Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19” and more specifically by considering how interactions between migration, development, and COVID-19 play out at different interdependent levels of analysis. The IOM’s Toolkit for development partners: Integrating Migration into Covid-19 Socio-Economic Response provides a starting point for developing contextual backdrop that would cover all three levels of analysis: i) micro – that includes health, socio-economic and psychological impact of pandemic on migrants, ii) meso – that considers impact of migration governance across sectors and migration practices and iii) macro – that looks at short, medium and long-term impact on socio-economic development and its effect on migration.

IOM’s Toolkit for development partners: Integrating Migration into Covid-19 Socio-Economic Response - Multi-level socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 crisis, linked to migration and development, page 1



To achieve the stated objectives and examine all three levels of analysis, methodology included analysing different aspects of Covid-19 response:

- containment measures such as quarantine, restrictions on freedom of movement, border shutdown. This includes analysis of rules and regulations adopted during the State of emergency and their implications on human rights of migrants and provision of services
- response of authorities to COVID-19 and how it affected migrants in Serbia (asylum seekers, migrants in reception centres, returnees under the Readmission agreement, irregular migrants, refugees in former Yugoslavia and internally displaced persons - IDPs),
- the impact that border closure had on Serbian citizens which have returned to Serbia after residing abroad and its subsequent impact on remittances.

Several sources of information were examined in order to compile data relevant for all different aspects:

- Rules and regulations enacted during the State of emergency by Serbian authorities;
- Reports and updates of international organizations (UN agencies and other) on situation in Serbia
- Global Reports and guidelines in order to properly align the measures with the SDG and GCM framework
- Analysis of media coverage on migrants- to examine how were migrants portrayed during the pandemic
- Academic articles on interlinkages of Covid-19’s secondary impact and migration

As already mentioned, this report was carried out in parallel to the preparation of the *UN Socio Economic Assessment in Serbia* - a specialized assessment focused on mid and longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on broader areas of the economy and society in Serbia, carried out by the UN Task force. The process of compiling UN Socio Economic Assessment in Serbia entailed detailed data collection across sectors and drafting of fact-finding reports with joint inputs from the Government of Serbia and UN Agencies, which included submission of assessments of different line ministries and specialized institutions. Some of these assessments were used for the purposes of this report, primarily the *Fact finding report for PIMO on asylum seekers, IDPs, refugees and persons in risk of statelessness* and the *Draft Rapid Assessment on the Socio-Economic Impact of Covid-19 on Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the Republic of Serbia*, both produced by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Information contained in the *SCRM document: Information on the socio-economic measures taken to prevent spreading of Covid-19 in the period March-May 2020 to different categories of migrants* was also used for assessing the impact of Covid-19 on education, employment, social protection and housing of migrants.

1.3. Limitations

The report provides precise data where it was possible and identifies gaps where due to fact that data is missing, it was not possible to provide a clear picture on socio-economic effect of Covid-19 on migrants. As will be shown primary areas where empirical data is lacking is emigration, which includes Serbian students studying abroad and Serbian migrants that have returned to Serbia following the border shutdown. Here, the report used auxiliary sources such as data from Eurostat and looked at ongoing surveys that would be helpful to provide more information on the subject. Data is also missing when it comes to number of foreign students enrolled in Serbia, as this information is extracted from the Ministry of Interior in the annual Migration profile by looking at number of persons who were granted temporary residence on the ground of studying. The results of this report can be used to develop a better understanding of gaps and can serve as a basis to guide more comprehensive data collection efforts.

2. BACKGROUND – MIGRATION TRENDS AT A GLANCE

Although the first thing that comes to mind when considering immediate effect of Covid-19 on migrants is how restriction of movements have affected lives of those who were stranded (asylum seekers, migrants, returnees, beneficiaries of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration - AVRR) the migration context in Serbia is more complex and includes different migrant categories, all of which were affected by the secondary impact of Covid-19. Thus, before describing how they faced challenges brought on by the pandemic it is important to shed some light on the overall migration landscape in Serbia and its main migrant categories.

Primary issues on migration agenda of Serbia for the past three decades have been management of large-scale flows of forced migrants from former Yugoslavia - refugees from the Republic of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Kosovo and Metohija. As shown in the table below, while the number of refugees decreased significantly over the years, the number of IDPs remains high even today. From late 2000 onwards, as part of the European Union (EU) accession negotiations, new migration challenges have emerged, including reintegration of returnees under the Readmission agreement and development of the asylum system (procedure and reception capacities) for asylum seekers from third countries.

The influx of asylum seekers and migrants skyrocketed in 2015 when the Western Balkans migratory route became one of the leading routes for migrants to enter the EU, resulting in the inflow of 579,518 persons that transited through Serbia. This number was 35 times higher the number it had in 2014⁵. With the closure of the Western Balkans route in March 2016, the number of asylum seekers significantly decreased to 12,811 in 2016 and since then it has been gradually reducing. In 2019 12, 935 persons expressed intention to seek asylum⁶.

It should be stressed that the overall number of migrants, including irregular migrants, who were registered in migrant centres and have transited through centres in the past few years is much higher. In 2017, there were total

⁵ Government of the Republic of Serbia (2016). Migration profile of the Republic of Serbia for 2015.

⁶ Government of the Republic of Serbia (2020). Migration profile of the Republic of Serbia for 2019.

of 23,015 migrants registered in centres throughout the year, in 2018, 22,893, while in 2019 this number increased to 35,094 and in 2020, until the end of September total of 38, 460 migrants were registered.⁷

In 2016, 6, 899 irregular migrants were denied entry into the territory of Republic of Serbia, similar to 2017 when there were 6,787, while in 2019 the number of irregular migrants who were denied entry was 5,214. In 2019, in line with the new Law on Foreigners 7,513 orders were issued to persons illegally residing in the Republic of Serbia to return.⁸

When it comes to returnees, the number of requests for readmission has been steadily decreasing from 9,495 requests for readmission in 2015, to 5,779 in 2016, 3,485 in 2017, to 1,991 in 2019⁹. The number of registered returnees has been also decreasing from 3,933 in 2016, to 1,455 in 2019.

In terms of immigration, Serbia does not feature as a country of destination, as confirmed by low numbers of foreigners temporarily or permanently residing in last year (total of 20,000 as shown in the table below). Foreigners are predominantly from China, Russian Federation and to a lesser degree from Turkey, Ukraine and the Western Balkan countries.

On the other hand, depopulation, aging population, intensified emigration flow and brain drain have become defining characteristics of the country in recent time. The exact number of those emigrating remains unknown and is difficult to track, as the National Office for Statistics does not have data on the volume and characteristics of external migration. Also, there is no organisation globally that can provide precise records on emigration from Serbia, as Eurostat data only capture the number of new immigrants in EU member states. However, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that in the period from 2012 until 2016 around 245,000 people have left Serbia¹⁰. Serbia has a large diaspora (the overall estimates go up to 5 million¹¹), which remains underutilized resource and annual remittances accounted in last decade for 15.3% of the total gross domestic product (GDP).

Snapshot of statistics on migrants

Migrant category	Number in 2019
Emigration: Citizens of Serbia registered as new immigrants in EU member states (Eurostat data)	49,631
Migrants that have expressed intention to seek asylum	12,935
Number of approved asylum requests	25
Total number of migrants registered in centres over the year	35,094
Beneficiaries of the AVRR	193
Foreigners permanently residing in the Republic of Serbia	8,721
Temporary residence permits issued for the first time	11,119
Number of foreigners granted temporary residence on the ground of education	1,557

⁷ SCRM¹ database on persons accommodated in asylum and reception centers

⁸ Data from Migration profile of the Republic of Serbia for 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019.

⁹ Government of the Republic of Serbia (2016). Migration profile of the Republic of Serbia for 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019.

¹⁰ International Migration Outlook 2018, Paris, OECD.

¹¹ Migration profile of the Republic of Serbia for 2015.

Returnees under the Readmission agreement	1,455
Victims of trafficking	33
Refugees from former Yugoslavia	26,502
Internally displaced persons	198.545
Number of issued orders to persons illegally residing in the Republic of Serbia to return	7,513

Source: Migration profile of the Republic of Serbia 2019, available at http://www.kirs.gov.rs/media/uploads/Migracije/Publikacije/Migracioni_profil_Republike_Srbi.%20godinu.pdf

3. MIGRANTS' ACCESS TO RIGHTS DURING COVID-19

This section looks at the Government's response to Covid-19 from the perspective of access to services and exercising migrants' rights. This entails looking at series of areas, from how migrants were accessing medical care, asylum procedure, information and free legal aid, to the overall conditions in migrant centres. The section also looks at particular situation experienced by stranded migrants and the overall response of migrants in the centres and concludes with enlisting examples of discrimination of migrants which were increased during the pandemic.

3.1. Access to medical care

Only four cases have tested positive for COVID-19 among the refugee¹² /migrant population since the beginning of the pandemic, and all have successfully recovered¹³. Access to health care was ensured to all persons accommodated at the centres and medical teams consisting of at least a doctor and a medical technician, and in most cases a psychologist, have been provided. All persons, based on the indications, have been provided access to health care at both secondary and tertiary levels. The National Commission for Infectious Diseases has prepared a Protocol for Responding to Suspected SARS-cov-2 Cases in Asylum and Reception Centres. All persons who had the symptoms were tested for the virus¹⁴.

In cooperation with the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the UNHCR, appropriate materials were prepared with information on access to health care facilities, psychological support, restriction of movement, and health prevention measures through posters and leaflets, as well as by phone or social networks. Asylum-seekers and refugees were also equipped with individual personal protective equipment (PPE) (masks and gloves) and hygiene items as required¹⁵. The mission of Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Serbia provided first aid kits to the shelter for victims of trafficking of human beings (THB)¹⁶ and ASTRA's Victim Support Team continued to provide services to enable functioning of the SOS phone as well as provision of assistance to victims. Emergency support included provision of accommodation for newly identified victims, provision of clothes, food, urgent medical assistance and hygienic means.¹⁷

¹² Bearing in mind that in Serbia the term refugee is used both for refugees from former Yugoslavia under the Law on Refugees as well as on asylum seekers which were granted international protection under the Law on Asylum and temporary protection, throughout this report the term refugee will encompass those under the Law on Asylum and temporary protection, unless specifically mentioned refugees from former Yugoslavia.

¹³ UNHCR. Serbia monthly update. August 2020.

¹⁴ Fact finding report for PIMO on asylum seekers, IDPs, refugees and persons in risk of statelessness. UNHCR

¹⁵ UNHCR. Draft Rapid Assessment on the Socio-Economic Impact of Covid-19 on Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the Republic of Serbia, June 2020

¹⁶ OSCE. 6. May 2020. OSCE Mission to Serbia adapts its support to Serbia's changing needs during COVID-19 pandemic. <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-serbia/451597>

¹⁷ ASTRA. Misija OEBS-a u Srbiji: Pomoć i podrška žrtvama trgovine ljudima tokom pandemije <https://www.astra.rs/oebs-srbija-pomoc-i-podrška-zrtvama-trgovine-ljudima-tokom-pandemije/>

As for other migrant categories, under the Serbian law refugees from former Yugoslavia enjoy same health protection as Serbian citizens. No discrimination in accessing health care institution/COVID-19 infirmaries or testing was reported.

3.2. Access to Asylum Procedure

During the pandemic outbreak, registration of asylum seekers and intake of new asylum applications was discontinued, and the Asylum Office resumed the examination of asylum applications on 25 May 2020. Since collection of biometric data from foreigners by police included photographing and fingerprinting of foreigners it was stopped for safety reasons on 24 March with the adoption of the Decision on the Status of Foreigners in the Republic of Serbia during the State of Emergency¹⁸. According to this decision, validity of all personal documents of foreigners, including expired identity documents of asylum seekers and refugees was automatically extended until the end of state of emergency.

Prior to this, the Government adopted on 16 March 2020 the Decision suspending the provision of all state administration services extended in person to the public.¹⁹ The authorities remained under the obligation to continue extending their services by post, e-mail or phone and the Asylum Office continued issuing certificates and personal documents in prescribed manner.²⁰

The Regulation on Deadlines in Administrative Proceedings during the State of Emergency²¹, provided that, during the State of emergency, the parties to administrative proceedings shall not bear the consequences of their failure to comply with the deadlines prescribed by the laws governing the general administrative procedure or special administrative procedures. Deadlines that expire during the State of emergency, relating to taking administrative actions, terminating administrative proceedings and deciding upon legal remedies, will be extended by 30 days following the end of the state of emergency. This meant that protection to asylum seekers whose applications have been dismissed or rejected has been also extended.

The lawful residence of all foreigners residing in Serbia was also extended for during the State of emergency, while the Decision Extending the Validity of Work Permits Issued to Foreigners Pending the State of Emergency extended the validity of all work permits which were expiring during the State of emergency until the moment it is lifted.

Following the lifting of State of emergency, registration of asylum seekers and work of the Asylum office continued normally and according to last information in August 681 intentions to seek asylum were registered and 16 persons applied for asylum. In 2020, by the end of August Asylum office granted international protection in Serbia to 16 persons (nine were granted asylum and seven subsidiary protection).²²

Following the end of State of emergency registration of asylum seekers and intake of new asylum applications continued. The problems that emerged during the State of emergency in accessing the asylum procedure and performance of official duties could be avoided in future. Instead of discontinuing the procedure, registration of asylum seekers can be enabled, provided the protection measures are complied with- putting up physical barriers between the staff and the asylum seekers and the use of protective gear.

3.3. Access to information and free legal aid

From 24 March 2020 onwards, the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (SCRM) has been posting the latest information on the epidemic on its website on a daily basis and in centres all relevant information was distributed to migrants so they would have access to information on COVID-19 risks and public health prevention measures.

¹⁸ Decision on the Status of Foreigners in the Republic of Serbia during the State of Emergency <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-serbia/451597>

¹⁹ Decision suspending the provision of all state administration services extended in person to the public. Official Gazette of the RS, Nos. 35/20 and 37/20.

²⁰ Belgrade Centre for Human Rights. 2020. Right to asylum in the Republic of Serbia. Periodic report for January-March 2020, p. 41

²¹ Regulation on the Application of Deadlines During the State of Emergency (Official Gazette of the RS, no. 41/20)

²² UNHCR. Serbia monthly update. August 2020.

A Coronavirus Pandemic Daily Bulletin was launched and distributed daily in refugee languages in centres. Bulletin contained information such as access to health care institutions, COVID-19 infirmaries, psychological support, restriction of movements measures, health prevention measures, curfew, and all other issues relevant for exercising migrants rights. Civil society organizations (CSOs) produced leaflets with information on the state of emergency in seven languages and distributed them in all centres, as well as to the Border Police and other police departments.

Before the pandemic, migrants were regularly visited by CSOs providing free legal aid and the UNHCR. Once the strict confinement measures were introduced across the entire country and movement became fully restricted all visits have been cancelled and the CSOs continued to extend legal advice and information to migrants via email and phone.

3.4. Conditions in migrant centres, including restriction on freedom of movement

On 16 March 2020, the Government adopted the Decision on the Temporary Restriction of Movement of Asylum Seekers and Irregular Migrants Accommodated in Asylum and Reception Centres in the Republic of Serbia, restricting fully freedom of movement to residents of the asylum centres and reception transit centres (RCTs).

The Decision allowed for enhanced supervision and security of asylum centres and RCTs, prescribing exceptions to the temporary restriction of movement (in cases when the SRCM may for justified reasons allow asylum seekers and migrants to leave the facilities for a specific period of time – for example to see a doctor). Following the lifting of the State of Emergency on May 6, the Ministry of Health enacted a Decree on 7 May restricting entry to and exit from reception centres for migrants and asylum centres, allowing exit only in exceptional cases like medical reasons and with the approval of the SRCM. This decision was faced with heavy criticism by the CSOs in Serbia as it was restricting the rights of migrants and it was abolished a week later, on 14 May²³.

Total of five asylum centres and twelve RCTs were in use from the beginning of 2020 to moment when the State of emergency was declared. At the time 5,912 persons were accommodated in these 17 centres. During the State of emergency, the Government temporarily restricted movement of asylum seekers and irregular migrants accommodated in centres. In the days that followed the State of emergency the number of those accommodated in the centres increased and at one point it reached 9,100 persons. Migrants were predominantly from Afghanistan and to a lesser degree Syria, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iraq and Iran. To ensure capacities for all, the SRCM enhanced medical and hygiene measures, started transferring migrants between centres and additional rub halls were erected to accommodate 680 people, 1,200 places were provided in winterized tents and approximately 630 additional places were provided in ordinary tents. Two more locations have been selected, Morovic and Miratovac, to set up emergency accommodation facilities and tents. Morovic, previously used for quarantine of Serbian citizens was relocated to migrants and Miratovac has been reconstructed purposefully for migrants.

During the pandemic, the SRCM had to provide care for additional 3,000 persons, which is 50% more than the regular capacities that the Republic of Serbia has allocated for such purpose. To resolve the situation, in the period March-May, the SRCM incurred over RSD 280,000,000 of additional unforeseen costs as a result of the pandemic.²⁴

In previous months, situation in asylum centres and RCTs was normalized and once reopening of centres started in mid-May, already in May the number of migrants accommodated in centres shrank from 9,105 at the beginning to 5,802 at the end of the month²⁵. Migrants are offered individual and group psychosocial counselling and workshops on self-reliance and integration are organised. In August, the number of residents in Asylum centres and RCTs dropped to 4,325 persons.

²³ EU Agency for Fundamental Rights. Migration: Key Fundamental Rights Concerns. June 2020.

²⁴ Fact finding report for PIMO on asylum seekers, IDPs, refugees and persons in risk of statelessness. UNHCR

²⁵ UNHCR. Serbia monthly update. May 2020.

During the pandemic authorities invested substantial efforts to readjust and increase accommodation capacities, implement preventive protocols, and ensure the presence of medical teams, psycho-social support and related services for migrants. Nonetheless, situation negatively affected migrants and their well-being, making the ongoing need for psychosocial support even more prominent, as marked in the IOM's Guidance and Toolkit for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support teams.

3.5. Stranded migrants – AVRR

IOM in Serbia through its Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme supports migrants with voluntary return to the country of origin or to a third country where returnee is entitled to permanent residence. In 2019, with cooperation of the Government of Serbia, IOM carried out return for 193 migrants, predominantly citizens of Iran (53,4%)²⁶.

During the State of emergency, IOM team in Serbia continued to regularly visit state run accommodation facilities for migrant population. Although daily present in the transit/reception centres, following strong preventive measures, AVRR counselling was adjusted to the newly established curriculum, aiming to provide support to urgent cases.

In this period 37 migrants were returned while additional 67 registered migrants remain to be returned until all the measures are lifted and the international air flights resume. Data is continuously collected on movement, restrictions, requirements and other relevant information in order to inform migrants on the situation in their country of origin, so that they can make the well-informed decision.

Migrants in Serbia waiting to be returned through AVRR			
Nationality	Number	Nationality	Number
Afghanistan	2	Kongo	1
Algeria	5	Mongolia	1
Burundi	4	Morocco	8
Cuba	3	Pakistan	1
Egypt	2	Somalia	1
Bangladesh	1	Sri Lanka	2
Iran	3	Sudan	2
Iraq	15	Tunisia	5
Jordan	1	Vietnam	7
Lebanon	3	Total:	67

3.6. Contribution of migrants residing in centres to Covid-19 response

Despite the quarantine, migrants have demonstrated an admirable level of solidarity and willingness to contribute to fighting the pandemic in line with their opportunities. Migrants in centres in Sombor, Adaševci, Principovac and Bujanovac have been sewing protective cotton masks for Serbian public service workers. In the reception centre in Bujanovac, 40 protective masks that can be washed and reused were sewn daily²⁷. IOM and Caritas have provided support to these efforts. Migrants have sent a letter to the Government of Serbia offering their help, noting that the virus does not make a difference between local population and offering their help - saying that

²⁶ Government of the Republic of Serbia (2020). Migration profile of the Republic of Serbia for 2019.

²⁷ In Solidarity When It Matters the Most: Migrants in Reception Centres Supported by the EU Helping the People of Serbia. EU Delegation in Serbia. <http://europa.rs/in-solidarity-when-it-matters-the-most-migrants-in-reception-centres-supported-by-the-eu-helping-the-people-of-serbia/?lang=en>

among them there were people with a medical background, but also those willing to volunteer in helping with street disinfection, assisting to courier services for people in quarantine etc²⁸.

Other migrants have used their time during the pandemic to help people learn languages online: migrant from Iran offered to teach her native Farsi to people in Serbia. Classes were advertised on social media and 45 people applied in less than a week. A trained teacher gave the migrant a crash course, tools and materials before the programme started via video chat²⁹.

Solidarity and migrants' readiness to help host communities in emergency situations was already demonstrated back in 2014 during floods that have heavily hit Serbia. At the time, asylum seekers residing in a hotel in Obrenovac were among the first affected by the floods and evacuated. Despite this, they were the first to volunteer in Šabac and help local community pile sandbags to protect the banks of the Sava river³⁰. Having lived through many emergency crisis and hardship, migrants have increased resilience, ability to react promptly and remain calm in such situations, a set of qualities that is of much use in emergency situations.

Examples of migrants' solidarity are the best way to fight prejudice in host communities, and dissemination of migrants' solidarity stories should be done strategically by authorities, to mitigate the negative associations that communities might have of migrants. Authorities and civil society should ensure that these are the stories that come to forefront in order to counter spread of fake news that are stigmatizing migrants as spreaders of Covid-19.

3.7. Discrimination and anti-migrant sentiment

Stigmatisation and hate speech

Across the world, migrants have been used as scapegoats during the pandemic with media labelling them as carriers of Covid-19. Unfortunately, Serbia was no exception to this trend, although to a much lesser degree.

Compared to many European countries where migrants have been an issue weighing heavily on the political agenda and where political parties used migrants during election campaigns to mobilize their voters, this was not a case in Serbia until recently. This is understandable as migrants predominantly see Serbia as a country of transit and except for 2015 which has seen historic high of 579.518 migrants registered, since then there were no more than 13,000 asylum seekers annually. Nonetheless, at the same time it should be stressed that the number of overall registered migrants in centres is three times higher, as mentioned earlier (35,094 in 2019).

The public opinion survey shows that while 40 percent perceive migrants in a negative manner, 47 percent are neutral, and 11 percent see them in positive light. Moreover, in terms of trust towards capacity of authorities to handle migrants' influx, when asked how local authorities handled migration crisis in 2015, 55 percent of citizens said the response was mostly successful or highly successful³¹.

Nonetheless, during the pandemic anti-migrant discourse was heightened. At the end of February, so-called 'people's patrols' started intercepting migrants in Belgrade and intimidating them. Facebook group "Stop naseljavanju migranata u Srbiji" (stop inhabitation of migrants in Serbia) attracted over 330.000 members in just few days and a rally in Belgrade in early March called for the return of all migrants that are passing through Serbia³². Some opposition nationalist parties have also abused the issue of migrants during their political campaigns, accusing the government of planning to settle refugees permanently in Serbia.

Security incidents

²⁸ Migranti nude pomoć Srbiji u borbi protiv korone. Radio Slobodna Evropa, 16. April 2020. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/migranti-nude-pomoc-srbiji-u-borbi-protiv-korone/30546599.html>

²⁹ UNHCR Serbia. Want to learn a new language? Refugees in Serbia offer to teach you online <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2020/5/5ebe65b24/want-learn-new-language-refugees-serbia-offer-teach-online.html>

³⁰ Mitrović, O. (2016). Handbook on migration and local development, pp 61-62. IOM

³¹ CeSID Opinion Poll on migrants 2019. Within the project EU Support to Migration Management in the Republic of Serbia.

³² BBC Serbia. 7 May 2020. „Naseljavanje migranata u Srbiji" i korona virus: Kako epidemija utiče na širenje lažnih vesti i antimigrantskih stavova <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-52524776>

On 6 May there was a live broadcast on social media of a man driving with his car into Obrenovac reception centre, trying to invade migrants. The man who turned out to be a member of a far-right group Levijatan was arrested by the army guarding the centre and sentenced to 30 days of prison which caused a small protest of far-right sympathisers outside Obrenovac RTC on 13 May³³. SCRМ and CSOs strongly condemned this incident of hate-speech and authorities were called to respond strongly to the spreading of racial, ethnic or religious hatred. On 6 June, media reported that the case was closed, with the man convicted to eight months of imprisonment³⁴.

Noting the existing anti-migrant sentiment and in order to prevent mounting xenophobia, the authorities should insist on raising awareness campaigns among public and maintaining response that is inclusive of migrants.

4. SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT ON DIFFERENT MIGRANT GROUPS

As mentioned at the outset, in addition to asylum seekers and migrants residing in centres, Serbia is host to many vulnerable migrant categories, from refugees from former Yugoslavia, IDPs, refugees under the Law on Asylum and Temporary protection, returnees under the Readmission agreement, victims of trafficking of human beings. In order to obtain the full picture of challenges emerging ahead, secondary impact of pandemic on education, loss of income of migrants and their economic opportunities as well as impact on housing and social protection is examined in this section.

4.1. Impact on education of migrants

During the pandemic, across the world schools were shut down, face to face classes halted and education was moved online. With teachers and schools improvising quick solutions to remain remotely engaged with pupils and keep the education ongoing, all the while staying safe from public health emergency, education specialists have defined this shift from the conventional modes as Emergency Remote Teaching³⁵, as opposed to regular and well developed in advance online schooling.

The impact of this shift was even more pronounced for migrant children whose education has already been disrupted for several years by displacement, trauma and necessity to support their households. In order to fully grasp the challenges faced by migrant children in Serbia, it is necessary first to provide a brief outline of how inclusion of migrants in the Serbian education system evolved over the past few years, highlighting reforms that Serbia has undertaken in improving quality of education of migrants. and the challenges it encountered.

Serbia started enrolment of asylum seekers children in 2013 and the most common problems faced included that children did not have documents testifying of their previous education which made enrolment in the right grade more difficult. To overcome this problem and following the experience of 11 pilot schools where migrants were enrolled in 2017, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MESTD) adopted the Expert instructions for the inclusion of student refugees/ asylum seekers in the education system, which stipulates that the school is obliged to prepare and implement the Support Plan for migrant children at the school level, and Individual Support Plan for each child. At the time, the MESTD in cooperation with the SRCM also distributed leaflets in migrant centres providing information about the enrolment of children in Farsi, Urdu, Arabic, English and

³³ Independent Balkan News Agency. Serbia: Shameful far-right protest held at the Obrenovac Immigrant Reception Center. 13. May 2020. <https://balkaneu.com/serbia-shameful-far-right-protest-held-at-the-obrenovac-immigrant-reception-center/>

³⁴ EU Agency for Fundamental Rights. Migration: Key Fundamental Rights Concerns. June 2020.

³⁵ Hodges, C. et al. 2020. The Difference Between Emergency Remote Teaching and Online Learning. Available at <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning>

Pashtu, to provide adequate information about the possibilities of education for the children during their stay in Serbia, to their parents and guardians.

Several projects aiming at supporting teachers' professional development and offering psycho-emotional support to children were launched. Good practices in provision of inclusive education for migrants started emerging, including provision of professional development for teachers, bussing children daily from migrant centres to local schools and having accompanying staff from the SRCM on busses and adjusting meals in centres³⁶. Since September 2019, the SRCM has been financing provision of Serbian language courses for refugees as part of their integration programme, while over the past years Serbian language courses have been organized for asylum seekers, through various projects.

In this context, during the pandemic the Operational plan for Continuation of Schoolwork in Difficult Conditions was conceptualised and adopted on 16 March, along with the Distance learning program for primary and secondary school students. The implementation of Distance learning began on 17 March 2020 through the Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) and several online platforms were providing support to teachers and students - Viber, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and national platform for online learning My school)

Out of 14 privately accommodated refugee children in Serbia that were following curriculum RTS, most common problems that were reported referred to language barrier, lack of equipment to follow online classes and inability of parents to support their learning efforts. The UNHCR and UNICEF subsequently provided tablets, allowing children to complete their school year.

Among the IDP children, estimates show that over 5,000 children of school age were unable to follow courses or had difficulties accessing courses due to lack of access to internet and necessary equipment. This was particularly the case with Roma children, and it remains a problem that should be urgently addressed. As concerns refugees from former Yugoslavia, there are no children of school age among the refugee population so change to online education had no impact.

When it comes to education of children of returnees under the Readmission agreement, the Law on the Foundations of the Education System introduced a flexible approach for children coming from vulnerable groups and who were not fully documented by providing the possibility of their enrolment³⁷. In 2019/2020, 77 returnee children were enrolled in 19 elementary schools in Serbia³⁸. It should be stressed that this data does not fully reflect representation of returnee children in schools, seeing how many of them are not registered as returnees. Lack of money is a major obstacle for children of school age not being enrolled to attend school³⁹, and there is a need for additional psychosocial activities that would ease their reintegration into the school system upon return. Bearing in mind that returnee children predominantly come from low income Roma families, it can be concluded they faced the same obstacles to online education as other vulnerable migrant groups.

Ongoing donor projects are working with schools to improve inclusion of migrants in schools. The project Strengthening the Response Capacity of the Republic of Serbia to Manage Effectively Mixed Migration Flows includes provision of support to the MoESTD in ensuring access to quality education to migrant and refugee children in Serbia in the municipalities where centres for migrants are located. Within this project a call was launched in July 2020 for actions grants in maximum value of 6,000 EUR intended for schools that are providing education for migrants/asylum seekers⁴⁰ and total of 58 school administrations were selected from Belgrade,

³⁶ Bunar, N. 2020. Promoting effective integration of migrants and refugees in education: experiences from Spain, Serbia and Belgium. Stockholm University.

³⁷ Law on the Foundations of the Education System (2017), Official Gazette RS, No. 87/2017. Children who do not have birth certificates or registered permanent or temporary residence on the territory of the municipality where a school is located may still enroll in school. Conditional enrollment is allowed for returnee children who attended schools abroad but do not possess school documents (diplomas, certificates on completed schooling, school certificates on examinations passed), until they obtain all the necessary documents.

³⁸ Migration profile of the Republic of Serbia for 2019. Republic of Serbia. P. 36

³⁹ GIZ. (2019). Survey on the status and needs of returnees based on the Readmission Agreement in Serbia in 2019.

⁴⁰ Full text of public call and list of successful applicants available at <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/konkursi-i-javni-pozivi/opsti-konkursi-i-javni-pozivi/>

Bujanovac, Bosilegrad, Sjenica, Vranje, Pirot, Sombor, Sid, Kikinda, Sombor, Subotica, Nis, Loznica, Lajkovac, Valjevo, Tutin, Banja Koviljaca, Adasevci, Becej,

With uncertainty looming on how the education will look like in the upcoming period (online or regular schooling), authorities should continue promoting their migrant inclusive approach to education, addressing all aspects needed to achieve quality education for migrants – provision of necessary equipment, language courses, continuing professional development of teachers.

4.2. Impact on employment of vulnerable migrant groups

Temporary disruption of many income-generating activities poses a significant burden on migrants as it exacerbates their existing vulnerabilities, especially bearing in mind their overall economic circumstances, including limited or no access to technology, limited capacity to cope and adapt, lack of savings, inadequate access to social services.

There are still 25,794 refugees in protracted refugee situation in Serbia and most of them belong to vulnerable categories. It is estimated that out of approximately 10,000 people which are economically active, 40 percent of them were unable to earn their income during pandemic. This is due to fact that they are predominantly working in industries which were suspended during the State of emergency (crafts, seasonal agriculture and construction work, owners of small business, sellers at farmers markets). Financial loss of these people is estimated at over 3,291,673 EUR (387 million RSD)⁴¹.

Out of 35,000 IDPs who are able to work, are earning small and irregular income due to the activity they engage (crafts, seasonal agricultural and construction jobs, small business owners, market stall renters, etc.), and are faced with unresolved housing needs, it is estimated that 21,000 people were unable to earn income or have lost their jobs during the COVID-19 crisis. Taking the minimum wage as the basis for estimation, these persons lost almost RSD 2 billion⁴².

Returnees under the readmission agreement constitute also extremely vulnerable group with poor levels of education and high unemployment rate, requiring assistance to find employment for economic survival and sustainable reintegration that would prevent them from leaving again. They are entitled to active employment policy programs and in 2019 there were 38 returnees registered with the National Employment Service, 70 individual employment plans were developed for returnees, and 15 returnees were included in the active employment policy programs⁴³. Reason for such low figures are that many returnees do not register at the National Employment Service.

When it comes to asylum seekers and refugees (persons granted asylum and/or subsidiary protection), 18 households consisting of 33 vulnerable persons contacted UNHCR and reported loss of jobs and income. Out of this number, 24 are adults of working age with the average monthly salary being a minimum wage in Serbia, 31,747 RSD. When it comes to asylum seekers accommodated in centres, out of 27 of them who had jobs before the crisis, 10 lost their jobs, although following the lifting of the State of emergency, four out of these 10 returned to work⁴⁴.

4.3. Impact on social protection

Majority of cash and in-kind social assistance measures in Serbia were aimed at the prevention of joblessness and support to small and medium-sized enterprises. Although belonging to the most vulnerable category, asylum seekers and migrants in camps were not eligible for the universal emergency cash payments that the Government distributed

⁴¹ SCRM document: Information on the socio-economic measures taken to prevent spreading of Covid-19 in the period March-May 2020 to different categories of migrants.

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Government of the Republic of Serbia (2020). Migration profile of the Republic of Serbia for 2019.

⁴⁴ UNHCR. June 2020. Draft Rapid Assessment on the Socio-Economic Impact of Covid-19 on Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the Republic of Serbia

to all adult citizens, nor to any stimulus measures, as it was targeting Serbian citizens only. During the pandemic there were no new social protection instruments envisaged for migrants (except those that are Serbian citizens) to help them alleviate the impact of Covid-19 and the envisaged budget cuts will directly affect this population.

Asylum seekers which are accommodated in centres receive cash cards so they can cover their small expenditures. In April cash cards were not distributed and during the last week of May cash cards of were distributed 3,000 RSD per person again but only to families and vulnerable medical cases. Majority of single males were not included.

As for returnees under the Readmission Agreements, who predominantly belong to Roma ethnic minority, due to the 2020 budget reduction, benefits for returnees have been reduced by RSD 5 million⁴⁵. This cut can significantly affect returnee community. The survey done in 2019 by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) showed that share of returnee families receiving some kind of monetary assistance or access to soup kitchen is much higher compared to other groups in Serbia : compensation for home care and assistance was received by 2 percent of households, financial assistance to the family was provided to 63 percent of households, children's allowance to 54 percent, maternity allowance to 10 percent, one-off assistance to 33 percent, and meals in soup kitchen to 16 percent.⁴⁶ Compared to the same survey done by the IOM in 2011, In 2019 there is two time more returnee' families receiving family allowance and 20 percent more families receiving child allowance. One-off assistance also almost doubled⁴⁷.

When it comes to vulnerable IDPs, funds intended for one-time cash assistance, as well as for assistance for buying energy supplies and medicine, were reduced by RSD 58 million, which means that some 3,500 most vulnerable families, or more than 20,000 persons, will be denied this form of assistance.

It should be noted that due to fact that some of pre-accession IPA funds were reallocated to Covid-19 containment measures, the project for the provision of legal aid for these vulnerable migrant populations was cancelled. This will further aggravate the situation of vulnerable migrant populations. Every year, the SCRM allocates funds to support projects by refugee and IDP associations and CSOs in the amount of RSD 12 million, supporting some 60 projects annually. As this budget has been reduced by RSD 11 million, this year a maximum of 6 associations will be supported, and several thousand beneficiaries will not be included in projects.⁴⁸

Bearing in mind that migrant's services depend not only on central level but also on the overall functioning of the level of local self-government, it should be stressed that during pandemic social protection coverage worsened, partly due to the lack of capacity of relevant local institutions to identify those hit hardest by the crisis and find new ways to assist them. Namely, during Covid-19, most local self-governments did not include CSOs in their emergency task forces or decision-making process⁴⁹

This knowledge should be coupled with the fact that Serbia's GDP is projected to fall between 2.5 and 5.3 percent in 2020 and that depending on the duration of the crisis, between 125,000 and 327,000 citizens could become newly poor.⁵⁰ In a situation when the entire system is overburdened and weaknesses of the social protection system exposed, there is a risk that migrants, such as returnees under the Readmission agreement, victims of trafficking, and other vulnerable groups will be left behind.

On level of service provision, the overall budget cuts will impact human resources in charge for service delivery and outreach to the Roma community which includes returnees. Namely, health mediators, pedagogical assistants and Roma coordinators have played an invaluable role in providing educational support for returnee children, ensuring outreach to the Roma community and raising health standards, as acknowledged in the National Strategy for Roma Inclusion 2016–2025. Such positions were never resolved in a systematic way within the social protection system

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ GIZ. (2019). Survey on the status and needs of returnees based on the Readmission Agreement in Serbia in 2019.

⁴⁷ IOM. (2012). Survey on the needs of returnees in the Republic of Serbia. IOM Mission in Serbia, Belgrade.

⁴⁸ Fact finding report for PIMO on asylum seekers, IDPs, refugees and persons in risk of statelessness. UNHCR

⁴⁹ UN Socio Economic Assessment in Serbia

⁵⁰ UN Socio Economic Assessment in Serbia

but were working on a project basis with no fixed term contracts. Losing this type of frontline workers would impact the overall capacity of the system to provide essential services to the most vulnerable.

The current crisis might also exacerbate social exclusion of migrants on local level. Serbia has developed instruments for addressing migration at the local level through Local action plans for refugees, IDPs, and returnees under the Readmission Agreement (LAP), prepared by the Local migration councils and adopted by municipal authorities. LAPs are of principal importance in planning housing solutions, and the economic empowerment of vulnerable migrant groups, including sustainable reintegration of returnees. Local action planning includes a set of midterm measures that the local authorities intend to implement to resolve migrants' needs through setting specific objectives, targets and measures for their realization. With expected budget cuts, it remains questionable to which degree this will be achieved.

Finally, Covid-19 disproportionately increases risks for some categories of migrants such as victims of trafficking. Criminals have adjusted their modus operandi to the 'new normal' created by the pandemic, especially through the abuse of modern information and communication technologies. Identifying victims of human trafficking and their referral to social protection schemes is even more difficult during COVID-19 and victims that are still in confinement by their traffickers find themselves in desolate situation, particularly those experiencing sexual exploitation.⁵¹ In 2020 the Centre for Human Trafficking Victims Protection in Serbia identified 37 victims of trafficking all Serbian nationals⁵². However, this number can be much higher, particularly among migrant population. Due to difficulties in identification and detrimental effects that Covid-19 has on victims of trafficking, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime argues there is a need for systematic data collection and analysis on the impact of COVID-19 on trafficking in persons.

Some cuts and gaps in social protection for migrants are already noticeable, with some projects for migrants being cancelled and state budgetary cuts being made for programmes targeting migrants. Other effects will be noticed, bearing in mind the overall crisis and its disproportionate effect on other vulnerable categories, meaning that competent authorities will need much more capacity to properly address the needs and socio-economic consequences of the crisis for various migrants' categories. This will be particularly difficult in aggravated circumstances which migrants are facing, including increased need for socio-economic assistance, including psychological support.

4.4. Impact on housing of vulnerable migrant groups

Housing solutions are provided from the national budget and donor funds for refugees from former Yugoslavia, IDPs and returnees under the Readmission agreement. Housing solution include donation of construction material for the completion of residential units, the purchase of village housing, building housing units and the allocation of prefabricated houses on land owned by the beneficiary or provided by the local government.

Access to durable housing solutions was affected as the Regional Housing programme, which is providing durable housing solutions to refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia was prolonged due to the State of emergency. As a result, 2,500 families were not provided with housing solutions in envisaged period. This also meant prolonged financing of renting flats for three months, leading to an estimated financial loss of 1,505,494 EUR (177 million RSD). Moreover, as provision of housing solutions for refugees and IDPs requires significant funds, budget cuts caused by Covid-19 have an impact of provision of housing to refugees. Namely, in 2020 the SRCM allocated 270 million RSD to provision of housing. This budget line has now been reduced for 6 million RSD, meaning that 10 families will not get assistance in provision of housing this year. Also, due to budget cuts refugees from

⁵¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2020). Impact of The Covid-19 Pandemic on Trafficking in Persons

⁵² Monthly reports of the Centre for Human Trafficking Victims Protection <http://www.centarzztlj.rs/index.php/o-nama-2/statistika>

former Yugoslavia will receive 170,112 EUR less (20 million RSD) less than planned for one-time financial assistance for purchase of energy supplies and medicine⁵³.

Out of 196,995 IDPs, 15,857 households are in a state of need, i.e. their housing needs are not met, and they do not have any additional income they could use to solve this existential need without organized assistance. In 2020, the funds allocated by SCRM for the improvement of living conditions and housing of IDPs amounted to RSD 270 million. Due to the corona virus emergency, the allocation for that budget line has been reduced by RSD 148 million, which means that some 220 families will not receive assistance and will not have their housing needs met this year. The direct financial impact of this situation is RSD 12 million that these families had to spend on rent in the past three months. In the following period, until their housing needs are met, these families will keep paying RSD 4 million per month⁵⁴.

5. IMPACT ON SERBIAN CITIZENS LIVING ABROAD

5.1. Return of Serbian citizens and its possible implications

In a context of disrupted national and international transport services more than 52,000 extraordinary restrictions to mobility have been put into effect by governments and authorities worldwide⁵⁵.

Serbia, like all other countries, responded to the spread of COVID-19 by closing borders and imposing complete travel ban on 19 March 2020. Border crossings and commercial flights restarted on 21 May.

Border closure has triggered large flows of return migration, with Serbian citizens living abroad returning in response to the adverse impact of the virus on economic activity and to avoid being stranded overseas in a situation where they lost their employment options or were ineligible for social protection. Media statements from March and April spoke of return of several hundreds of thousands of Serbian citizens to the country in a short period following the pandemic outbreak from mostly the EU. Naturally, this poses a number of protection concerns and places further weight on the far-reaching socio-economic impact of the pandemic. Moreover, it is expected that with overwhelming loss of jobs, there will be increased number of people moving towards informal, riskier migration channels (Yayboke, 2020).

Nonetheless, the return of Serbian citizens must be properly contextualized with what we know of Serbian citizens living abroad. As mentioned earlier, Serbia is a country of emigration. With lack of actual data on the volume and characteristics of emigration, Eurostat and available national statistical offices data show that Germany, Austria, Sweden and Switzerland feature as primary destinations, to which people with primary and high school education go. Overseas countries are interesting for students and highly educated persons and popular new destinations are Italy (attractive for those with high school) and Great Britain (popular with the most educated youth)⁵⁶. From other EU member states, Slovenia and Hungary have recently emerged as frequent destinations for Serbian citizens.

With no actual figures to properly assess the size of Serbian recent emigration or their profile and socio-economic characteristics, national media wrote about return of hundreds of thousands of Serbian citizens from abroad⁵⁷. However, this information remains highly dubious and incomplete as when asked to fill out the form when entering the country, citizens were only asked to say from which country they are returning from (to assess the level of risk it poses from Covid-19) and no information was sought on their migrant status or the length of time they have spent abroad, let alone about their economic status or if they plan to remain in Serbia. Aware that there is abundance of incomplete information to properly assess the impact of Serbian citizens returning from abroad, the

⁵³ SCRM document: Information on the socio-economic measures taken to prevent spreading of Covid-19 in the period March-May 2020 to different categories of migrants

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ IOM. COVID-19 Analytical Snapshot #23: Travel restrictions and mobility UPDATE, 23 April 2020.

⁵⁶ Maximising the development impact of labour migration in the Western Balkans. 2018., p.44 http://wb-mignet.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Final-report_Maximising-development-impact-of-labour-migration-in-WB_0412018-1.pdf

⁵⁷ BBC. Korona virus: Povratak u Srbiju - od čekanja na aerodromu do samoizolacije. 23. Mart 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-52007905>

Institute for Sociological Research is carrying out research on the practices, attitudes and experiences of movement and self-isolation of Serbian citizens who have entered the country following the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic. The research entitled Mobility of Serbian citizens and Covid-19 pandemic might be able to offer some more in-depth findings that would be able to paint a clearer picture on the scale of return of Serbian citizens and their socio-economic circumstances, allowing to assess properly the impact they will have on national economy. In addition, the UNDP in cooperation with Returning Point programme (Tacka povratka) is carrying out survey on returning migrants from abroad during the pandemic, aiming to understand reasons for return, intentions to stay in Serbia or to return abroad again.

At the same time, while the major countries of destination – United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand have temporarily suspended immigration support, the pandemic has also shifted the notion of what jobs are considered as essential. Those traditionally considered low skilled have become key workers in 2020 as they were maintaining core society functions including food supply chains⁵⁸. Role of migrants will be instrumental in recovery economy, particularly those working in jobs considered as essential so coupled with lack of data on actual return of Serbian citizens it would be premature to say how and to which degree this will affect Serbian economy.

5.2. Impact on foreign students in Serbia and Serbian students abroad

According to the Migration profile of the Republic of Serbia and national databases, precise data on foreign students are not available. The closest estimates on number of students from abroad enrolled at Serbian universities comes from the Ministry of Interior's data on number of foreigners who were granted temporary residence on the ground of education. At the end of 2019 there were 1, 557 students enrolled in Serbia, slightly less than in 2018 when there were 1,683⁵⁹. Out of them 22,3 percent were from Libya, which has consistently been the largest groups of foreigners studying in Serbia for the last ten years, followed by Russia 5,8 percent), Montenegro (5,2 percent), Greece (4,8 percent), Iran (4,3 %), Croatia (3,9 percent), Bosnia and Herzegovina (3,4 percent), Turkey (3 percent) and China (2,8 percent) and North Macedonia (2,7 percent).

When it comes to Serbians studying abroad, the actual estimate is even harder to make because, as already mentioned, the emigration data from Serbia is the most difficult to capture with no precise databases. As concerns the measures targeting students studying abroad, students were one of the priority categories in repatriation flights during March and April and the Government of Serbia recently adopted free Covid-19 testing for pupils and students studying abroad⁶⁰

5.3. Impact on remittances

Globally synchronised lockdowns triggered by Covid-19 have led to an unprecedented economic halt, resulting in a deep global recession and estimated impact on growth of global GDP for 2020 of around -4 percent⁶¹. According to the World Bank estimates, remittances to low and middle income are projected to fall by nearly 20 percent in 2020.

While decline of remittances will primarily lead to a further decrease in consumption, recent research carried out on global level warns that it will also reflect on achievement of SDGs, bearing in mind that remittances help achieving 7 of the 17 SDGs⁶²: SDG 1, No Poverty; SDG 2, Zero Hunger; SDG 3, Good Health and Well-Being; SDG 4, Quality Education; SDG 6, Clean Water and Sanitation; SDG 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth; and SDG 10, Reduced Inequality.

⁵⁸ Migration Policy Centre. April 2020. Rethinking Migrants' Skills and Labour Immigration Policies

⁵⁹ Migration profile of the Republic of Serbia for 2019. Republic of Serbia.

⁶⁰ Vesti. Učenci i studenti koji su državljani Srbije, a koji odlaze na školovanje u inostranstvo, mogu besplatno da se testiraju na Covid-19, <https://www.vesti.rs/Novi-Sad/Besplatno-testiranje-na-koronu-za-ucenike-i-studente-koji-se-skoluju-u-inostranstvu.html>

⁶¹ Frederic Boissay and Phurichai Rungcharoenkitkul, Macroeconomic effects of Covid-19: an early review BIS, 2020.

⁶² Remittances matter: 8 facts you don't know about the money migrants send back home. 17. June 2019. UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/remittances-matter.html>

From January to July 2020, foreign remittances to Serbia amounted to 1,6 billion euro, making already a 19 percent decrease⁶³ compared to 2019 which registered 3,5 billion EUR in remittances (totalling some 8 percent of GDP⁶⁴). Taking into account that one in ten households in Serbia receives remittances⁶⁵ and that they are predominantly used for local consumption this will hit hard poor households and can expose new poverty fault lines in Serbia.

The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (SORS) conducted a representative research during 2014–2015 on remittances which showed that remittances are predominantly sent from Germany (27.5 percent), Austria (15 percent) and Switzerland (7.5 percent). Spending the money for food, utilities, petrol, cigarettes, clothes and shoes prevailed (79 percent), while far less money was spent on home appliances, health care and education or entertainment (7.3 percent; 16.4 percent and 6 percent, respectively). Investments in purchasing, building or renovating flats/houses were ranked second in the share of spending the money from remittances (26 percent). The smallest shares of the received money through these transfers were used to invest in business (2.9 percent) and savings (1.2 percent). Research also showed that 97.7 percent of total business investments were related to agricultural production⁶⁶.

Developmental potential of remittances remains underutilized with only 2,9 per cent invested in business or profit generating activities.⁶⁷ Despite numerous efforts over the years to improve this, the situation remained the same and is part of the “Serb remittance puzzle” as summarized in the UNDP’s study:

“Whether in 2008 or in 2017, the question remains the same: how to harness the diaspora remittances for development? Ten years into this topic, several banks have lowered the costs and a few money transfer companies have entered the market. However, no remittance investment-focused instrument has been developed, and the puzzle has remained. It is too small to be treated as a potential investment, and collectively too big to be ignored⁶⁸.”

The study proceeds to propose a solution consisting of specific and targeted national policy towards diaspora, including promoting money transfer through the cheapest formal channel, towards a special type of instrument that would be focused on the diaspora’s small and medium enterprise investments or infrastructure projects, with local infrastructural support and recognition by the local community, the state and its diplomatic missions abroad⁶⁹.

While this solution requires significant, comprehensive and systemic efforts, there are also simple methods which can be undertaken to assist the authorities in obtaining a more in-depth view of how the pandemic has affected lives, jobs and income of Serbian diaspora. This information would be a starting point for analyzing how such changes will reflect on the overall contribution of diaspora to homeland through remittances or investments flows. It would also show the potential of Serbian diaspora as a continuing source of support for their family members and networks residing in Serbia and to what extent could the diaspora contribute to respond to COVID-19 consequences in Serbia through donations. A good example is a survey recently done by IOM Bosnia and Herzegovina, which although carried out on a very limited sample contains some pertinent findings relevant for future policy responses.⁷⁰

⁶³ Central European Initiative. Serbia: remittances decrease by almost 19%. 24 September 2020. <https://www.cei.int/ansa/90753>

⁶⁴ World Bank. Personal remittances, received (current US\$ and as % of GDP)”, and Data on remittances, (Accessed on August 2020) <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.CD.DT>

⁶⁵ Final Report. Maximising the development impact of labour migration in the Western Balkans. 2018. http://wb-mignet.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Final-report_Maximising-development-impact-of-labour-migration-in-WB_0412018-1.pdf

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ UNDP. 2017. Assessment of the National Investment Framework for Diasporas in the Republic of Serbia, p.42. Publication produced within the Global joint project „Mainstreaming Migration into National Development Strategies”.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ IOM Rapid Assessment Impact Of Covid-19 On The Diaspora, Emigrants And Their Contribution To The Development Of Bosnia And Herzegovina

Proposed survey could capture the following elements:

- changes in status in countries of residence (potential loss of working permits) during the pandemic;
- changes in employment status during the pandemic: if they lost their job, had to change it, had to close down business. Mapping sectors in which diaspora members work would be also highly relevant;
- changes in monthly earnings during the pandemic – whether their income decreased substantively;
- indicate the scale and frequency of remittances prior to pandemic and now (whether it increased or decreased, did they change channels for sending remittances, how it will affect the receiving households)

The survey could also assess whether the pandemic made the respondents consider returning to Serbia.

It is already anticipated that COVID-19 crisis will have a far-reaching effect on SDGs realization, particularly SDG 1, No Poverty; SDG 2, Zero Hunger; SDG 3, Good Health and Well-Being; SDG 4, Quality Education; SDG 6, Clean Water and Sanitation; SDG 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth; and SDG 10, Reduced Inequality. Remittances can be instrumental for achievement of these SDGs and in order to fully assess the impact of the current crisis on remittances, a more thorough survey Serbian diaspora members is needed on economic changes brought on by pandemic.

5.4. Contribution of diaspora to pandemic response

Across the world diaspora communities have been stepping in to support efforts of their countries of origin, or countries hosting large diaspora of their origin in fighting the pandemic. Activities ranged from raising funds to provide PPE to healthcare workers and doctors in Bangladesh, to contributing financially to provide testing kits in Eritrea by the Lebanon's diaspora in Australia or to the set-up of a designated COVID-19 Response Fund by the Irish government to support organizations that deliver services to the Irish diaspora⁷¹.

Due to the increasing pressure on the health care system, in late March the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Serbia's diplomatic missions and consulates, with the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), have invited medical workers (doctors, nurses, medical technicians and other health personnel) living abroad who are currently not professionally engaged to report their availability to temporarily return to the country and help with the COVID-19. The open call was launched within the Returning Point programme (Tacka povratka). More than 300 have applied to return and by 30 March, 24 had arrived from Germany.⁷²

The UN Socio Economic Assessment in Serbia enlists examples of diaspora support to Serbia, including the organization "COVID-19 KaraTim," consisting of a team of epidemiologists, doctors, scientists, statisticians, IT experts and other qualified experts from across the Western Balkans, who offered free technical support on public health surveillance and assistance. Their contributions ranged from offering to do a literature review of leading academic journals and reports, to do a statistical analysis of health data from Serbia, provide suggestions for improving the quality of data generated given Serbia's situation, and recommendations for prevention strategies based on epidemiological indicators. Also, the organization "Serbs for Serbs" has called upon the diaspora to donate to poor families in Serbia. Other organisations such as the "Diaspora Group," have offered assistance for transferring aid and other materials into Serbia.

However, despite these examples it should be noted that during the first peak (March-May), diaspora engagement was not noticeable to a large extent. This might be partially explained by the fact that there was an increased stigmatization of diaspora in media and claims that returning migrants were responsible for spreading the virus, meaning that migrants have faced stigmatization upon their return. The ongoing research Mobility of Serbian

https://iom.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9X2LGhN6XWyRUxf?fbclid=IwAR2PqME749KZ8EedBUxb9TWLPYhu_qR43rpOvc3-XI5-o87vYkZBiO6Efd8

⁷¹ IOM. COVID-19 Analytical Snapshot #31: Diaspora engagement

https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/covid-19_analytical_snapshot_31_-_diaspora_engagement.pdf

⁷² Policy responses for Serbia. Covid-19 Health System Response Monitor. Available at

<https://www.covid19healthsystem.org/countries/serbia/livinghit.aspx?Section=2.2%20Workforce&Type=Section>

citizens and Covid-19 carried out by the Institute for Sociological Research will shed more light on those claims and assess experiences of citizens that have returned to country during the pandemic.

Another reason might be that during the first peak, Serbia was not as affected and in need for assistance. The situation changed in late July when the overall health situation deteriorated and Sandzak became a hotspot of Covid-19 affected areas. Donations of health centre in Tutin were delivered in medical equipment by diaspora from Switzerland, Luxembourg and Germany and large donations were quickly raised for medical supplies in Sandzak⁷³.

Diaspora engagement became noticeable and prominent when the pandemic escalated in Sandzak in July 2020. In the process of taking the right steps and responding to the negative effects of the pandemic and the economic crisis, cooperation at all levels of government, local self-government and diaspora is needed to address the upcoming challenges.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Stemming from the impact analysis, the following recommendations are devised to ensure that Covid-19 response includes migrants, addresses their wellbeing and enhances social cohesion. The recommendations are enlisted, in no priority order, in the areas that require greater attention to promote integration, care and protection for migrants.

Strengthen level of preparedness of migration management authorities to respond to pandemic

Asylum system was put under significant strain during Covid-19. The pandemic exposed the need for increased supplies of PPE for border police officials, staff in asylum centres and RCTs and representatives of Asylum office to ensure their safety while working with migrants. Series of measures should be considered, from building capacities of migration management authorities to develop standard operating procedures for preventing and managing Covid-19 at borders, to implementing procedures to prevent and manage Covid-19 in centres and to ensure asylum procedure in a safe environment.

Increase provision of support for social wellbeing of migrants, including mental health support

To ensure that migrants' needs are addressed within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, their overall social wellbeing needs to be enhanced. This includes also mental health support, as the pandemic affects both migrants and their caretakers, and widespread availability of mental health support should be at the forefront of every country's response to and recovery from the COVID-19, as stipulated in the UN Secretary General's Policy Brief on COVID-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health and the IOM's Guidance and Toolkit for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support teams. Migrants in detention, transit centres, victims of trafficking and those that are stranded face situations of increased vulnerability and require reinforced capacities of health care respondents as well as other service providers working directly with them. A set of measures ranging from psychological support seeking to cultivate strengths and resilience of migrants to promoting their social wellbeing should be developed.

Launch public information campaigns to respond to stigmatization of migrants and reduce discrimination among local population

The report showed increased discrimination and xenophobia in Serbia directed towards migrants in 2020. Launching of media campaigns by state authorities that would promote tolerance of asylum seekers, migrants and refugees, all the while advocating the need for migrant's inclusive response during the pandemic could preclude any incidents, hate speech and hate crimes. Information and support systems should be available to migrants to report any act of discrimination or abuse they may have experienced.

Work on set of measures to improve education of migrants in line with the SDG 4: Quality Education

⁷³ AlJazeera. Mersiha Gadzo. Serbia's Sandzak residents warn of 'apocalypse' over coronavirus. 7 Jul 2020. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/7/7/serbias-sandzak-residents-warn-of-apocalypse-over-coronavirus>

After the initial temporary success with online education, it was acknowledged that very few countries had the necessary digital infrastructure, right methodology as well as sufficiently trained human capital for an overnight shift from classrooms to online learning. This is even more difficult for most vulnerable communities who need education more than others - for empowerment, to beat inequalities and to achieve better life. While some measures have been adopted to guarantee inclusive education for migrants in Serbia, Covid-19 additionally compounded challenges that migrant children face in accessing quality education. The report outlined different challenges faced by returnee, IDP and migrant children in Serbia. They encounter obstacles in accessing education putting them at risk of falling further behind in school. Comprehensive policies on this matter, including provision of Serbian language courses, psycho-emotional support to children as well as necessary technical equipment for distant learning are needed. This should be coupled with provision of online tools to teachers that are working with vulnerable children.

Promote employment opportunities among vulnerable migrant population

The assessment showed that vulnerable migrant categories have incurred significant financial loss during pandemic due to loss of employment. 21,000 IDPs were unable to earn income or have lost their jobs during the pandemic as well as 4,000 refugees from former Yugoslavia. These people are already marginalized and have unresolved housing issues which is why they should be prioritized in the Covid-19 socio-economic response. Same applies for returnees under the readmission agreement as their economic reintegration is a precondition for sustainable reintegration.

Provide additional budgetary allocations for social protection of vulnerable migrant groups

Budget cuts have been already made on provision of assistance to IDPs and returnees. Within the shrinking budget space and increased number of persons in need of social assistance, there is an increased danger that vulnerable migrants will be left out of some social assistance programmes and are in risk of losing their livelihoods. Several options can be considered to mend the cracks in social protection system— making vulnerable migrants eligible for social welfare programmes under Covid-19 response, providing support either in the form of cash or in-kind goods and services to prevent falling into greater poverty, or allocating new funds that would ensure that targets from LAPs are met. Emergency support to marginalised communities should be provided, including funding for projects providing essential support to marginalised communities.

Explore options of engaging migrants in a pandemic response

Across the world, migrants have been acting as instrumental agents in crisis and recovery response. While migrants residing in camps face particular situation, the assessment showed their willingness to contribute to response to Covid-19 with their skills and know how. Bearing in mind the potential this has for fighting prejudice in local communities and dispelling stigmatization of migrants, including them actively in response and disseminating stories on solidarity would be a valuable way of reducing hostilities and changing perceptions on migrants among general public.

Carry out a survey among diaspora to assess how their income was affected by pandemic so that a more informed assessment could be made on diaspora investment and reduced scale of remittances

There is still a lot of unknown in terms of how Serbian migrant workers and overall diaspora was affected by Covid-19, requiring more in-depth research on how pandemic affected their socio-economic status and consequently, how it will change their contribution to economy of Serbia (via remittances or potential investment). The survey and thorough mapping would serve as a starting point for showing the potential of Serbian diaspora in contributing to Covid-19 recovery response. Remittance-reliant households and communities are especially vulnerable to the economic impacts of the pandemic and their needs should be included in national COVID-19 response and economic recovery planning.

Increase support to civil society organizations working with migrants

The assessment showed reduced state funding for some CSOs working with migrants as well as cancellation of some donor funded projects. Taking into account that migrants might be left out of some social protection services, and bearing in mind that CSOs are more responsive and flexible to provide services tailored to migrants needs, such programmes should be prioritized both in order to achieve SDGs and allow social cohesion.

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