Why I Stayed

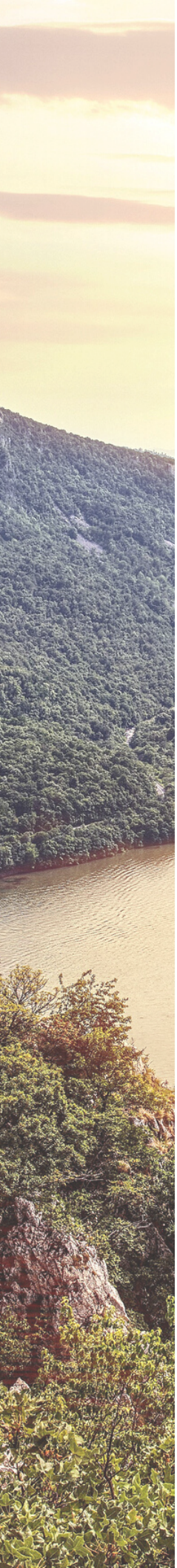
Asylum, Integration, and Futures in Serbia
Through the Eyes of 13 Refugees

klikAktiv
center for development of social policies

RAS

Zachary Goodwin

2022



Report
WHY I STAYED: ASYLUM, INTEGRATION, AND FUTURES IN SERBIA THROUGH THE EYES OF 13 REFUGEES

Author
Zachary Goodwin

Feedback from
Jana Canović
Jessica Collins-Bojović
Marijana Hameršak
Sara Ristić
Marta Stojić Mitrović
Milica Švabić
Stevan Tatalović

Translation, Interpretation, Transcription
Jana Canović
Nemanja Kovačević
Maria Luisa Valencia

Design
Maya Angulo

Photos
Cover, Refugee Aid Serbia.
All others, author or Creative Commons.

Funding Organization
The Fulbright Program

Sponsoring Organizations
Refugee Aid Serbia
KlikAktiv - Center for Development of Social Policies

Date
December 1, 2022

Suggested Citation
Goodwin, Zachary. *Why I Stayed: Asylum, Integration, and Futures in Serbia Through the Eyes of 13 Refugees.* Belgrade: Refugee Aid Serbia / KlikAktiv, 2022.

Fieldwork for this report was conducted between October 2021 and August 2022 through a funding grant from The Fulbright Program.

Official organizational sponsors for grantee's research were Refugee Aid Serbia and KlikAktiv - Center for Development of Social Policies.

The views reflected in this report are exclusively those of the author and the research participants. The report does not necessarily reflect the views of the editors, funding organization, the sponsoring organizations, any partner organizations, or other organizations and individuals that have chosen to share and publicize this report.

Any errors are attributable to the author alone.

Table of Contents

Terms and Definitions

Game: The colloquial term used by refugees to refer to attempts to irregularly cross borders.

Guaranteed game: Refers to border crossing attempts where smugglers charge much higher prices, in theory "guaranteeing" passage.

People-on-the-move: An umbrella term used in this text to refer to all displaced people who find themselves in situations of mobility. This includes refugees, asylees, asylum-seekers, and migrants.

Asylum-seeker: An individual who is currently applying for asylum protection.

Migrant: Lacks a standardized definition, but is generally used to refer to individuals perceived to have left their origin countries for reasons unrelated to violence or persecution, such as labor opportunity. However, its usage often implies that the individual's migration is less valid (i.e., compared to refugees) and is thus used sparingly in this report.

Refugee: Legally speaking, a refugee is someone who has received asylum. Colloquially, the term is used more widely to refer to individuals who have fled their origin country on grounds of persecution even if they do not yet have asylum. In this text, the term is used predominantly in its legal definition and interchangeably with **asylee**.

Protected status: In this text, "protected status" or "protected individual" is used to refer to someone who has received either asylum or subsidiary protection in Serbia**.**

Asylum: In the Serbian context, asylum is protected status guaranteed for five years. Grounds for asylum follow those outlined in the 1951 Geneva Convention: "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" in one's origin country.

Subsidiary Protection: In the Serbian context, subsidiary protection is protected status guaranteed for one year. Grounds for subsidiary protection are less individually circumstantial than for asylum, and can include fear of harm in situations of generalized insecurity and violence in one's origin country.

Abbreviations

Used in text after first instance

ADRA: Adventist Development and Relief Agency
APC: Asylum Protection Center
AVRR: Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration
BCHR: Belgrade Centre for Human Rights
BiH: Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosna i Hercegovina)
CRPC: Crisis Response and Policy Centre
DRC: Danish Refugee Council
EU: European Union
FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization
IDEAS: IDEAS Centre for Research and Social Development
IOM: International Organization for Migration
IYE: Institute for Youth Education in Niš
JRS: Jesuit Refugee Service
KIRS: Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (Komesarijat za izbeglice i migracije Republike Srbije)
KlikAktiv: KlikAktiv - Center for Development of Social Policies
MSF: Doctors Without Borders (Médecins sans frontières)
MUP: Ministry of the Interior (Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova)
NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGOs: Non-governmental organizations
PIN: Psychosocial Innovation Network
RAS: Refugee Aid Serbia
SGBV: Sexual and gender-based violence
StC: Save the Children
UASC: Unaccompanied and separated children
UDHR: Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN: United Nations
UNHCR: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USA: United States of America

Other Notes:
The use of quotation marks within testimonies does not necessarily reflect a word-for-word utterance, but is used to help readers follow interactions between characters within testimonies.

Translations from Serbian-language and Spanish-language news articles are the author's own unless otherwise stated.

Some organizations and sources use American spellings while others use British spellings, creating some orthographic discrepancies (e.g., Belgrade Centre for Human Rights vs. Asylum Protection Center).

Introduction

When the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) handed over the Asylum Centre Banja Koviljača to Serbia's Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (KIRS) in 2008, the centre housed just 45 individuals from six countries.[1] The Balkans, in those years, had yet to become a primary migration route toward the European Union (EU), and very few of those who did traverse it considered Serbia as a final destination. Serbia's asylum system had only existed since 2008, and from that year until 2014, the Ministry of the Interior (MUP) registered 28,285 intentions to seek asylum.[2] Yet, the Asylum Office received just 1,521 applications and upheld only 15 decisions granting 16 individuals refuge or subsidiary protection.[3]

However, the year 2015 saw the onset of Europe's so-called 'migration crisis,' during which an estimated 1.3 million individuals reached the EU via routes stretching across the Mediterranean, the Aegean, and the Balkans, propelled by increasing unrest in Afghanistan and the Arab world and challenges to European border externalization in Africa and Asia.[4] In 2015, the MUP registered 577,995 intentions to seek asylum in Serbia — twenty times the previous seven years combined — and the Asylum Office granted a modest but record number of positive decisions (24).[5] The beginning of the 'crisis' also led to the massive infusion of EU migration management funding into Serbia. Between 2015 and 2018, the EU allocated at least €30,000,000 to KIRS and related agencies for camp construction, agency staffing, management of accommodation, and other operational costs.[6] Since the 'crisis,' with an eye on negotiations for EU accession, Serbia has increasingly performed the EU's

1 Vesna Petković, "UNHCR hands over asylum centre to Serbian government," *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, December 24, 2008, https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2008/12/49521e644/unhcr-hands-asylum-centre-serbian-government.html

2 'Intention to seek asylum' should be understood as the default status assigned to persons encountered and registered by the Ministry of the Interior. While, in practice, those with this status have most of the same rights as asylum-seekers, one is not legally an asylum-seeker in Serbia until they submit an application, orally or in written form, to the Asylum Office; for statistics, see: Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, *Right to Asylum in the Republic of Serbia 2021*, (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2022), 18-20, http://azil.rs/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Right-to-Asylum-in-the-Republic-of-Serbia-2021.pdf

3 Nikola Kovačević, *Precondition for Integration: The right to work of refugees and asylum seekers in the Republic of Serbia*, (Belgrade: A 11 - Initiative for Economic and Social Rights, 2020), 19, https://www.a11initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/PRECONDITION-FOR-INTEGRATION-A-11-Initiative.pdf

4 Border externalization refers to the process by which the EU has outsourced the enforcement of its borders to non-EU countries.

5 Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, *Right to Asylum 2021*, 18; Nikola Kovačević, "Regular Procedure," *Asylum Information Database | European Council on Refugees and Exiles*, May 2, 2022. https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/serbia/asylum-procedure/procedures/regular-procedure/.

6 "UN and other multilateral funds," Commissariat for Refugees and Migration Republic of Serbia, https://kirs.gov.rs/eng/projects/un-and-other-multilateral-funds

border management and militarization agendas, with Serbia's external EU borders becoming focal points of enforcement.

Nonetheless, the increasing number of people-on-the-move in Serbia and the ever-increasing difficulty of passage into 'Fortress Europe' has not led to a proportional increase in lodged asylum applications nor positive asylum decisions. The vast majority of people-on-the-move still view Serbia as a transit country, and the Asylum Office, seemingly internalizing this logic, issued positive decisions protecting just 207 individuals from 2008 through July 2022.[7] Meanwhile, Serbia's 2021 recognition rate was 24% (not including discontinued applications), below the EU average of 34%.[8] Further, a 2020 report on integration from the A 11 - Initiative for Economic and Social Rights could only identify with certainty that 55 protected individuals remained in Serbia at the time of that report's writing, suggesting a lacking integration infrastructure for refugees in the country.[9]

With this landscape in mind, this project examines the lives and decisions of those who have sought asylum in Serbia and, so far, have stayed. **What personal and sociopolitical factors contribute to an individual's decision to declare asylum in a traditional transit country? What factors enable or hinder long-term resettlement, integration, and life satisfaction for those who have received or applied for asylum in Serbia?** This project aims to unpack the impact of overlapping border, asylum, and geopolitical policies on individual refugees' decision-making. I approached these questions from a discursive and rhetorical perspective, conducting interviews with refugees and asylum-seekers in Serbia and soliciting their presentations, perceptions, and justifications as to why they have chosen (or been forced) to remain. The result is the following collection of first-person narratives, which presents individuals' stories holistically and in their own words, providing insight into how the featured participants

[7] Kovačević, "Regular Procedure." Kovačević tallies 196 protected individuals between 2009-2021; UNHCR Serbia operational updates between January and July 2022 tally an additional 11 individuals protected in the first seven months of 2022.
[8] Nikola Kovačević, *Country Report: Serbia. 2021 Update,* (Belgrade: European Council on Refugees and Exiles / Asylum Information Database, 2022), 15, https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/AIDA-SR_2021update.pdf; "Latest Asylum Trends - Annual Overview 2021." European Union Agency for Asylum. https://euaa.europa.eu/latest-asylum-trends-annual-overview-2021#:~:text=considerably%20more%20decisions.-,Recognition%20rates,refugee%20status%20or%20subsidiary%20protection.
[9] Kovačević, *Precondition for Integration*, 41-45.

have made meaning out of and reacted to asylum and migration management policies in their countries of origin, transit, and destination.

Methodology

I have centered this project around 11 first-person narratives, constructed through a collaborative interviewing and editing process between myself and the participants. These 11 narratives feature the stories of 12 interviewees. (I interviewed one couple together and present their story in one narrative.) I also analyze parts of a thirteenth interviewee's story. I refer to these 13 individuals as the project participants.[10] Further, I briefly discuss two additional refugees' stories, gathered through open press sources, because I believed their experiences added more texture to the first section of the report and highlighted patterns and injustices common to the Serbian asylum system.

I made contact with participants through chain referrals from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or from personal connections with refugees employed or served by NGOs with which I collaborated or volunteered. One strength of this method was the increased level of trust it created between me and the interviewees. I knew some participants for months before interviewing them; otherwise, participants trusted me because they greatly trusted the person who referred them to me. However, this method meant I was mostly in contact with a certain profile of refugee — those who had integrated well, spoke English or Serbian, remained visible to NGOs, and/or were employed by NGOs. NGO interpreters, for example, are overrepresented in my sample, compared to the demonstrable number of Serbian asylum recipients who work in restaurants, call centers, or are unemployed. I was also unable to make contact with any asylum recipients who had left Serbia, since these individuals broke contact with Serbian NGOs and/or were not interested in discussing their experiences in the country. My sample, therefore, skews toward positive representations of life in Serbia, though participants also levied a number of important criticisms. Nonetheless, I address this

[10] Annex 1 includes a matrix describing the details of each interview, such as language, location, and nature of our relationship.

bias by integrating statistics, takeaways from other reports, and complementary interviews with lawyers and NGO representatives.

The 13 interviewees were between the ages of 19 and 65, included 11 men and two women, and were from Iran (5), Afghanistan (3), Iraq (2), Cuba (2), and Burundi (1). This gendered skew and subsequent lack of gender-specific analysis is, in my opinion, this report's greatest shortcoming. In Serbia, a number of high-profile and good practice decisions have involved the protection of women survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), forced marriage, and abuses related to sexual orientation.[11] However, the Asylum Office's practice on these grounds is inconsistent, and an examination of practice through the stories of women grantees with these claims would be welcome. Of course, these stories are among the most sensitive from a protection standpoint and are traumatic, both first-hand and in their retelling, especially in conversation with a cisgender-heterosexual male of a foreign nationality. In a few instances, service providers reached out on my behalf to potential female participants who declined. The highly-involved nature of this report's methodology would have likely accentuated discomfort for survivors, and the underrepresentation of women in this collection, particularly those with these claims, is perhaps expected though unfortunate.

The five nationalities included in this report are among the eight groups most commonly granted protection in Serbia. Of the 207 individuals granted protection between February 2009 and July 2022, the origins were as follows: Libya (47), Syria (31), **Afghanistan (27), Iran (19), Iraq (15),** Ukraine (14), **Burundi (9), Cuba (7),** Somalia (5), Sudan (5), Pakistan (4), Cameroon (3), Ethiopia (3), Russia (3), Nigeria (2), stateless Palestinian (2), Türkiye (2), Bangladesh (1), China (1), Egypt (1), Kazakhstan (1), Lebanon (1), Mali (1), Niger (1), South Sudan (1), and Tunisia (1).[12] Two notable exclusions from the participants are Syrians and Libyans. This was not intentional, but rather derived from who I made contact with and who agreed to participate. In remedy, I discuss the case of one Libyan refugee in-depth based on press sources, and analyze trends and policies relevant to Libyan and Syrian migration where appropriate.

[11] This includes status granted to a Cameroonian woman and her child on SGBV claims, an Iraqi mother and child on forced marriage claims, an underage Nigerian girl on human trafficking claims, and three Chechen women on sexual orientation claims. See: Kovačević, "Regular Procedure."
[12] I have compiled these statistics from annual and periodic reports from BCHR, UNHCR, and the Asylum Information Database (AIDA).

For further context, I conducted formal interviews with representatives from nine NGOs and state institutions: the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights (BCHR), the Crisis Response and Policy Centre (CRPC), IDEAS: Centre for Research and Social Development (IDEAS), Info Park, the Institute for Youth Education in Niš (IYE), the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), KlikAktiv - Center for Development of Social Policies (KlikAktiv), the Psychosocial Innovation Network (PIN), and Save the Children (StC). I was also, throughout my time in Serbia, an affiliated researcher and/or volunteer with Refugee Aid Serbia (RAS), KlikAktiv, and Info Park, and so had many more informal conversations with staff and beneficiaries at these organizations.

To construct each narrative, I conducted a primary interview with each individual, transcribed their interview, constructed their first-person narrative from the transcript, sent them the draft for review, and then collaborated through secondary interviews, phone calls, and/or written correspondence to ensure accuracy and their satisfaction with the narrative. This methodology is thus a hybrid approach integrating oral history, journalism, and discourse analysis. All narratives are told from the first-person perspective, the bulk of the text primarily transcribed from a main interview, but with information overlaid from secondary interviews and edited by both myself and the participants, who were thus invited to take more collaborative roles than in traditional qualitative research approaches. Participant involvement ranged from little to no feedback provided on original drafts to actually writing sections of text for the narrative. I deliberately adopted this collaborative approach in contrast with traditional approaches to non-fiction, which commonly transfer sole authority over the shaping of an interviewee's story to the author/researcher. I believed this method would lead to greater trust, sensitivity, and accuracy, while also providing additional insight into how individuals reconstruct the memory of their migration and imbue it with meaning. Two participants spoke directly with me in a native language (Spanish), three spoke in a non-native language (one French, two Serbian) through interpretation, and eight spoke directly with me in a non-native language, English (possessing varying levels of fluency). Thus, some participants possessed a linguistic advantage when articulating their stories, while other stories were mediated by interpretation and translation. Greater use

of interpreters throughout the research would have facilitated further equality between participants, but was simply beyond the resources of this project.

As an editor, I focused on the following interventions: corrections of grammar, reordering for chronology or to overlay detail later added, cutting repetitive sections for length, and standardizing references to NGOs, etc., to match the orthography of the report. In some testimonies, identifying or particularly incendiary statements were modified, in consultation with the participant, for protection reasons. While I attempted to confirm facts, dates, and places, I did not challenge interviewees' interpretations of violence, politics, religion, and other such subjects. Whether the Bulgarian jungle hosts crocodiles or whether Europe manufactured the 2015 'crisis' to steal Middle Eastern youth remains, in my opinion, of secondary importance to an individual's belief in these ideas and the way such perceptions shape their understanding of self and story. Similarly, many testimonies feature participants' lengthy articulations of sociopolitical opinions that are not directly relevant to the research question. For reasons of clarity and length, I worked with participants to streamline these sections, but I believed their inclusion was important in rejecting the expectation that refugees must always be grateful, coherent, and politically correct. Refugees, like all humans, exaggerate, curse, misremember, go on diatribes, hold controversial opinions, and jumble their thoughts. These discussions also reflect interactions between participants' positionalities and my positionality (cishet, male, white, U.S.-American researcher), the meeting of which often produced unique political and interpersonal dialogues that wouldn't have occurred otherwise.

I have divided the following 11 narratives into four sections based on roughly chronological eras of Serbian policy on migration/asylum. The first section covers the asylum system from its inception in 2008 until 2014, and discusses one interviewee's story in parts and two further stories based on media reports. The second section, containing six first-person narratives, includes those from predominant countries of origin (Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq) who arrived during the so-called European migration 'crisis.' The third section contains the narratives of three members of the same Iranian family who arrived regularly under a visa-free regime in place between 2017 and 2018.

Finally, the fourth section contains two narratives of two refugees from Cuba and one from Burundi, their migration pathways shaped by political dynamics inherited from the Yugoslav era. Taken together, these four sections map out the evolution of the Serbian asylum system, the collision of EU priorities with Serbia's geopolitics, and the cumulative effect of these overlapping regimes on the decisions of refugees who have found themselves in between them.

Main Findings

There are three main threads to be drawn from these first-person histories as a whole. First, the Serbian asylum and migration management system is very tightly wound with EU priorities, which in turn greatly influences whether and why refugees stay. Between 2008 and 2014, the nascent Serbian asylum system predominantly served as a mechanism through which to regularize the status of *sur place* refugees or individuals with pre-existing connections in Serbia.[13] Its formation, though, was an important step in a series of early 2000s reforms which brought Serbia toward international legal refugee conventions and EU candidacy.[14] The onset of the 2015 'crisis' escalated this relationship to a new level. The stories presented in this second section bear witness to the securitized EU border mechanisms institutionalized during the 'crisis,' including border violence, prolonged detention, the weaponization of instruments like the Dublin III Regulation, and treatment amounting to torture. These mechanisms work to 'push back' refugees from the EU core — that is, to expel refugees back across EU borders into Serbia. However, the severity of human rights abuses in EU periphery countries like Bulgaria and Greece also serves to 'push forward' refugees, seeking reprieve, into the suspension zone of the Western Balkans — somehow both in the middle of and yet excluded from the EU. This has led some scholars to term the Balkan 'route,' instead, a 'circuit,' through which refugees move in circular, inconsistent, and duplicative motions, forced into these spaces by EU 'push backs' and 'push

[13] *Sur place* refugees are those were not refugees when they left their country (e.g., did not flee due to well-founded fears), but who later acquired a need for international protection due to circumstances that transpired in their origin country following their departure, making their return dangerous.
[14] Marta Stojić Mitrović, "Serbian migration policy concerning irregular migration and asylum in the context of the EU integration process," *Issues in Ethnology and Anthropology* 9, no. 4 (2014): 1105. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308277135_Serbian_migration_policy_concerning_irregular_migration_and_asylum_in_the_context_of_the_EU_integration_process

forwards.'[15] Despite eventually making proper lives for themselves in Serbia, most participants in this section expressed that their decision to apply for asylum in the country was a result of getting 'stuck' in the middle of this 'circuit.'

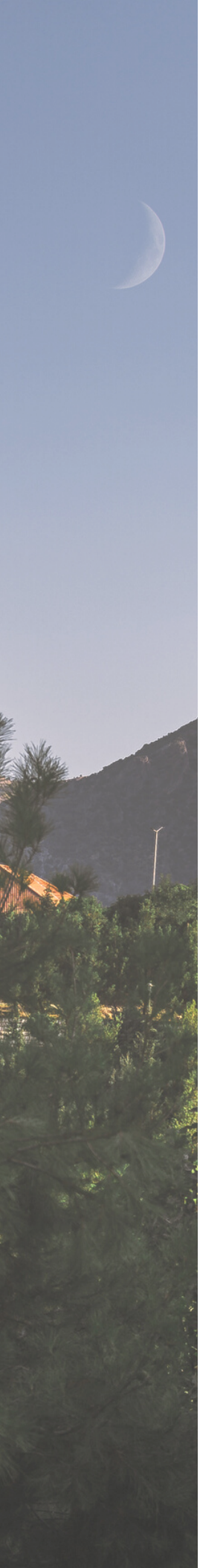
Yet, the testimonies presented in the third and fourth sections complicate the predominant narrative of Serbia as a transit country whose migration landscape derives solely from EU policy, as well as the idea that 'no one chooses' to stay in Serbia. Serbia's inherited geopolitical relationships from the Yugoslav era have created a series of unique visa regimes which, at various points in time, have opened migration pathways not viable elsewhere on the European continent. Serbia's visa-free regimes with Iran (2017-2018), Cuba (1966-present), and Burundi (2018-2022) are all examples of this. Individuals from these countries who arrived under these regimes more commonly express that they came to Serbia purposefully with the intention of declaring asylum. Others express that they viewed the visa-free regime as an opportunity to visit Serbia and assess the viability of permanent migration — an option not available to Afghans or Syrians, for example, who are forced to commit to dangerous and irregular journies without prior first-hand evaluation of the destination countries. Crucially, these visa-free regimes demonstrate that state policy determines the physical safety of a given migration pathway, more so than the actions of individual people-on-the-move. Simultaneously, this conclusion reattributes agency to the Serbian state as well as people-on-the-move: the former capable of challenging EU policy in pursuit of its own geopolitical goals, and the latter showing ingenuity and forging new routes in the overlapping gray areas of national and international politics.

Finally, all of the stories speak to the experience of integrating into Serbian society. Through its lack of prominence in most narratives, the state emerges as a conspicuously absent actor in facilitating integration. Most participants struggled mightily (or are still struggling) to find employment and housing, and have only managed to do so through intense personal efforts and/or the support of NGOs. The most prominent critique levied by participants, however, is the Serbian state's non-issuance of passports and citizenship for refugees, despite relevant laws and

[15] For the term, 'Balkan Circuit,' see: Marta Stojić Mitrović and Ana Vilenica, "Enforcing and disrupting circular movement in an EU Borderscape: housingscaping in Serbia," *Citizenship Studies* 23, no. 6 (June 2019): 540-558, https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2019.1634368.

precedents at the national and international levels. This *de facto* policy has created a level of immobilization and psychological stress that parallels the experience of irregular migration, keeping refugees legally and socially separate from Serbian society in perpetuity and undermining the rights entitled to individuals under asylum.

All in all, participants vocalized multiple reasons for having stayed in Serbia — physical safety, freedom of expression, a welcoming culture (relative to other countries), and the simple fact that doing so was the most sensible (or only) legal recourse available to them. I should also note that some participants said they did not decide to stay in Serbia at all, but that they've been forced to stay because of restrictive border policies. EU and Serbian policies contour the set of decisions available to each individual based on their nationality and socioeconomic class, though participants have also found ways to make these policies work for their particular situations. Most importantly, participants, even after receiving asylum, have continued to make demands upon the state for full recognition of the rights guaranteed to them under national and international frameworks, asserting their right to equal treatment within the society they've adopted as their own.



I. Beginnings

Safaa, of Iraq, received subsidiary protection in 2009 — making him the first person to receive protected status in the Republic of Serbia. When I met him at his apartment in Novi Sad, however, he had only been living for seven months on his own. He'd spent the previous 12 years in a small house on the grounds of the Asylum Centre Banja Koviljača, alongside Musa, of Somalia and the fifth person to receive protected status in Serbia, working as an interpreter for a wide array of NGOs and volunteering for camp management. A falling out led Safaa to leave the camp for the first time, first to Novi Sad, then to Belgrade, at the age of 65 still needing to work. Twelve years in the camp had given Safaa little chance to integrate into wider Serbian society, to find a job within his own field, to make a life beyond the contours of his protected status.

The first section of this collection discusses the early years of Serbia's asylum system, 2008-2014, and explores the dynamics that led to the system's creation in its particular form. For reasons I will discuss shortly, this section does not include any at-length first-person narratives. However, it is informed by the discussion of three refugees' stories: Safaa's, based on an in-depth interview; Amran's of Libya, based on a brief conversation and media reports; and Musa's, based on media reports. This analysis sets up the three major themes that reverberate throughout the report. The first is how Serbia's asylum system has always been tied to Serbia's relationship with the EU, from the very inception of Serbia's asylum law. The second is the influence of relationships between Yugoslavia and countries involved in the Non-Aligned Movement, which, even after Yugoslav dissolution, have created certain paths for the movement of citizens between Serbia and these countries. Finally, stories of this period make clear the many barriers to refugee integration in Serbia. The most distressing, according to interviewees across sections, is Serbia's refusal to grant passports or citizenship to protected individuals, in effect immobilizing refugees and maintaining their second-class legal and social status in perpetuity.

Asylum in Yugoslavia, 1948-1992, and Serbia, 2008-2014

To contextualize the three stories, I first briefly outline how the ideology and dissolution of Yugoslavia created particular conditions for the national asylum system in this successor state, Serbia. In lieu of a national asylum system, Yugoslavia (a signatory to both the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol), instead empowered the UNHCR to handle asylum requests on Yugoslav soil and relocate grantees to a third country. In several *ad hoc* instances, Yugoslavia granted asylum on its own territory, always in ways that promoted Yugoslavia's particular ideology of third-way socialism.[16] It wasn't until Yugoslavia's implosion in the 1990s, creating Europe's worst refugee crisis since World War II, that central authorities in Belgrade passed a 1992 law responding to the influx of diasporic refugees, mostly focused on humanitarian aid instead of protection codification.[17] Meanwhile, in the EU, an originally welcoming discourse toward Yugoslav refugees eventually soured, leading to high rejection rates of Yugoslav asylum cases and eventually evolving into strict visa regimes imposed on nationals of the constitutive countries emerging out of Yugoslavia.[18]

Yugoslav ideology and dissolution thus laid the groundwork for Serbia's asylum system in several ways. First, many camps used to accommodate Yugoslav refugees would later be repurposed for refugees during the mid-2010s mass migrations. Second, the political dimension of asylum during Yugoslav times remains visible in the national origins of many asylum-seekers in Serbia, though this dynamic also clashes with the current ideological projections of the right-wing Serbian nationalist agenda. Most importantly, however, the EU's strict visa regimes for ex-Yugoslav nationals immediately established mobility management as a central tenet of the EU's relationship with these emerging states. In the years following, the ex-Yugoslav states would negotiate the liberalization of these regimes, facilitating their citizens' mobility to and from the EU, in exchange for harmonizing with EU migration practice via each country's Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA).[19] In Serbia, these harmonizations have included

[16] For example: in 1956 to Hungarians fleeing the Soviet invasion; in 1973 to leftist Chileans fleeing Pinochet's coup. See: Stojić Mitrović, "Serbian migration policy," 1107.
[17] Ibid, 1109.
[18] Michael Barutciski, "EU States and the Refugee Crisis in the Former Yugoslavia," *Refuge* 14, no. 3 (June-July 1994): 33.
[19] Only Kosovo has not received visa liberalization, making their passport the weakest in Europe.

strengthened border technology, a working agreement with the EU border agency Frontex, enhanced monitoring of the migration of both Serbian and third-country nationals, and the adoption of national asylum legislation.[20] Indeed, Serbia only passed its first asylum law, in 2007 (and implemented in 2008), when the EU finally presented Serbian leadership with a concrete plan for visa liberalization. Since then, Serbian leadership has also incorporated EU language on "illegal" or "irregular" migration into national strategies — categories that didn't exist in Yugoslav legislation but that have become the dialectical framework for managing non-European migration through the Balkans, in cooperation with the EU, since 2008.[21] Thus, we can see how Serbia's asylum system resulted from a bargain: increased freedom of movement for Serbian citizens, inching closer toward acceptance into the EU core and its associated benefits, in exchange for Serbia's cooperation in restricting mixed migration flows from the more distant, non-European periphery.

Yet, the newly inaugurated Serbian asylum system contained several deficiencies that would keep its applicant numbers low, and its recognition rate even lower, for the initial years of its existence. For one, the initial law did not hold the state to a procedural timeline, meaning that asylum-seekers faced indefinite and unpredictable wait times between steps.[22] (Revisions to the law have since established a timeline, though it is rarely followed. In practice, wait times are still indefinite and unpredictable.) More importantly, however, the Asylum Office relied heavily on the 'safe third country' concept, meaning that the vast majority of asylum cases were rejected not on merit, but on the presumption that the applicant could have declared asylum in a previous country of transit.[23] Serbia recognized every country it bordered as a 'safe third country,' and the concept remained valid grounds for case rejection until 2018.[24] Without guarantees of a set decision date, or even a guarantee that the particularities of their case would be considered, most potential asylum-seekers in Serbia thus decided to move on and try their luck elsewhere.

[20] Stojić Mitrović, "Serbian migration policy," 1114.
[21] Ibid, 1112.
[22] Ivana Krstić, "The Efficiency of the Asylum System in Serbia: Main Problems and Challenges," in *The New Asylum and Transit Countries in Europe during and in the Aftermath of the 2015/2016 Crisis*, edited by Vladislava Stoyanova and Eleni Karageorgiou, 158-184. London: International Refugee Law Series, 2018.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Milica Švabić (KlikAktiv), interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia, March 1, 2022.

Between 2008 and 2014, the Asylum Office received 1,521 asylum applications, 1,361 of which were suspended, which occurs when an applicant is believed to have left the country. This left just 160 cases for the Asylum Office to decide upon. Across those seven years, the Asylum Office upheld decisions covering 16 individuals. Those granted asylum were citizens of Libya (2), Türkiye (2), Egypt (1), and Tunisia (1). Those granted subsidiary protection were citizens of Syria (5), Ethiopia (3), Iraq (1), and Somalia (1).[25] However, even among these 16 individuals, fewer than half can be said with certainty to remain in Serbia a decade later. In his 2020 report for the A11 Initiative, *Precondition for Integration*, Nikola Kovačević reported that the three citizens of Ethiopia, the two citizens of Türkiye, and the one citizen of Egypt had definitively left Serbia, while he could not confirm the whereabouts of two of the Syrian citizens and the two Libyan citizens (brother and sister). This leaves only six individuals from this time period remaining definitively in Serbia (as of 2020): three citizens of Syria, one of Iraq (Safaa), one of Somalia (Musa), and one of Tunisia.

The settling of these six individuals in Serbia, however, does not confirm a successful state-led integration program. The three individuals of Syria are *sur place* refugees, having resided in Serbia — connected familially, linguistically, and culturally — prior to receiving protected status.[26] Meanwhile, as we will see through Safaa's story, even those who've had status in Serbia for over a decade have struggled to independently integrate into Serbian society, remaining tied to the Serbian camp system and the humanitarian aid industry that has become ubiquitous since the mid-2010s refugee 'crisis.'

Safaa of Iraq

To understand how and why protected individuals from this inaugural period arrived and have remained in Serbia, I first turn to Safaa's story. I conducted an 85-minute interview with Safaa at his home in March 2022. Safaa shared about his time in Iraq and his 12 years at the Asylum Centre Banja Koviljača, but mostly he liked discussing his work with different NGOs, showing photos from field visits, and

[25] Kovačević, "Precondition for Integration," 18-20.
[26] Ibid, 20.

explaining his motivations and philosophies for engaging in humanitarian work. Prior to escaping Iraq in 2007 due to violence against Sunni Muslims in post-occupation Baghdad, Safaa had traveled to Yugoslavia on business trips and spent a year working with an air conditioning service business in Novi Sad (the same business he owned in Baghdad). Saddam Hussein's Iraq was Yugoslavia's closest ideological and trading partner in the Middle East, with as many as 100,000 Yugoslav workers living in Iraq on the eve of the Iran-Iraq War.[27] This geopolitical relationship enabled Safaa's initial mobility to and from Yugoslavia, and thus informed his decision to flee to Serbia upon threats to his and his family's life.

> *We [didn't] have many choices. I kn[e]w Yugoslavia before had a relationship with Iraq. And here, I think it's a cheap country, not expensive like Germany. I would like to go to Germany but we can't, because we don't have enough money. And I say, "okay, I'll go alone because we don't have money." Say, "go alone, then I can bring you [my wife and son]." And I go to Syria, Syria go to Serbia, flying.*

Safaa hoped to eventually bring his family to Serbia, though, for reasons he did not elaborate on, his wife and son have since moved to San Francisco and are in little contact with him. Upon arrival in Serbia, Safaa went to the UNHCR's office and was referred to the Asylum Centre Banja Koviljača, the only such centre in Serbia in 2008, and which had previously hosted Chilean, Eastern European, and diasporic Yugoslav refugees.[28] At Banja Koviljača, in exchange for help learning Serbian, Safaa began to assist at the centre's in-house school for children and with other tasks, including sewing and aid provision. Over the years — even after Safaa received subsidiary protection in 2009 — this evolved into formal and informal working relationships as a cultural mediator with KIRS, UNHCR, IOM, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), and associated judicial and police institutions. Throughout, Safaa continued living in a small house on the grounds of the Asylum Centre. In our interview, it was clear that Safaa's work with refugees circumscribed his entire existence at the camp and, by extension, Serbia.

[27] Ljubica Gatarić, "U Iraku Je Radilo 100.000 Radnika Iz SFRJ," *Večerniji*, March 22, 2022, https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/u-iraku-je-radilo-100000-radnika-iz-sfrj-732836.
[28] KIRS, "Asylum and Reception Centers," *Commissariat for Refugees and Migration Republic of Serbia,* https://kirs.gov.rs/eng/asylum/asylum-and-reception-centers.

> *One day, I don't sleep 24 hours … in the morning, I want to [end] the shift, and the boss say, "Safaa, stay." Say, "I can't. I want to sleep, I can't." They say go — yes, believe, I swear — they say, "go sleep one hour only." In my clothes only, I went like this, sleep. Say, "Safaa, Safaa." I say, "yes?" Say, "finish one hour." And I come again to work. It's too much hard. But it was my pleasure, with my heart. I work from my heart.*

However, over Safaa's 12 years at the centre, his working relationship with camp management soured and reached a breaking point when renovations forced the temporary relocation of residents to Krnjača camp. At that time, Safaa said he was placed in dirty and crowded accommodation. This succeeded an incident at Banja Koviljača where other residents were accommodated in Safaa's home, leading to the introduction of bedbugs. Safaa interpreted this as a lack of respect on behalf of camp management, given Safaa's many years working for them (often without pay), and an attempt to humiliate him.

> *They don't know how to respect. This word. They don't know it … The boss, he wants me to kiss his hand. I can't. First, I am an engineer. I work, second, I work too much for the centre, more than him. And more, I respect him. But I can't kiss his hand. I did what they wanted.*

Through a connection, Safaa found a job involving scrap automobile parts in Novi Sad and left camp accommodation for the first time since his arrival in Serbia. This decision to leave was clearly a traumatic and disappointing one for Safaa, as it involved the collapse of the only social network he'd built during his time in Serbia.

> *I don't believe they did me like this. I hoped, I thought they cared about me because I worked for them for many years. And I think they are saying, "okay, thank you, Safaa. We care about you. What you want, we can give." I think that. But no.*

In Novi Sad, Safaa told me he spent his free time teaching himself French, writing an Arabic language book for children, and taking walks in the park. He was known by those working at the grocery store and the photocopy shop, but few others. Soon after our interview, Safaa moved to Belgrade to pursue an internship with IKEA through an UNHCR-supported refugee work program, where he still works, as of our last correspondence in August 2022.

During our interview and in our successive communications, Safaa struck me as someone afflicted by extreme loneliness and a lack of socialization. To be clear, this state should be understood as a direct consequence of insufficient integration programs and KIRS' exploitation of Safaa's labor, which resulted in Safaa's inordinate amount of time living apart from society in a refugee camp. It also derives from draconian state policies around travel documentation and naturalization (to be discussed shortly). Additionally, Safaa's level of English was less developed compared to other participants. When I sent Safaa a draft of his first-person narrative, he expressed his dissatisfaction with its disjointedness, but he did not offer edits and declined a follow-up interview due to work obligations. In order to do his interview justice, I decided it made more sense to analyze quotes as I have done here, where I could include the larger context of my relationship with Safaa and my own observations, in contrast to publishing a first-person draft with which Safaa was not happy.

Musa of Somalia and Amran of Libya

Of anyone granted protected status in this early period, I have come to know Safaa's story in the most detail. But I also want to discuss the stories of two other refugees whose stories reflect themes similar to Safaa's in terms of travel pathways, reasons for coming to Serbia, and integration challenges. Musa of Somalia, who lived with Safaa at the centre in Banja Koviljača, arrived in Novi Sad, Serbia, in 1984 at 19-years-old on a student scholarship, according to a 2014 profile in the Serbian newspaper *Vreme*.[29] He simply never left. The following two decades, through the years of Yugoslav dissolution, saw Musa marry, divorce, and bounce between odd jobs as a teacher, a musician, and a bootlegger, earning him stints in a Croatian prison and the Padinska Skela detention centre for foreigners near Belgrade, emerging on the other side broke and with few available options. He sought *sur place* asylum — Somalia, by that point, faced an Ethiopian invasion and multiple insurgencies — and was briefly accommodated by KIRS in a private hotel before being moved to Banja Koviljača in 2007. He received subsidiary protection in 2010. I was unable to make contact with

[29] Marko Rudić, "Godine idu, a nisam sa svojima," *Vreme*, April 17, 2014. https://www.vreme.com/vreme/godine-idu-a-nisam-sa-svojima/

Musa myself, but heard from service providers that he still works occasional interpretation jobs at refugee camps. (I don't know his housing status.)

Amran of Libya, like Musa, first traveled to Serbia as a student. Once again, the existence of this mobility path derives from the strong relations between the former Yugoslavia and Libya under Muammar Gaddafi — to date, more Libyans have received asylum in Serbia than any other nationality. Amran completed a master's at the Faculty of Philosophy, then balanced archaeological preservation work in Libya with a Ph.D. scholarship in Canada, returning to Serbia with his wife and children to finish his doctorate, according to a *Vreme* profile.[30] By this point, it was 2010, the onset of war in Libya, and across the following years he faced increasing threats from fundamentalist groups regarding his cultural preservation work. It became clear he could no longer go to Libya. Amran declared asylum in Serbia, and his family of five received it in 2016.[31] I made brief contact with Amran in July 2022, who declined participation, saying that he had lost any faith in the power of storytelling to change his now desperate situation. Amran has been trying to find a way out of Serbia since at least 2017, if not earlier.[32] In Belgrade, he's mostly found odd interpretation jobs despite his Ph.D. He says his family has faced discrimination from authorities. Two of Amran's children have Canadian birthright citizenship, but Amran, his wife, and his eldest son would have no way to accompany them there, on account of the expiry of their Libyan passports. Amran protested in front of the Canadian embassy in 2019, and then he and his family undertook a hunger strike there in 2020, denouncing what he called the Canadian consul's "absolutely unprofessional" behavior.[33]

Barrier to Integration: Interpretation and the Aid Industry

In all three stories, we can see how refugees in Serbia struggle to find employment meeting their qualifications and instead find themselves tied to the aid industry, working as interpreters — an unpredictable line of work that relies on the

[30] Jovana Georgievksi, "»Niko i ništa« u Beogradu," *Vreme*, December 19, 2019. https://www.vreme.com/vreme/niko-i-nista-u-beogradu/
[31] Having received asylum in 2016, chronologically Amran's story should fall under the second section of this report. However, I decided to discuss it here because Amran's story aligns more with the themes seen in Safaa's and Musa's.
[32] Nemanja Rujević, "A Libyan exchange student returns to Serbia as a refugee," *InfoMigrants*, December 6, 2017, https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/6395/a-libyan-exchange-student-returns-to-serbia-as-a-refugee
[33] Rade Ranković, "Amran Kalifa: Borim se protiv diskriminacije moje porodice," *Glas Amerike*, January 17, 2020. https://www.glasamerike.net/a/amran-kalifa-borim-se-protiv-diskriminacije-moje-porodice/5250127.html

continuation of the displacement crisis which brought the interpreter to Serbia in the first place. In his A11 report, Kovačević listed just 17 of the 55 protected individuals he knew to be in Serbia as steadily employed, three as interpreters.[34] As Milica Švabić, an attorney at KlikAktiv, told me, working in interpretation "is not an integration into Serbian society because they are still in refugee topics … they're being again traumatized with the experience of traveling, of being a refugee, and so on." That Safaa and Musa continued to live for so long at the site of their work, after receiving status, is this phenomenon taken to its most extreme end.

Further, the field is not financially lucrative. Years of working contract-to-contract did not leave Safaa with a savings base sufficient for retirement when he did decide to leave the camp. The UNHCR-supported program at IKEA through which Safaa currently works supported eight refugees and asylum-seekers across the first half of 2022 and is a fantastic initiative.[35] Yet, Safaa, at the age of 65, should not have to work as he has reached the legal age of retirement in Serbia. His story might be the most illustrative example of Serbia's poor socioeconomic integration infrastructure for refugees: the country's first protection grantee working internships past retirement age in order to make ends meet.

"I have a right:" Passports and Citizenship

Beyond struggles with finances, Safaa also continually mentioned the fact that he has never received a passport or a path to naturalization despite living over a decade in Serbia. "I have a right," he said. Article 87 of the Asylum Act of Serbia provides for the issuance of travel documents to those who have received refugee status.[36] Meanwhile, the 1951 Refugee Convention, to which Serbia is a party, says signatories "shall as far as possible facilitate the assimilation and naturalization of refugees." It is important to note that, under Serbian law, the issuance of a travel document is only prescribed for those with refugee status, not subsidiary protection. (The Convention provides no

[34] Another three individuals listed as unemployed were listed as occasional intepreters for NGOs.
[35] UNHCR, "UNHCR Serbia Update, April/May 2022," *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, July 1, 2022, https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/unhcr-serbia-update-aprilmay-2022.
[36] Republic of Serbia, *Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection*, (Belgrade: Komesarijat za izbeglice i migracije, 2018). https://kirs.gov.rs/media/uploads/Law_on_asylum_and_temporary_prot.pdf

comment on this distinction in this case.) Regardless, the Serbian state has never issued travel documents to any refugee, nor has it naturalized anyone on the basis of their refugee status in Serbia.

Safaa, who has subsidiary protection, said he was told by a lawyer that he could receive a passport after three years of residence in Serbia. Whether or not this is true, it is understandable that Safaa believes his 'temporary' protected status, which has now lasted 13 years, might eventually open a path toward travel documents and/or naturalization. Further, the Asylum Act provides for the issuance of travel documents to subsidiary protectees in "exceptional cases of a humanitarian nature," though neither has this been implemented.[37] Safaa spent at least half of our interview discussing his frustration with the passport issue and the numerous times he says he was promised one. This non-issuance has precluded Safaa's family reunification and created an all-encompassing isolation. "Why would he come here?" said Safaa when I asked if his son had ever visited. "I go to him. I am the father." Yet, the Iraqi passport — if Safaa even still possesses a valid one — provides visa-free access to just six Caribbean and Oceanic countries.

Amran's case might be even more egregious. His Libyan passport has expired. Serbia, his country of asylum, will not grant him a passport. Canada, the country of two of his children, will not grant him a visa on account of his not having a passport. The UNHCR, meanwhile, rejected a relocation request from the family in 2017 because they have asylum in Serbia.[38] This catch-22 renders Amran, his wife, and his eldest son completely immobile. Further, Libyan law says citizens who have resided abroad for more than two years without government approval can be unilaterally denaturalized.[39] While I do not know if this is Amran's case, this revocation would lead to his *de jure* statelessness. Amran and his family's imposed immobility is an obvious violation of Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), for which Libya, Serbia, and Canada — all of which have ratified the UDHR — are all culpable.[40]

---

[37] Nikola Kovačević, "Travel Documents," *Asylum Information Database | European Council on Refugees and Exiles*, May 2, 2022. https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/serbia/content-international-protection/movement-and-mobility/travel-documents/#_ftnref1

[38] Georgievski, ""»Niko i ništa«."

[39] Bronwen Manby, *Citizenship Law in Africa: A Comparative Study*, (Cape Town: African Minds/Open Society Foundations, 2016): 105, https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/d5d1d086-1a0d-4088-b679-003e09e9c125/citizenship-law-africa-third-edition-20160129.pdf

[40] Article 13 states that (1) "everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state" and (2) "everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country."

Decision to stay: purposeful or forced?

A number of news articles have presented the stories of Safaa and Amran as purposeful decisions to stay in a country most pass by — "[Amran] tells InfoMigrants why he wants to stay"; "Asylum seeker Safaa refuses to leave Serbia."[41] Indeed, these framings are misleading, often contradicted by interviewee quotes later in the same article. First following education and work exchange patterns established between their countries of origin and Yugoslavia at the height of the Non-Aligned Movement, Safaa, Musa, and Amran then found through international protection in Serbia a means to avoid immediate threats to life in their origin countries. The decisions of these men to apply for asylum in Serbia should thus be read as stop-gap solutions that have become unintentionally permanent. It should be stated that in other media interviews, Safaa has offered more positive presentations of his time in Serbia. In a recent profile by BCHR, Safaa and the interviewer present Safaa's story as one of exemplary humanitarian service and love for his host community.[42] Safaa told BCHR he wants to stay in Serbia and made no comment in either direction during his interview with me. Meanwhile, I was never in direct contact with Musa and so do not know his feelings. Amran, however, in my brief correspondence with him and in a number of media interviews, has been explicit in saying that he wants to leave Serbia as soon as possible. In Amran's case, this is clearly connected to his rendered immobility and the legal and social discrimination deriving from a lack of equal documentation.

The Serbian government justifies its current passport policy on the fact that the bylaws necessary for implementation are not in place — a rather circular logic considering the revised 2018 asylum law mandated the passage of bylaws within 60 days, a timeframe which the state let expire without action.[43] Some developments hold promise for improvement for the likes of Safaa and Amran. A new round of revisions to the Law on Asylum, still under legislative consideration at the time of writing, would

[41] Rujević, "A Libyan exchange student"; Rujević, "Asylum seeker Safaa refuses to leave Serbia," *InfoMigrants*, November 29, 2017, https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/6316/asylum-seeker-safaa-refuses-to-leave-serbia
[42] Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, *Right to Asylum in the Republic of Serbia Periodic Report for January–June 2022*, (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2022): 49-52.
http://azil.rs/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Right-to-Asylum-in-the-Republic-of-Serbia-Periodic-Report-for-January-June-2022.pdf
[43] Milica Švabić (KlikAktiv), interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia, March 1, 2022.

incorporate implementation measures directly into the law, negating the need for bylaws and hopefully expediting issuance.[44] KlikAktiv has also brought the case of an asylee before Serbian courts suing for citizenship, the first case of its kind, which was rejected on first instance and has been pending before the Administrative Court since February 2021.[45] This passport issue is perhaps most pressingly felt by the likes of Safaa, those who arrived earliest, following education and work paths opened by the years of Yugoslav third-way socialism. But improvements to relevant procedure would also, as we will see, transform the lives of asylees who arrived later — during the years of the 'crisis,' as the borders opened, closed, and left them behind.

[44] KlikAktiv, *Still on the Move to the EU: Situation of Refugees in Serbia Annual Report 2021*, (Belgrade: KlikAktiv, 2022), 16, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WXR0Ffzk6HC7ZXjORD6t-AqsmZJ2FC9n/view
[45] Ibid, 17.

II. Crisis

"Something miraculous was happening that fall," writes Matthieu Atkins in his 2022 book, *The Naked Don't Fear the Water*, a firsthand account of Afghan refugees traveling the smuggler's road to Europe. It was 2015, and "under the weight of the people, the border had opened."[46] Prior to 2015, Serbia's MUP had registered 28,285 total intentions to seek asylum. But in 2015 alone, it registered 577,995 — twenty times the total of the previous seven years — in what would come to be known as Europe's 'migration crisis.' Across the continent, arrival numbers reached levels not seen since World War II. An estimated 1.3 million refugees came to Europe that year — fleeing Syria, North Africa, Afghanistan; traversing the Sahara and the Mediterranean; arriving by air, by sea, by foot, by any and all means. This unfolding mass movement revolutionized the EU's relationship with Serbia, recentering it around the multilateral enforcement of an increasingly restrictive border regime, and created a new demographic of asylum-seeker in Serbia: those who'd set out to reach the EU, only to find that they couldn't.

The crisis emerged in 2015 from the ripples of the Arab Spring and the global financial crisis — new heights of violence reached in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq; skyrocketing economic insecurity across the Balkans and the African continent; the rule of law weakened in transit countries, those Arab leaders paid by the EU to restrict migrants' mobility challenged and even deposed.[47] This collective pressure found its release in mass migrations following routes lightly tred and established in preceding years. Initially, Europe's response to this increased mobility was largely humanitarian in nature. As early official discourses in Germany and other northern European countries welcomed migrants, Serbia and other Balkan countries adopted facilitating positions as 'transit countries,' understanding that migrants did not wish to stay, and thus providing emergency aid, transit visas, and direct transport to external borders. Slowly, however, governments across the continent pivoted toward the narrative frame of the 'crisis,' which, in

46 Matthieu Atkins, *The Naked Don't Fear the Water: An Underground Journey with Afghan Refugees,* (New York: Harper, 2022).

47 Libya's Muammar Gaddafi received €50 million from the EU on migration management in 2010, after previously demanding €5 billion from Italy to prevent a "black Europe." His deposition and lynching in 2012 removed one of the major barriers impeding irregular African migration to the EU. See: Bjarte Vandvik, "The EU's dubious refugee deal." *The Guardian*. October 20, 2010. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/oct/20/eu-refugee-libya-gaddafi

establishing the situation as extraordinary, worked to justify more severe, securitarian policy measures.[48] The Balkan "formalized corridor" existed until March 2016, redirected by the closure of the Hungarian border in September 2015, and then shuttered by the Croatian government and the intensification of regional border controls through the EU-Türkiye deal.[49] Suddenly, migrants found themselves in Serbia for longer periods of time, impeded, and Serbia's shift from transit country to one of "enforced stay" in turn catalyzed new securitarian policies: greater policing of entry at southern borders, criminalizing solidarity and migrant organizing, forcing more people into camps, and increasing penalties for smuggling.[50]

This change in Serbia's official position occurred in tandem and in cooperation with the EU, itself having slowly abandoned the humanitarian model. It was also the predictable continuation of the symbiosis established when Serbia first tied its asylum system to EU visa concessions. The opening of Serbia's EU accession negotiations on Chapters 23 and 24, which includes asylum and migration management, occurred just a few days after Serbia's deployment of troops to its southern borders, the official turn to securitization on July 16, 2016.[51] In the interior, the state increasingly pursued policies meant to reduce the visibility of migration in the public eye — forcing people-on-the-move into camp accommodations, evicting informal squats, and interrupting NGOs providing aid outside of official settings.[52] People-on-the-move staged hunger strikes and marches in protest, hoping, eventually, that the securitarian turn would reverse and the borders would reopen. However, since the height of the 'crisis' in 2015/16, Serbia has only increased its cooperation with the EU on migration through allowing Frontex missions on its soil, reforms to its asylum law, and the further centralization of its migration regime under KIRS.[53] The irregular movement of persons, on the other hand, has not decreased. In fact, in the first quarter of 2022, Frontex recorded its highest

[48] For an accounting of change in government discourses, see: Marta Stojic Mitrović, "The Reception of Migrants in Serbia: Policies, Practices, and Concepts," *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work* 4, no. 1 (March 2019). https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-018-0077-0.
[49] Barbara Beznec, Marc Speer, and Marta Stojić Mitrović, *Governing the Balkan Route: North Macedonia, Serbia and the European Border Regime*, Belgrade: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Europe (2016), https://bordermonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/5-Governing-the-Balkan-Route-web.pdf.
[50] Stojic Mitrović, "The Reception of Migrants in Serbia," 20.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Marta Stojić Mitrović, Nidžara Ahmetašević, Barbara Beznec, and Andrej Kurnik, *The Dark Sides of Europeanisation. Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the European Border Regime*, Belgrade: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Europe (2020): 51. http://stage.rosalux.rs/en/dark-side-europeanisation
[53] "Frontex expands presence in Western Balkans with operation in Serbia," Frontex, June 16, 2016. https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-expands-presence-in-western-balkans-with-operation-in-serbia-9WRMiW.

number of “illegal border crossings” since 2016.[54] Rather, this border regime has transformed the Balkan ‘route’ into a ‘circuit,’ wherein people-on-the-move circle through spaces searching for new and inventive exits from the blockade.[55] In so doing, they often face violent push-backs, deportations, and prolonged periods of limbo in Balkan transit countries. Many, like the interviewees featured in this section, have sought reprieve from this state violence through the institution of asylum.

S, Jafar, Fazal, Karoh, Mihail, and Zaki

Though the end of the “formalized corridor” led to the widespread perception that the Balkan route had been ‘closed,’ large-scale irregular migrations through the Balkans never ceased and continue to the present. Small numbers, however, when faced with the increased difficulty of reaching the EU, have decided to enter asylum procedures in Balkan transit countries. Between 2015 and 2019, Serbia’s Asylum Office received 1,972 asylum applications and upheld 98 decisions protecting 143 individuals.[56] The largest pools of applicants have consistently been from Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan, though complemented by notable numbers from North Africa, and increasingly characterized by new routes from Cuba and Francophone Africa (as will be discussed in this paper’s final section). Though intention registrations in 2015 outnumbered those in 2016 by 45 to one, a much larger percentage of intentions in the years following resulted in filed applications, while the number of individuals protected in 2016 was actually larger than in 2015.[57] This discrepancy results from the delayed effects of the new border measures. Most who arrived in Serbia in 2015 were able to outpace the closures and continue north, while those who arrived after felt their full effect. Even still, while some people-on-the-move have decided to stay in Serbia, most have not, having continued to other transit countries or found their way into Fortress Europe.

[54] “Q1 illegal border crossings into EU highest since 2016.” Frontex. April 14, 2022. https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/q1-illegal-border-crossings-into-eu-highest-since-2016-vvV0ak.
[55] Stojić Mitrović and Vilenica, “Enforcing and disrupting circular movement in an EU Borderscape,” 540.
[56] I assembled the number of applications from BCHR’s annual and periodic reports; the number of decisions and individuals is from: Kovačević, “Regular Procedure.”
[57] This is also based on totals in BCHR’s annual and periodic reports.

So what factors lead a person-on-the-move, arriving from a predominant country of origin via the Balkan route during or post-'crisis,' to remain in Serbia? This section explores this question through the stories of six individuals who have received protected status in Serbia: S, Fazal, and Zaki of Afghanistan; Mihail of Iran; Jafar of Iranian Kurdistan; and Karoh of Iraqi Kurdistan. All six arrived via the Balkan Route after the end of the corridor, as border militarization became more and more institutionalized. Their stories illuminate how these controls play out in the lives of individuals, leading them to alter their routes and plans. At the same time, participants provided other, more intrinsic reasons for staying in Serbia: education, family considerations, and a more welcoming culture compared to other countries of transit. Nonetheless, several participants voiced that they desire or would consider leaving Serbia for another country. As in the first section, Serbia's withholding of passports and citizenship was the most prominent barrier to integration in all cases.

"Stuck in Mobility:" Push-backs, push-forwards, and the Balkan Circuit

"We arrived back in Belgrade and I slept rough for another three months. After that, I finally decided to ask for asylum in Serbia. At that point, my will for another attempt, another attempt. It wasn't there … Finally, I gave up." This is how Jafar, a 32-year-old Kurd from Kermanshah, Iran, described his decision to apply for asylum in Serbia — ten months after leaving Iran and taking a winding route through Türkiye, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Serbia, the EU, Serbia again, North Macedonia again, Serbia again, the EU again, and finally Serbia once more. Jafar, Karoh, Fazal, and Zaki all express similar sentiments of having gotten 'stuck' in Serbia, unable to continue forward, running out of money, repelled by the EU's impenetrability. Serbian asylum lawyers also told me the majority of their clients were those who became tired, unable to pass into the EU.[58] But what exact mechanisms of the EU border regime are most visible in these decisions? And how can we make sense of the idea of being 'stuck' and its effects on people-on-the-move in their efforts to create new lives within its parameters?

[58] Milica Švabić (KlikAktiv), interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia, March 1, 2022; Nikola Kovačević (IDEAS), interview by author, Belgrade, Serbia, April 6, 2022.

The 'push-back,' or the practice of forcing a person back across an international border before they have the chance to ask for asylum, has been rightly and often criticized by human rights organizations in numerous contexts across Europe.[59] Jafar, Karoh, Fazal, and Zaki variably described experiencing push-backs at the hands of Bulgarian, Greek, Hungarian, Croatian, Austrian, and Italian authorities, involving the use of police dogs, beatings, destruction of personal items, forced disrobing, electric tazers, and other tactics meant to humiliate and demotivate. A singular focus on push-backs, however, reinforces the idea of a Balkan route experienced in a purely linear fashion, ping-ponging between points A-B, then B-C, and so on. In reality, the EU border regime operates circularly, unpredictably, and from all sides, creating a much more suffocating and disorienting experience. Karoh, for example, recounted his chain deportation from Austria to Hungary to Serbia — despite having previously passed through Romania and Bulgaria, never before having set foot in Serbia. "I saw some signs in Cyrillic and I actually thought I was in Russia," he said. Meanwhile, all four aforementioned respondents recounted abuses at closed refugee camps in Bulgaria, particularly Busmantsi Detention Centre. Fazal connected his decision to remain in Serbia directly to this treatment, after being deported to Bulgaria from Switzerland through the Dublin III Regulation, then crossing into Serbia.[60] "I can't leave Serbia now. If I leave, I'll be starting over again and maybe they'll deport me to Bulgaria. I'm afraid." Additionally, the four participants noted they were forced to declare asylum and leave fingerprints in Bulgaria, which renders them legible to the EU's biometric border system and all but guarantees their deportation to Bulgaria should they be caught in an EU core country.

Here, we can see the circular and suffocating nature of the EU border regime: push-*backs* upon attempts to cross the EU's physical borders, human rights abuses pushing people-on-the-move *forward* and out of EU periphery countries like Bulgaria, and a biometric and legal regime that returns those who do reach the core back to the periphery. The common result is that people-on-the-move eventually arrive in the

[59] See: Lorenzo Tondo, "Revealed: 2,000 refugee deaths linked to illegal EU pushbacks," *The Guardian*, May 5, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/may/05/revealed-2000-refugee-deaths-linked-to-eu-pushbacks

[60] The Dublin III Regulation is an EU mechanism stating that, except in cases of a minor's reunification with family, the country responsible for processing an asylum application should be the one where the individual first entered the EU and was fingerprinted. Naturally, this has led to disproportionate removals to countries at the EU's edge, such as Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Spain.

Western Balkans — a site in between the EU's two halves, a kind of suspension zone — and get 'stuck' there, unable to reach the core, unwilling to stay in the periphery. Yet, for as long as individuals remain within this suspension zone but outside of those countries' asylum procedures, their existence remains exhausting and precarious, moving between transit camps, weighing options for another crossing, and facing potential deportation. To describe this experience, I borrow Sabine Hess' description of individuals "stuck in mobility" — those who find themselves in constant motion, and yet, paradoxically, unable to move forward or backward.[61] Declaring asylum in a transit country is thus an attempt to cement one's physical presence and end this physically and mentally taxing form of waiting.

In previous research, I have argued the migration management philosophy of 'deterrence,' which underpins the EU border regime, to be a failed framework in both a humanitarian and more literal sense: it does not actually discourage migration, state violence creating an experience so visceral that, if anything, it pushes people-on-the-move to continue.[62] The results presented here might seem to contradict this thesis. However, it bears repeating that while the MUP registered 618,388 intentions to seek asylum between 2015-2019, the Asylum Office received just 1,972 actual applications. In other words, roughly 0.3% of those who passed through Serbia considered staying seriously enough to enter the procedure.[63] As mentioned previously, crossings at EU external borders are at their highest since 2016, even as border controls become more entrenched with each passing year. The idea that securitization discourages crossings has no statistical backing, and this is without even mentioning the ethical arguments against the violence involved in the regime's implementation.

Family Pressure, Social Support, and Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC)

While the importance of the EU border regime cannot be denied, placing the full weight of an asylum-seeker's decision-making at its feet removes that person's agency

[61] Sabine Hess, "De-naturalising transit migration. Theory and methods of an ethnographic regime analysis," *Population, Space, and Place* 18, no. 4 (July/August 2012): 428-440. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/psp.632
[62] Zachary Goodwin, "State Controls and Narrative Constructions of Migration, Smuggling, and Europe at the Serbian-Hungarian Border," *The Yale Review of International Studies* 12, no. 2 (2022): http://yris.yira.org/essays/5649
[63] The highest conversion rate was in 2016 — 12,821 intentions and 574 applications, or 4.88%.

and ignores the multifaceted and individual nature of each journey. Decisions are also influenced by family pressures, monetary considerations, and the personality and adaptability of the individual — phenomena especially visible in cases involving unaccompanied and separated children (UASC). S, my very first interviewee and now a friend of mine, left Afghanistan at the age of 14 after his father, a high-ranking military officer, received threats from the Taliban.[64] He thought he might reach cousins in Belgium, but upon arriving in Serbia, S became involved in empowerment programs run by the NGO Info Park, received accommodation at safe houses, quickly learned the language, and made good friends at his Serbian public school (all child refugees in Serbia are entitled to enroll).[65] "I spoke with my family and my father," said S. "I told him I wanted to stay in Serbia. I said it was good for me … my father told me, 'okay, it doesn't matter to me where you are, in which country. It's important to me that you are safe and that you're going to school.'" Five years later, S interprets for Info Park and KlikAktiv, and drinks more *rakija* and listens to more Balkan pop music than most Serbs I know.

Most children who migrate unaccompanied via the Balkan route are Afghan or Pakistani boys, fleeing forced recruitment, domestic violence, and severe poverty. Some are homeless or orphaned, but often first-born boys are sent at the behest of the family so that they can escape forced recruitment, find work in Europe, and send back money.[66] Three other interviewees from this section arrived in Serbia as UASC: Karoh (fleeing forced recruitment), Fazal (fleeing an unspecified family problem), and Zaki (fleeing Taliban recruitment and extreme poverty). Several service providers I interviewed said that the flexibility and understanding of the family (clear in S' case) most often dictates whether an UASC stays in Serbia. "In my experience, [boys] who decided to stay here [were] from families who were financially a bit better than the rest, so that they were not under pressure to continue forward and to reach Western Europe and then work and send money back," said Irena Abdelmaksoud, former co-director of Info Park. More common, she said, is that families pressure UASC to continue to Western Europe even

[64] S traveled to Serbia with a family friend who was not a minor. However, this friend continued migrating once the pair reached Serbia. By the definition provided by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, this still places S in the category of UASC — at the very least, from his time in Serbia forward.
[65] For a discussion of accomodation infrastructure for UASC in Serbia, see: Carole Serviere, "Caring for unaccompanied minors in transit in Serbia," *Refugee Law Initiative Working Paper* 51, https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/9449/
[66] Katarina Jovanović, *Struggling to Survive: Unaccompanied and separated children travelling the Western Balkans Route* (Belgrade: Save the Children North West Balkans, 2020), 10.
https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/struggling-survive-unaccompanied-and-separated-children-travelling-western-balkans-route/

when the child wants to stay in Serbia. In that same vein, two child-care workers at the state-run IYE in Niš could only recall one UASC from their safe house who applied for asylum in Serbia — a boy from Iran whose father convinced him to pause in Serbia so he could work and send money. Nonetheless, the boy left ten months into the asylum procedure and is now in England. Similarly, Miodrag Živković of JRS spoke of one instance when the father of a 10-year-old Afghan boy, after speaking with JRS employees, agreed that it would be better for his son to stay in Serbia, attend school, and await reunification documents to join the father in Sweden regularly — a process which did, after four years, eventually come to fruition.

Abdelmaksoud also said that some children stay because they are homeless, orphaned, or the family runs out of funds. Zaki arrived in Serbia with his sister in December 2016, completely out of money. For two and a half years they stayed, technically illegal but tolerated, Zaki selling sardines at the farmers' market and doing odd interpretation jobs at the camp. But once they again began trying the *game*, it became clear there was only enough money to send the sister to France.[67] Instead, Zaki applied for asylum and received subsidiary protection. He remains in Serbia as an interpreter for the IOM, and sends money both to his family in Afghanistan and his sister in France. Of all the participants, he was the only one who explicitly told me he wants to leave Serbia. Continued family financial pressure of this sort makes Serbia a difficult destination country, given its high unemployment rates, accentuated further for refugees.

One final factor that might convince UASC to stay in Serbia is the level of personalized social support, afforded by the relatively small number of kids in the system, which can nurture the natural adaptability of children. Nikola Kovačević, a lawyer at IDEAS who has represented nearly 30% of Serbia's asylum grantees, told me that in some instances children decide to stay because their assigned guardian is attentive and they receive proper care. "They're like 1% of the population who really received a lot … they would probably never receive this kind of treatment in Germany,

[67] Some scholars argue that the use of the term *game* represents a spatial tactic adopted by people-on-the-move to map and resist the overlapping border regimes restricting their movement. See: Claudio Minca and Jessica Collins, "The Game: Or, the 'making of migration' along the Balkan Route," *Political Geography* 91 (2021), https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0962629821001505.

where they have 10,000 unaccompanied children per year," he said. S, for example, now interprets at the same NGO that first assisted him when he arrived in 2017. Karoh, too, mentioned positive experiences living at Zmaj safehouse and the assistance of a Krnjača camp teacher in finding his first job. The ability of children to learn languages at an accelerated pace is also beneficial, as it facilitates their schooling, ability to make friends, and job prospects.[68] Personalized NGO assistance is less visible in stories of those who still hope to leave Serbia, like Zaki, who says he feels he alone has "done everything, my own integration," and that NGOs like the UNHCR have only made "fake promises." Family expectations, family wealth, individual adaptability, and personalized support (or lack thereof) are thus all factors that might influence an UASC to seek asylum, and then stay, in Serbia.

Cultural Factors: Freedom, Openness, Acceptance

Finally, respondents also mentioned the perceived warmth, hospitality, and authenticity of the Serbian culture as a reason to stay. I first met Mihail, an Iranian Christian convert and professional MMA fighter who arrived in Serbia in 2019, at a cafe near Belgrade's downtown. "For Serbian people, if you are good, they love you. If you are not good, nobody will have business with you," he told me. After speaking for two hours, Mihail invited me to see his training gym. When we arrived to find it closed — it was Orthodox Good Friday, both of us had forgotten — we instead weaved between the socialist blocks of the Belgradian suburbs to find the best berry bushes, discussing Mihail's home city on the Caspian Sea, his dating life in Serbia, and how he struggles to make ends meet financially. But Mihail said his economic difficulties are unimportant. "All of my life I've searched for freedom," he said. "Now I've found it." Escaping political persecution and severe physical torture in Iran, Mihail placed utmost importance on the fact that in Serbia, "nobody touches [his] life."

Jafar, Karoh, S, and Fazal also spoke positively of traits they believed characteristic of the Serbian culture and mentality: Serbs are "beautiful" (Jafar), "open" (Karoh), and "good people" (S), quickly become your friend (Karoh), and are curious

[68] In my work with Info Park's boys' empowerment program, I met UASC who spoke four or five languages. One boy from Syria, who I interacted with in English, and another from Pakistan, who I interacted with in Serbian, spoke with each other solely in Turkish.

about those from other countries (Fazal). Mihail also mentioned that Serbian culture reminded him of Iran: “We have a lot of similar things, similar culture. I like that they are respectful.” Like many Middle Eastern societies, Serbia is a predominantly collectivist and polychronic culture, with Serbian language and cuisine also significantly marked by five centuries of Ottoman rule.[69] Mihail also perceived Serbia as opposed to Western political structures such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and interpreted this as signifying Serbia’s just and non-aggressive position in the world order. In this way, certain factors which differentiate Serbia from many EU countries, and in fact dissuade many people-on-the-move from staying, are to others familiar cultural elements or virtue signals that enable integration and make staying more appealing.

“We are in prison:” Immobilization and discrimination without documents

While most respondents in this section had predominantly positive things to say regarding Serbian society’s reception of them, Zaki’s experience was far more negative, stemming primarily from one issue: the Serbian government’s refusal to grant passports or permit naturalization for refugees. The impact of this is not just the obvious inability to travel internationally. It also impedes domestic processes, such as renting apartments and finding work. “I think [the government] didn’t announce our status here to their people,” Zaki explained. When asked for identification, refugees are only able to produce a card resembling those issued to camp residents, just with a longer validity period, and different in style and format than those issued to Serbian citizens. “If I show my card … nobody will trust it. Nobody knows it. If I go to the bank, they investigate my card.” This extra hurdle makes it more difficult for refugees to navigate institutions, and subjects them to the distrust and suspicion of Serbs unfamiliar with their documentation. Of course, there is also the fact that refugees cannot travel internationally, nor participate in the political process, using this identification card. “We are in prison,” Zaki said. “We can’t go anywhere. With this bullshit card, we can’t do anything.” Refugees in Serbia are thus relegated to second-class legal and social

[69] For monochronic vs. polychronic cultures, see: Giancarlo Duranti and Olvers di Prata, “Everything is about time: does it have the same meaning all over the world?,” *Project Management Institute*, May 20, 2009, https://www.pmi.org/learning/library/everything-time-monochronism-polychronism-orientation-6902

positions. First, they do not enjoy the same rights as citizens. Second, they must shoulder the mental burden and social shame of knowing that, in exercising their limited rights, they will likely face suspicion, confrontation, and the questioning of their status and identity.

All five other respondents mentioned the non-issuance of travel documents as the largest, if not singular, issue marking their life in Serbia. Jafar's description of bureaucratic obstacles mirrored Zaki's. "Here no one knows my documents, the police don't know my documents, the hospital doesn't know my documents, the government doesn't know my documents," he said. Meanwhile, S and Fazal noted how the lack of a passport has prohibited them from visiting family, traveling with friends, and exploring the region. "I have a lot of friends, every year they are going to Montenegro or Croatia for swimming," Fazal said. "But I can't go because I don't have travel documents." Kovačević of IDEAS described this rendered immobility as "something that literally psychologically kills people. They are stuck, they cannot travel, they cannot go on a vacation … they cannot meet their families …" Ironically, the Serbian state's decision to withhold refugees' travel documents — despite the existence of a legal framework approving their issuance — subjects asylum recipients in Serbia to a level of immobilization that parallels the experience of irregular migration. Just as before they received asylum, their ability to move legally remains dependent on the strength and possession of their origin country passport.

Therefore, while declaring asylum in Serbia can be understood as an attempt to end the precarity of being "stuck in mobility," the main characteristic of that condition — one's freedom of movement disproportionately limited, managed, and violated by the state — is not resolved by receiving asylum in the country. This is further compounded by the fact that a protected individual in Serbia must periodically receive reapproval of their status and identification documents — subsidiary protectees every year, refugees every five years. Though this is common in many countries, and while most appeals for reapproval pass without issue, the repeated subjection of one's future to the whims of an unpredictable state bureaucracy produces, as Elena Fontanari puts it, the conditions

for “a prolonged, precarious, and unsettled life.”[70] S, Jafar, and Fazal, despite all expressing satisfaction with their lives in Serbia, said that resuming irregular migration to another country sometimes crosses their mind. They connected this sentiment to the impermanence and limitations of their legal status. S, for example, mentioned how his cousin in Belgium questions his decision to remain in a country that won’t grant him a passport: “He's saying to me, ‘this is the reason why I’m telling you to come to our country, to have a better life.’” Were S to visit his cousins in Belgium, he would have to do so irregularly and give up his life in Belgrade. The issuance of travel documentation, or better yet citizenship, would allow for family visitation without such a drastic decision.

Participants recognized, however, that the granting of passports or naturalization would not solve all of their problems. S and Fazal also mentioned job insecurity and low salaries. Zaki spoke of social exclusion irrespective of legal status: “Even if I get a passport, or I marry here, have children and everything, they will never ever count me as one of their own.” However, if we understand culture as downstream from politics, then it’s legal discrimination that creates space for the proliferation and acceptance of social discrimination. Equal legal status, to include documentation of identical form, design, and use of Serbian citizens, would simply create fewer opportunities for discrimination or even just confusion in processes ranging from opening bank accounts to finding housing and jobs.[71] The following texts present six exceptional stories of personal strength and (in five) community support. The subtext I would encourage readers to look for, however, is the lack of state support and recognition that forces refugees to rely so heavily on their communities, their families, and their inner strength.

[70] Elena Fontanari, *Lives in Transit: An Ethnographic Study of Refugees’ Subjectivity across European Borders*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 94.
[71] See, for example: “Equality Commissioner Finds Banca Intesa Discriminated against Refugees and Asylum Seekers,” *Belgrade Centre for Human Rights*, July 12, 2021, http://www.bgcentar.org.rs/bgcentar/eng-lat/equality-commissioner-finds-banca-intesa-discriminated-against-refugees-and-asylum-seekers/

S

Nationality: Afghan
Gender: Male

Age at time of interview: 19
Age at time of migration: 14

Status: Refugee in Serbia
Current Residence: Belgrade, Serbia

First Interview: December 14, 2021
Second Interview: July 17, 2022

My name is S. I'm 19-years-old, from Afghanistan. I was born in Baghlan but I lived in Kabul, because my family, they lived in Kabul. And so in Kabul, I was in school until the seventh grade. My father, he worked in the national army. He was threatened by the Taliban. Because of that, I had to leave Kabul to come some place safe. And from that day, I started traveling. That was five years ago, towards the end of 2017.

So, from Afghanistan, when I started traveling, of course I started with a smuggler. And so first of all, we went to Pakistan, from Pakistan to Iran, from Iran to Türkiye, and from Türkiye to Bulgaria, and after that Serbia. That time was difficult, because four years ago, I was 14-years-old. But also it was okay, because we were a group. I came with one of my friends. He was 24 or 25, someone my family knew and also he was from our city. We were together all the time. So it was difficult, but okay. We reached Serbia together and then he continued. I think he's in France now.

From Afghanistan until Bulgaria, it took seven days. And after that, I was in Bulgaria for two months. I was in a closed camp for one month, and after that they sent us to another camp. They had a closed camp and an open camp. First, you had to be in the closed camp, and after that you could go to the open one. Because of that, it took a little bit of time. I don't remember the name of the closed camp, but the conditions were so, so bad. Three times we had food, but it was too small for one person and it wasn't very good. And also about cleanliness, it was so bad. The open camp, called Harmanli, it also wasn't good, but it was better than the closed camp.

When I left Afghanistan, I didn't know anything about Serbia. I didn't know it existed. I only knew about Croatia. I don't remember, really, where we crossed into Serbia. I was still with a group. In Serbia, I was in the parks near here, in Savamala in Belgrade. I saw a lot of refugees. I realized I was starting a new life — a little bit different from Kabul. New people, and new friends. In the parks, I found Info Park. They spoke with me. "Are you new, do you need anything?" And so I said, "yeah, I'm new." They explained to me what I could do in Serbia and that if I wanted to go to a camp they could speak with Miksalište.[72] And so after that I was in a camp for three or four months — in Krnjača and maybe also Obrenovac, but that was just one time for four or five days, something like that. And after the camp, I moved to a safe house. First with JRS, then Vodovodska, then Zmaj. I moved between them because of school, some other problems. I was there until recently, until three or four months ago.

When I left Afghanistan I didn't know where I wanted to go, but I thought maybe Belgium, because I have cousins there. But when I got to Serbia I didn't try to continue on. I decided to apply for asylum in Serbia when I was in the safe house. I spoke with my family and my father. I told him I wanted to stay in Serbia. I said it was good for me, that there are very good people at this school where I started while I was in the safe house. And after that, when I spoke with my family, my father told me, "okay, it doesn't matter to me where you are, in which country. It's important to me that you are safe and that

[72] One Stop Point Miksalište is an aid and temporary accommodation centre run by KIRS in Belgrade's Savamala district. For a history of its change from autonomous humanitarian space to a state-managed centre, see: Teodora Jovanović, "Transformations of Humanitarian Aid and Response Modes to Migration Movements, A Case Study of the Miksalište Center in Belgrade," *Movements: Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies* 5, no. 1 (2020): http://movements-journal.org/issues/08.balkanroute/06.jovanovic-teodora--transformations-of-humanitarian-aid-and-response.html.

you're going to school." I said, "okay, yeah, this sounds good." In school, I had friends. I saw that it was okay. I applied for asylum and around that time I started learning Serbian.

The asylum process took one year and a half. I had a free lawyer from BCHR. First, we had a meeting. We sat with the lawyer to figure out what we had to say. In the interview, there was a police officer, a translator, and my guardian. Before that we had already spoken with my lawyer, so we knew what they would ask. We knew what would happen in the interview. After the first interview, two months after or three months after, I got my ID card for six months. Then, after nine months I got that work paper. And after that, I got asylum. When you get asylum in Serbia, it's the same ID card, but it's not for six months, it's for five years. My first job, it was at a private company, something like a mechanic. I found that job from a friend. After that, I came to work at Info Park. I had been coming since 2018, and every week we had a boys' day.[73] In 2019, I began as a volunteer, and that became a paid position. I began interpreting. I enjoy it. I like to help people who don't know the language, anyone who needs help.

I'm in school, too, studying computer science. I'm in my last year of high school. I will go to a faculty afterwards, but maybe first I will take a rest, maybe for a year, but I'm not sure. We will see, you know, I have time. I don't know what I want to study. When I was a child, like ten or 11-years-old, I wanted to be a lawyer. But it's a little bit difficult — you have to learn so much. So we will see. I also just moved into a new apartment. It's not a safe house, but it's similar. No one from the staff lives with us. I live with one of my friends. He is from Afghanistan, too, and he goes to faculty here. But JRS, who run the safe house, they are paying for the first three months, and after that we pay something, not all of it, but something.

I have lots of friends here from school, mostly Serb. In our free time, we go to a bar to drink something, or to play some game, or we just walk. I also really like boys' days at Info Park, because we're going with kids, we're playing football, bowling. And we have workshops, so they could learn something, to teach them what I learned before. An average day for me depends. When I work at Info Park, I wake up at 7 a.m. or 7:15. First,

[73] "Boy's day" is a weekly Info Park empowerment program for refugee boys (primarily UASC) centered around structured recreational activities and skills and protection workshops.

I shower, and if I have time, I eat breakfast. If I don't, I eat my breakfast here in the office. So from home, I come to the office, about 25 minutes by bus. After work, I go to my girlfriend's house, and from my girlfriend's house, home. And now I work at KlikAktiv, too. I had my friend who worked there before, and he left. And also another one of my colleagues, Sara, she's good with Vuk [the director] and KlikAktiv. Vuk called Sara and said, "we need an interpreter for Pashto, Farsi." And so Vuk called me. He said, "we need a translator for Pashto. If you want, you can join us." Mostly they need Pashto, because now it's mostly Pashtuns who are coming. I said, "okay, why not?" At Info Park, I work three days, right? And after that I have all week free, four days free. And I said, "okay, let's do it, why not?" It's better to do something than to sit there.

For now, I want to stay here. I have friends. My girlfriend, she's from Serbia. Her job is cool. Yesterday was three months together. So for now, I'll stay, but maybe in the future, after five or six years, I will see. Maybe I will go somewhere else, maybe I will stay in Serbia. My cousins might convince me to leave. Whenever they call me, they say, "what are you doing in Serbia? Come to Belgium, life is better." I like almost everything in Serbia, but one thing that is difficult: I don't know any refugee who has received a passport from Serbia. It's their biggest problem. Of course, all of us have friends or families in some other country we want to meet. Sometimes, when I speak with my cousin, he says, "okay, you're in Serbia, you got your asylum and everything, an ID card, so when do you want to meet up?" He lives with family. So, I say, "I can't." He says, "why? You've got your asylum and everything. Why can't you?" And I say, "oh, I don't have a passport." So he's saying to me, "this is the reason why I'm telling you to come to our country, to have a better life." So I hope that they will give us something. Okay, if they want, they can give us a passport, but if they don't give us a passport, just give us something to go travel, to see friends or family.

Another thing: refugees can't find good jobs here. They will find a job but with a small salary, like 400 euros or 300 euros per month. And with that money, you have to pay for rent or for something else, whatever. So, it's a small salary. And when they're waiting for asylum, they don't get any money from the government and they don't have a good place to stay. So other refugees will want to go across [the border]. Because of

that — I think, because of that — most refugees don't stay. When I came, I got money from my family. And also, this one organization gave us cash cards, about 30 euros a month. They used to do this for everyone in the camps, but now it's only for those in the safe houses. Another problem is, in Belgrade, we have three safe houses. They don't have enough space. Each safe house, they can have eight or ten people. All three safe houses [together] will have a place for 30 people. And it's only for those going to school, those asking for asylum in Serbia.

If a family member or friend wanted to [migrate] to Serbia, I would explain to them what they would have to do if they did come. What's the plan, everything. Also, what I saw. I will explain how you will be in the camp when you ask for asylum. And the government will not, of course, give you a passport. You'll receive some money, but not a lot. That's it: I'll explain about Serbia. I don't know if I would encourage them. I don't know, but I will explain and they will decide.

I saw S often during my time in Serbia, but we talked formally again in July. What's new?

So, I mean, nothing new yet. Usually, I work. Home, training. And I was just on vacation in Zlatibor. Yeah, that's it. Like every day working, home. Not yet. I'm still okay to stay here.

Jafar

Nationality: Iranian (Kurd)
Gender: Male

Age at time of interview: 32
Age at time of migration: 26

Status: Refugee in Serbia
Current Residence: Novi Sad, Serbia

First Interview: January 21, 2022
Second Interview: May 13, 2022

My name is Jafar. I am 32-years-old and I came to Serbia from Iran six years ago. I am working right now for CRPC, a partner of the UNHCR. I am from the Kurdish part of Iran, a city called Kermanshah. I lived there with my family and finished a university degree in information technology. In 2016, I had two big problems. I don't like to speak about that, but I was told I had to leave Iran immediately. I didn't have any time to think about it, to investigate what happened. And so I said, "I'll buy a ticket, I'll leave the country, and then I will try to figure out what's happening." So I left Iran in May 2016, alone, at night, and in the morning I arrived in Türkiye.

The same day I arrived in Türkiye, I went to the border with Bulgaria. I attempted to cross the forest with a group of about 25. I was the only one from Iran, the others were from Afghanistan, and it was men plus one large family of three children and three or four women. We crossed the border and then suddenly we heard a shotgun. We sat down. The police arrived and they took everything from us. Money, telephone, food, clothes, everything. They brought out a large garbage bag and put our stuff in that.

When we were caught by the police, the smuggler requested that we not tell them who he was, so we pretended that no one was a smuggler. Then, they took us in a military truck to the border station, where there was some sort of door. They opened the door, and told us to go back. They also had two big dogs, German Shepherds, barking at us the whole time, very, very close to our faces. The young men moved quickly through the door. But it was very difficult for the women. One fell down as she went through the door, and the police just started screaming at her. She was very afraid. And we went back to the territory of Türkiye, together with the smuggler.

I waited for two days in Istanbul, and then I made another attempt to cross the border with Bulgaria. At that point, I didn't know anything about the United Nations (UN) and the protection they are able to provide. I later found out there could have been some way for the UN to help me leave the country. But at that point, I didn't know anything about that, and so I decided to move on by myself. That journey from Türkiye to Bulgaria was four days walking. We walked from 6 p.m. until 6 a.m. Only during the night because we were visible during the day. It was a very tough path. Forests, rivers, mountains, lots of obstacles. We didn't have enough food because the smuggler had told us the journey would only last for one day, and so we were for three days without food, our group of 40.

After four days, we reached Sofia, Bulgaria. We found shelter with a Romani family, at a Romani house, and we were there for four more days. We only got one meal per day, and it was very expensive. I paid $100 for one burger! After those four days, the smuggler told us we needed to move toward the border with Serbia. We were gathered with about 35 or 40 other people in this one park. A minivan came and all of us jumped in. After one hour, the van stopped, somewhere near the border with Serbia. The driver told us there were police ahead and that he couldn't drive anymore, and so he told us to leave and try going by foot. But then the driver determined that we also couldn't go that way, so he told us to wait under the road for a cab driver to take us back to the Romani house. That was around 9 p.m. and we waited until 4 a.m. for that cab driver. No one came. Around 20 people in that group had left their fingerprints with the Bulgarian police, so they were issued a document, an intention to seek asylum, and so they were

free to move about because their status in Bulgaria was regularized. But I and others in the group didn't have any documents and hadn't left any fingerprints with the police, so we were illegal in Bulgaria. We were afraid to leave. We decided to wait for the cab driver, or some other solution.

Finally, one cab came and picked up five people, headed in some direction that we weren't familiar with. Some other shelter, not that Romani house. And after some time, the cab returned and picked up another five people, and that happened four times. I was in one of those groups of five people, and the driver took us to some unknown house. Eventually, four really big guys came in and demanded us to take off our clothes, give them our money, mobile phones, everything. After they took our money and phones, we put our clothes back on, and then put us in one room in the house. Then, one other big Bulgarian guy, the owner of the house, came in and called our smuggler, who was Pashtun but speaks Bulgarian. Through him, the Bulgarian guy demanded $10,000 from each of us to be released. The big Bulgarian guy left the house, saying he'd be back in five hours. And the smuggler advised us, "if anyone has that money, pay in order to be released." The advice for the rest of us was to try to escape. And so we decided to try, and we did. I'm not willing to go into details about how, but we escaped. On the street we found a police officer and asked for help, and of course the officer realized we didn't have registration papers, so they took us to some kind of police station. We spent one night at the police station without food, water, or being allowed to use the toilet. After that we were detained in some sort of prison. Busmantsi, it was called. I was there for ten days.

I can't say enough how awful that place was, during those ten days.[74] From 8 p.m. to 8 a.m., we were not allowed to use the toilet, to eat, to drink water. We had only 30 minutes during the day for a walk. I was questioned many, many times during those ten days. They asked me a ton of questions about the political situation in Iran, why I left Iran, what my intentions were, those types of things. We had to finish four interviews in

[74] Jafar, Fazal, and Karoh all mention Busmantsi by name. A 2018 Foundation for Access to Rights report interviewed eight detainees at Busmantsi and found uniquely deplorable conditions: bugs, poor hygiene, lack of access to toilets, and extremely restricted movement and outdoor time. See: Valeria Ilareva, *Advocacy Report on the "Red Line" Detention of Asylum Seekers upon Entry in Bulgaria*, (Sofia: Foundation for Access to Rights, 2018), http://hear.farbg.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/final_Bulgaria-Red-Line-Advocacy-Report.pdf

that closed detention centre in order to be transferred to the open refugee camp. During the fourth interview the last question they ask you is “do you want to stay in Bulgaria?” If you say “yes,” immediately you are released to go to the open camp. But if you say “no,” you have to stay in the prison for a long time. Some people stayed for six months in those terrible conditions.

So, I was forced to express intention to seek asylum in Bulgaria because everything is connected to the EU law on asylum, which means if someone expresses intent for asylum in one European country — and after that goes to, for example, Germany or France — Germany or France can deport you to that first country, in this case, Bulgaria. I didn’t know this at that point, but I found it out from other people. My opinion is that the EU probably gives money to the Bulgarian government for each refugee because the EU is not willing to accept them. I can’t be sure because that’s high politics, but it’s something I’ve been told and it’s from my experience. There was a translator in Busmantsi who told me if I wanted to go outside, I needed to sign this paper and write “yes.” He only told us that it was related to asylum. And so I signed.

After those ten days, about ten or 15 of us were transferred to the open camp, Voenna Rampa, in Sofia. In that open camp, Voenna Rampa, I was there for three months. I have some footage from that camp, photos and videos, I would be willing to show you. In Voenna Rampa, I was forced to give my fingerprints, even though I didn’t want to. Two police officers came into the office, beat me from head to toe. I fell down, lost consciousness, and one of the police officers grabbed my hand and put it on the pad. That’s how I left my fingerprint. After those three months, I came to Serbia by smuggler. We took a new route, one that few people were doing at that time. People tended to cross the border with Serbia near Vidin city. And, of course, the police knew that at that time, and so it became very difficult to go that way. So we decided to enter North Macedonia and to go from North Macedonia to Serbia.

During my whole journey, I tried more than 50 *games*. But this one was like an action movie. It was a *guaranteed game*, meaning I paid more: €1,700, about €700 more than was usual at the time. The smugglers were dressed in military uniforms with masks and rifles. I don’t know if they just had those clothes or if it was a real military

unit. Every 500 meters, the smuggler would come across the next smuggler, they'd greet each other, they'd get a report about the group, they'd count us, and then they'd switch and the new smuggler would lead us. This happened ten times. The main smuggler was an Iraqi guy who was able to bring his gun into the camp. He was very well-connected to the military and police in Bulgaria. At one point during the *game*, a friend of mine wanted to light a cigarette. The smuggler looked at him and told him not to do that. My friend responded, "look at your business, I want to smoke a cigarette." And the man just pulled a big gun from his jacket and my friend dropped his cigarette. But everything was working that time. Everything they told us was true. "You will walk for one hour." And we would walk only for one hour, and then rest.

When I got to Serbia, I wasn't able to go to a camp. Every camp was full. It was October 2016. Only minors and families were allowed to go to the camps, and I was left out. I could only go to one camp, and that was Preševo camp. That was a closed camp, so if you went there, you wouldn't be able to leave. Instead, I decided to sleep rough for three months. During those three months, I made thousands of attempts to leave Serbia at several borders: Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia, Romania, Hungary. Thousands of attempts. And often I managed to cross the border to reach Zagreb, Timișoara, other cities, but I was always caught by the police and pushed back to Serbia. After those three months, I was sleeping near the former railway station in Belgrade, old warehouses, barracks, where a lot of refugees slept.[75] But that winter was one of the harshest, with low temperatures, and Special Forces from the police came and surrounded that barracks and demanded that we all move to Preševo camp because we were in danger of freezing.

I was in Preševo for twenty days. After those twenty days, my smuggler called me again and asked if I wanted to start another attempt. And since Preševo was a closed camp, the only way to leave was to demand that Serbian police deport me to North Macedonia. One officer spoke to us and told us it was very cold, that we were in danger if we decided to do this. But I was thinking, I was in a jail in Bulgaria, I don't want to be in

[75] The "Barracks" were Serbia's most infamous informal refugee squat, in use from August 2016 until its eviction in May 2017. For a history of the Barracks, see: Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik, "Urban Geographies of Refugee Journeys: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism and Contestation over Public Space in Belgrade," *Political Geography* 67 (November 1, 2018): 65–75, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.08.017.

a jail here. So we asked the police to release us and deport us to North Macedonia by our own will. And so we did that, four of us. We were deported to North Macedonia in the night and immediately crossed back into Serbia near Miratovac. We traveled five hours by foot through Serbia, sleeping in a local mosque that night. The next morning we continued and traveled to Belgrade. This trip, it was very cold. Minus 20. The snow was all around and we went by foot in one-meter-deep snow. My friend was sweating, and also he was wet from the snow. His hair turned white, froze. I touched one of his hairs and almost broke it. It was that cold. But our will to succeed was very strong.

We arrived back in Belgrade and I slept rough for another three months. After that, I finally decided to ask for asylum in Serbia. At that point, my will for another attempt, another attempt — it wasn't there. During those three months, I succeeded in crossing the borders with Croatia, Hungary, and Romania. Sometimes I even managed to reach the Italian and Austrian borders, deep in EU territory. But the Italian and Austrian police pushed me back, which was a big surprise. I traveled by truck, foot, car, train. Everything that was possible at that time, we tried. Sometimes they were very violent. They used tear gas, dogs. They hit us with sticks, or forced us to stay outside in the rain. But sometimes they offered us water or cigarettes and acted in a professional, friendly manner. It depended. I was aware that European countries would push us back. I don't feel angry about it. It's the same as if someone wanted to approach my house; I wouldn't be happy about it. But I didn't have another way. This was my only way to reach those countries. Finally, I gave up. I decided to apply for asylum in Serbia.

I spoke with CRPC. This was the day I applied for asylum: March 15, 2017. Here's my police paper, the original one. When I came to Belgrade I was in the parks and I recognized one interpreter, Mihajlo, from Preševo, where he had worked with a different organization. But then, he was working with CRPC. So he gave me instructions on how to approach CRPC's office at Miksalište and ask for help and assistance. When I approached the office, Mihajlo was present and also our colleague, Milena. And Milena called the police station, Savski Venac, near the former railway and bus station, and that's how I applied. I was issued with a document — intention for seeking asylum in Serbia — and KIRS offered me accommodation at Krnjača camp. After one month, a

lawyer from BCHR came to Krnjača camp and asked me if I'm willing to stay in Serbia. I said, "yes, of course." After two months, the lawyer came again and asked me again if I'm still willing to stay in Serbia. And I said, "yes, of course!" It was very unusual, that someone really and truly wanted to stay in Serbia. And after three months, I had my first interview with the Asylum Office. I waited another six months for another interview with the Asylum Office, where I provided all of my documents and had to speak about the reasons for leaving my country. And then for another six months, I was waiting for their response. So, 15 months in total. I got a positive answer from the police: asylum protection.

Those 15 months in Krnjača, it was very difficult, living there with a thousand different people, different cultures. We were all in barracks, 150 people all using one shower, one toilet. The food was always the same, and catastrophic. So bad. And it was very difficult for me to live that way, because it was very different from my previous life. I had never, in my entire life, experienced something like that. In this time, as well, you have a lot of stress, a lot of bad things. You don't have a normal life. You can't focus. And just to tell you. Now, I live in an apartment that is 28 square meters. And in Iran, my room alone in my family's house was 35 square meters. Even still, during those 15 months, I never thought to leave. Once I went to the camp, I never tried the *game* again.

Through the asylum process, I received financial support from my family. The government in Iran blocked my bank account, so I had money, but I couldn't get it out, and so my family supported me. But after the first interview with the Asylum Office, I got my ID card. I was one of the few men in the refugee camp to have that document. And if you wanted to receive money from Western Union or some other money transfer provider, you needed to have that ID card. And so I began to provide this service to others in the camp, withdrawing money for a 5% fee, and this was like my first job. I don't like that I had to do this, but it was very hard for me to keep saying to my family, "send me money, send me something." When I left Iran, one euro was 1,080 rials. Now, one euro is 32,000 rials. Big difference in just six years. So it was very hard for me to keep asking my family.

Then I got another job, at a fast food restaurant on Slavija Square. I worked there for seven months. And at the same time, when I got asylum, I needed to leave the camp, so I looked for an apartment. It is very difficult for a refugee to rent an apartment here, but I was very lucky to find a good landlord, a very good man who would rent me his apartment. I'm still in that apartment and very satisfied with it. I thank God for that man, because it is really difficult to find an apartment here. Then, after working one other fast food job, I got this job at CRPC as an interpreter. The first of February, 2022, will be three years here. I already knew about CRPC, but Ivan [the translation team coordinator] sent me a message asking if I wanted to come to the office to talk about a job. I said, "Why not?" I like interpreting because I am a refugee and I know refugees. I like to work with them and help them.

When I came here, it was very difficult because there were not many people who wanted to stay here. I and a few others were an exception, and there was no experience, even in the UN, as to how to help people integrate here. The refugee crisis started as a crisis. It was an emergency situation, and we know how to deal with that. But how to integrate someone, this was new for all organizations, and also for me. But it's different now, it's gotten better. The UN and other organizations have plans for integration. But before, no. I was on my own at that point. It was very hard. For example, I was provided with a Serbian language course by KIRS. But it was very difficult because the teacher only knew English and Serbian, and I didn't speak English at that point, so that course was a complete disaster. I didn't learn anything. Basically, I began to really learn Serbian from everyday occasions, interactions with other people, at my work. The next course I took was provided by BCHR, and I ended up at that point basically working as an interpreter for other refugees taking that course because my Serbian had become good enough. I finished that course at BCHR and got a certificate, but I was still struggling with Serbian grammar, and still do. For integration, it is much easier today for other refugees because there is a plan. So in terms of what you asked me, Serbia is not easy. But it's better now. I see that. I can see that it's really changing for refugees here. It's very easy to make friends. People here like making connections with other people, with new people, from new cultures. People here are an open people. One difficult thing still

is that I don't have any travel documents. I can travel with my Iranian passport but only to Türkiye, and here no one knows my documents, the police don't know my documents, the hospital doesn't know my documents, the government doesn't know my documents, right? It's very difficult, because I know the language, I can find a job, I can work everywhere, but I can't travel. This is a big problem for refugees.

But I will stay here, I will. You know? I learned the language, I learned the culture, I've found friends. I will, why not? It's a very beautiful country and I'm here now with very beautiful people. I've had hard times here. Sometimes I think of going to some other place, of trying the *game*. But I make myself wait, wait, wait, and try not to think about that. I must remain here. I must think about my future here.

Four months later, I caught up with Jafar again. Has anything big happened since we last spoke?

Yes! I am about to marry this one girl. She's from America. Nebraska. In Iran, I was a converted Christian. I went to secret house churches, but I couldn't approach the church as a regular Christian. Here, I am a member of this one church. I met her through that four years ago, soon after arriving. Our wedding is in eight days. We will live together in Novi Sad.

Fazal

Nationality: Afghan
Gender: Male

Age at time of interview: 20
Age at time of migration: 14

Status: Refugee in Serbia
Current Residence: Belgrade, Serbia

First Interview: January 25, 2022
Second Interview: November 4, 2022

My name is Fazal. I'm from Laghman, Afghanistan, and I am 20-years-old. I decided to leave Afghanistan in 2014 because of some sort of family problem. I am 20 now, so I was young then, maybe 14 or 15, something like that.

I came first to Pakistan with three other people. I didn't know them but I met them and they were also trying to come to Europe. I don't know because of what. They didn't tell me. While in Pakistan I decided to go with these people from there to Iran. We were in Iran for eight or nine months. And when I was in Iran, I didn't have money. I told some of the other people from Afghanistan, if they can help me I will work in Türkiye and I will pay them, please help me, because I didn't have anyone helping me at that time and I had this problem with my family. We were staying in a smuggler's home, I think, and I worked for them a little bit, cleaning the home, things like that. After that, when they trusted me — when they knew that I was okay, that I don't make any problems — they accepted me into the group. So they did help me and I went after Iran to Türkiye.

When we came to Türkiye, they had some friends. I didn't have anyone, so I went with them, with their friends. I was living there. They found me a job in a textile factory, and when I started the job, slowly I paid them what they had given me. I was there for a little bit of time, but I saw that I don't have a future in Türkiye. In Türkiye, you are living illegally without any documents. You can't stay in a hotel, you can't go anywhere you want. You don't have freedom as I have in Serbia at this moment. I can go within Serbia whenever, wherever I want. I worked in Türkiye for two years. By that time, I had a little bit of money for myself. It was now that I could be in Europe, I had that much money. So after two years, I said to myself, I can't be here anymore because I don't have a passport, I don't have anything. When I'm going to a hotel and I want to book it, when I want to rent an apartment, I can't because I don't have any documents. The Turkish government, they are not giving you anything like this.

From Istanbul, I went to Bulgaria. They put me in a prison. Yes, I was small and they accepted me as underage, but still, I was in a prison for two or three months. The conditions were so bad. Trust me, it was so bad. Too many people in one room. Forty, 50 people — no, they were such bad conditions. They were giving us only a little bit of food, a small bit, bread, it was nothing. At nighttime, around 6 p.m. or 7 p.m., we had food. And until 8 a.m., we didn't have anything to eat. If you want to eat something else you need to have money in your pocket. There were people from Africa, a lot of other countries, who had been in the prison for a long time and they'd made some markets. So you would give them money, they would give you food to eat. In a prison, where will you get money? It was hard for anyone to send it to you. We were allowed to have mobile phones, yes, but without cameras. Lawyers were allowed, but only if you have money. If someone doesn't have money, you don't have lawyers. If you have money, you can find a lawyer easy.

This was Busmantsi prison, a place where you don't know anything. It was near Sofia. Without any reason, people like me are in this prison. I met one Afghan. He had a beard, a big beard. The police in Bulgaria, they held him for two years without any reason, just because he crossed the border. Everyone was telling him, "you're Taliban," because of the beard. In the prison, we had that type of police. They were hitting the

beard guy. The police officers told him, “cut your beard.” And he said, “no, I don’t want to cut it, I am Muslim and I don’t want to cut it.” He said it to them like that. But they told him, “no, you need to cut it, after that we will let you outside. Without that, we don’t let you.” Finally, they let him out after two years. Now, can we ask why I was three months in a prison, without any reason? They just took me at the border. Too many people. Forty people, something like that. They leave the prison after 20, 30 days. I was there for three months, and I don’t know the reason why. I’m telling you, Busmantsi is that kind of place. If they put you in Busmantsi, you don’t know which day you’ll be allowed to leave. You don’t know anything in Busmantsi.

After that, I was in an open camp. I forget the name. That time it was okay. They were giving food, the camp was clean, it was near the airport. It was 2015, something like that. I was there one year and five months, something like that, I’m not sure, believe me. I told them I wanted to declare asylum there. I was one month in the camp, waiting for them, two months, three months, waiting for them to inform me. But no one informed me. They were so slow, you know. When I come to your country, you need to directly put me in the asylum procedure. Just put me in the asylum procedure and I will wait for your answer. But they didn’t tell me anything. Just, I reported to the camp, that was it. I was eating and sleeping. I was without support, needing shoes, needing wardrobe, work permit, mobile, everything. No one was helping me, we didn’t have social workers, we didn’t have the UNHCR. I didn’t have any future. So I crossed out of Bulgaria and came to Serbia.

At that time, when I came to Serbia, the situation in Serbia was also so bad. So bad. You didn’t have camps here. People were living in barracks. We didn’t have anywhere to sleep. So I got on a bus and went to Germany, and then from there to Switzerland, where I decided to apply for asylum. When I left Afghanistan, I wasn’t thinking I would go directly to Switzerland or anything, just that if any country would accept me, give me asylum, I would accept it. And in Switzerland, they made me most welcome. They finished my work so quickly. In the first camp, I was there for three or four days. After that, they sent me to Geneva. They told me my life is starting in Geneva — you can leave Geneva, you can go anywhere you want, but your life is in Geneva now.

You need to live here. They put me in a camp, they gave me a bus card, and every month they were giving me 300 francs, and food three times a day. I was living in one big room, but everyone had their own beds, everyone had their lockers. It was the best situation so far, yes. The camp was for single adults. They didn't accept me as a minor in Switzerland. They brought me to some machine, I don't know, to check my age. They told me, "we can't accept you as a minor. You are 18." I was treated like an adult. There were 20, 25 people in that camp, from Eritrea, Afghanistan, Kurdistan, Syria. I didn't work at that time. I would have liked to have some work but I didn't need to. They were giving me enough money that I could spend it, buy shoes, whatever. It was enough because I had food and a place to sleep.

I was waiting for the answer to my asylum application. The answer came so quickly. Twenty days, one month, something like that. They told me I needed to go back to Bulgaria because that was the first EU country that took my fingerprint. I can say that it was my mistake. We had access to free lawyers to protest the decision, but I didn't get one. I was just enjoying myself. They told me I needed to go back to Bulgaria. I told them, "I don't want to go back to Bulgaria." They told me, "okay, speak with the lawyers, maybe they can help you." I told them, "okay," but I didn't speak with the lawyers. I was just enjoying that time. It was my mistake. I was young. I was going out with good friends, enjoying, going to coffee, drinking. I didn't get a lawyer, so after some time, I think they thought, he doesn't care, he's not serious about asylum. I was thinking that they would never deport me because they know, maybe, the situation in Bulgaria is not good. I was thinking they would not deport me, so I don't need a lawyer. But one day, the police officers came and they took me, and I asked them, "why?" They told me either that I need to be in a prison for two years or I need to go back to Bulgaria. I told them I was already in a prison in Bulgaria. "I am so afraid of prison. I can't be in a prison, please, leave me alone in Switzerland." They told me, "no, you need to choose one of these two options." "Okay," I told them, "deport me back." Because, really, I was so afraid of prison. When someone tells me "prison," my mind is not working at all. Then, I signed a paper of my own volition, and they put me in a car to Zurich. After Zurich, they flew me to Poland, and after Poland I came back to Bulgaria.

When I saw Sofia again, I was like, “yo, again I come to the jungle,” believe me. You know, in every country we have good people and bad people. Even in Bulgaria, we have good people and bad people. But the police of Bulgaria, they are not good people at all. The second time I was in Bulgaria, when they deported me, it was so much worse than before. The food was so little. In the camp, the situation was so bad. We didn’t have doors, we didn’t have locks. I was in the camp for 20 days, one month. I was afraid maybe they would put me again in Busmantsi. But thank God, they didn’t. But a lot of people, when they’re deported from Switzerland or Germany back to Bulgaria, they are going first to prison and then the camp. But they didn’t put me in prison when they deported me from Switzerland. Thanks to God. I was so afraid.

In Bulgaria, they didn’t show any interest in taking my asylum application. So I crossed again to Serbia. This time, the situation in Serbia was okay. I went to a camp, Obrenovac, in February or March 2018. I told them I needed an ID card, but they weren’t making them. They told me I needed to go to Preševo, near the border with North Macedonia. I told them, “that is so far from Belgrade. I want to make asylum here.” At that point I was tired. I was thinking, “okay, I will live in Serbia.” Because the people of Serbia and the police of Serbia are so much better than Bulgaria. And I was afraid that if, again, I decided to go to Germany or Switzerland, they would deport me back to Bulgaria. If they deported me again back to Bulgaria, I would need to go to prison. And that is why I decided to live in Serbia, because they don’t have deportation.[76]

I was staying illegally in Obrenovac, because I didn’t have any ID card. I had some friends in Krnjača, and so eventually I went there, and I was illegal there, too. But in Krnjača, I started my asylum process. One of the organizations, Asylum Protection Center (APC), I spoke with them and they gave me a lawyer and I started asylum in Serbia. I had my first interview. “What’s your name, where are you from?” After that, about two or three months later, I had my second interview. The first was in the police station, the second in the camp. I remember that second interview the best, the others not so well. I had a social worker with me, because I was recognized as a minor, and we

[76] Švabić of KlikAktiv clarified that, on occasion, Serbia forcefully carries out deportation orders. However, due to a lack of funds, it is more common for a rejected asylum-seeker to be issued with a simple order to leave the country. Instead of returning to their origin countries, however, these individuals usually continue on to the EU or stay illegally in Serbia, completely outside of any asylum or social support system.

were at Krnjača with the police. It was nine hours, ten hours, something like this. From the morning until four or five in the evening. They asked me everything, everything, everything. “How did you come, where did you work, how much debt do you have?” I told them about every second of my life. Where I was, how I was. A year passed after the interview, and the answer came positive. Asylum for five years.

So a little bit before that, after nine months, I got my work permit and my first job was in an Indian restaurant, part-time. And in terms of accommodation, you have to leave the camp once you have asylum, but I had already left the camp. I was only in Krnjača for two months. After that, because I was recognized as a minor, I was moved from Krnjača to Zmaj, which is a place for children in the asylum procedure. I was at Zmaj for two years, which also has [orphaned] kids from Serbia, and so I began learning Serbian from them. I was also attending high school at that point. For two years I was in a regular school, a school for everyone. People really liked me because I was not from Serbia, I am from Afghanistan, and so we were speaking a little bit in English, a little bit in Serbian. People from Serbia, they are so kind. They will like you if you’re from other countries. So everyone was talking to me, hanging out with me in school. After two years, I told them that I can come to school, but it’s better online because of my job. They said okay, so I started my school online. I only go to school when I have exams. Otherwise, I am working.

I was working at Diwali, the Indian restaurant, when the coordinator of CRPC came to eat. They saw me there, I am speaking the Serbian language real sweet. So they told me, “you are speaking so sweet, here’s our number and you can contact us. Maybe we can go to coffee some time, and if you want to have a job as a translator, we can speak about that.” I had met representatives from CRPC at Miksalište, but I didn’t know the coordinator. So we went for coffee. They gave me a paper, asked, “can you translate that?” I said, “of course, I can translate it.” After that, when I translated it for them — either from Serbian to Pashto or English to Pashto, I can’t remember — they told me, “wow, you are so smart and you can work with us.” I told them, “okay, I will start working with you, also I will go to school.” So I started a part-time job with CRPC.

So now, I'm living very well, thank God. I know the Serbian language well. I have a lot of people from Serbia, friends, I'm hanging out with them. I'm going to the gym, I have friends there from Serbia. I have money, girls, friends. I'm hanging out with them. I'm living alone. I'm happy. I have a car, I'm driving. Maybe eventually I will go to university to study economics. Everything is okay. But for the future, it's a little bit difficult. Life is hard in Serbia. I know that. In the future, if I don't have CRPC, I will need to work in some restaurant again. Life is hard here. But I need to be here now. I've finished everything. I know Serbian. I have a lot of friends. I can't leave Serbia now. If I leave, I'll be starting over again and maybe they'll deport me to Bulgaria. I'm afraid. I have to stay here.

For fun? In a weekend — maybe every two weekends, not every weekend — I go out with friends to the club, hanging out with friends. I like to go out for coffee with friends, maybe too much. A lot of times, when my friends are busy, I am at home watching Netflix, learning English because my English is not very good. The money I make here, it's not enough but I am trying to spend as little money as possible. I'm not going every day to party, just sometimes. Everything is so expensive here in Belgrade. So, yeah, it's not enough money, but you can live normally. One other thing that's hard, I don't have travel documents. I have a lot of friends, every year they are going to Montenegro or Croatia for swimming. They are calling me, "come with us, you can enjoy with us." But I can't go because I don't have travel documents. But I hope I get this so I can go to Croatia and Montenegro with my friends.

At the conclusion of our interview, Nemanja Kovačević, who assisted me in interpretation and facilitation of interviews with those refugees employed by CRPC, asked to say something about Fazal's life in Serbia.

I would like to say something regarding Fazal's integration. Fazal is my friend. We are not just colleagues. We see each other aside from just work, in our private time, and we tend to go have a drink, things like that. I've also visited him in his apartment, which is really nice and very suitable. I've also hung out in the splavs here with him and his

friends. And he is actually a very funny and interesting guy, as you can tell. His social circle is very wide. So I've met his friends, these guys from Belgrade that he's met in the gym and other places. I also visited him in that Indian restaurant. I think he's having a really good time, although the journey was very tough and there were so many obstacles to get to this point. But he's very brave, very motivated to succeed, and also he's a very likable person. Everyone can tell you that, no matter if it's someone his age or older. He's very well-accepted everywhere. So I'm really happy to have Fazal as my friend. I am also very proud of his journey and how he is doing here. You will see through all these circumstances, considering that he was alone on the journey and that he was very young and without the help of siblings, parents, friends, that he actually created his life here only by himself. It is very impressive and I wish him good luck. I want him to stay in Serbia if he finds that the best solution. But also, considering the overall situation in Serbia, I can totally understand if he decides at some point to leave the country and go somewhere else. I have no doubt that he will be successful everywhere — wherever he decides to go.

It took me a while to catch up with Fazal again. By the time we spoke in November 2022, he had changed jobs; I had changed countries.

My new job, yeah, I am working with Doctors Without Borders (MSF). It's almost been like nine, 10 months, probably. And life is okay, everything is fine. I don't have any problems. I am in the field. I am working in Subotica four days a week, and three days I am in Belgrade. In this moment, everything is good. I am happy because I have my job. I can pay my things, whatever I want, for example, for myself. So that is why I am happy now in Serbia. Believe me, I am so busy, but today I am free, so I'm just cleaning my house, meeting some friends, going to the barber. I am always busy!

Fazal then asked me about my life. I told him about starting my master's program in the Netherlands.

Ah, you are going around, visiting all these places, enjoying life!

I told him I wished the same for him soon, too.

Yes. I don’t know when will get the travel documents. But I hope we get it.

Karoh

Nationality: Iraqi (Kurd)
Gender: Male

Age at time of interview: 21
Age at time of migration: 15

Status: Refugee in Serbia
Current Residence: Belgrade, Serbia

First Interview: February 1, 2022
Second Interview: May 13, 2022

My name is Karoh. I'm from Erbil in Kurdistan, Iraq. I'm 21-years-old. I've been in Serbia almost five years now. I'm working as an interpreter for CPRC and as a bartender. I had some issues with my uncle in Iraq. He wanted me to participate in the war, and I refused to do that since I was very young. I just wanted a life as some simple, regular man. My mom felt sorry for me and gave me support for my journey. So in August 2016, I decided to leave Iraq and I went to Türkiye.

I spent two and a half months in Türkiye, where I tried to cross the border five times unsuccessfully: twice into Greece and three times into Bulgaria. On one attempt, Greek police caught us, confiscated our property, telephone, and pushed us back into Türkiye. The Bulgarian police would also take everything from us: all our clothes except our underwear. This was standard procedure. On my sixth attempt, I managed to cross the border with Bulgaria. First, I spent 17 days in a smuggler's house. After that, I tried to cross the border with Serbia but was caught by Bulgarian police. They took me to Busmantsi prison. At the time I was 15-years-old, but that didn't seem to matter to the Bulgarian authorities. I was the youngest prisoner. I was

sleeping on the floor and I was beaten every day during breakfast and lunch. It got to the point where I had to choose: stay in the prison cell and go hungry, or go for food and get beaten. I was there for 11 days, and then I was transferred to an open camp for one month.

I decided to try the border crossing into Romania. I was successful on the first attempt and spent seven months in Romania. I was accommodated in a camp and sought asylum there. I had sought asylum in Bulgaria, too, because if you don't do so in Bulgaria they tend to deport you. But no one responded to my asylum request, no lawyers or any organization. I realized it was too difficult in Bulgaria, that you have to pay in order to get a lawyer. In Romania, it was different, better. I had the assistance of lawyers. There were two who worked in the camp, representing all the people in the camp. I attended school there and learned Romanian, but nonetheless, my asylum application was rejected a total of seven times. I think I was rejected because I didn't have the assistance of a Kurdish translator — only an Arabic one, and I didn't speak Arabic well at that time. They were very correct and professional, they didn't threaten to deport me to Iraq, but I realized I didn't have a chance for asylum there. I moved on to Hungary.

I spent two nights in the forest, completely alone, without any friends. I was scared. But I managed. I didn't have any problems with the border police and I crossed. When I entered Hungary, I changed into some fresh clothes I had in my backpack. I threw away the old ones, which were dirty from sleeping rough in the forest. After I had changed, I realized I was standing directly in front of a police station. But they didn't know who I was and they didn't question me, didn't react, so I went to the bus station and bought a ticket. I went from that small city on the border to some other city, and from there caught a train to Budapest. I didn't know English at the time and even though I spoke Romanian, no one there spoke it, so it was very difficult to communicate. After waiting for six hours in Budapest, I got on a train for Vienna. I thought I had succeeded, and because I was very tired, I immediately fell asleep. Then, suddenly, I was woken up by the police. They asked me for my passport. Obviously, I didn't have anything. I looked at Google Maps and we were only ten minutes out from Vienna, one station away.

I left the train with the police officers and they took me to a police station. They took my fingerprints and there was also a translator over the phone for my language, Kurdish. The translator asked me whether I wanted to stay in Austria and I said, “yes.” The translator said the police would take me to a camp and that everything would be okay, that I didn’t have to worry. So the police put me on another train and I was alone with ten police officers. When the train started to go I realized something was wrong. The train traveled for almost one hour, which was strange since I had been caught only ten minutes from Vienna. I asked one of the police officers where we were going, and he told me to shut up and then another police officer slapped me across the face.

They took me to the Hungarian border and gave me to the Hungarian police, who detained me for 48 hours. I was also asked at that point if I wanted to apply for asylum in Hungary, and I said, “yes.” The police told me they would accommodate me at a camp, that everything would be alright. But I was put in some police transport vehicle, with cuffs on my hands and feet, and we traveled for three hours like that. They deported me to Serbia, even though I had never been before. I showed documents from Romania to the Hungarian police, but still, they sent me to Serbia. They didn’t provide any explanation. They just drove me in that vehicle to a forest, opened the door, gave me directions, and said, “go, go there.”

I had never been to Serbia before and I didn’t know where I was. Since then, I’ve realized I was somewhere near Sombor. I was interpreting for a court case there last year and I recognized the police station. But at that time, I saw some signs in Cyrillic and I actually thought I was in Russia. I was completely lost. Then I came across some Indians in the forest, people from India. I asked them where we were and they explained to me that I was in Serbia. We spoke enough English to get across the really basic information. I asked them how to reach the capital city, and they told me they were also going to the capital city and they offered me company. We bought bus tickets and came to Belgrade. I got off at the central bus station. I didn’t know anything about the city, and since I had spent all my money and didn’t have a mobile phone — the Hungarian police took it — I felt very strange and insecure and afraid. I didn’t know the language and I also didn’t know about Miksalište. That was in June or July of 2017. So I was just walking

the streets, just walking, trying to figure out what to do. Then, suddenly, I heard one guy speaking over the phone in Kurdish. It was like a gift from God.

It turned out that guy was a smuggler, but he provided me with a lot of useful information about Serbia and the situation for refugees in Belgrade. He told me about the camps and even accompanied me to Krnjača. The guy told me that to enter the camp I didn't need any document or prior permission — though to stay there, you do — so he advised me to stay there a few days illegally, that I will find some Kurdish guys who will help me. I was there for two days, but then KIRS discovered me, asked me for an ID card or document, and of course I didn't have anything. They wanted to expel me from the camp, but there was one girl working for KIRS who felt sorry for me and told me that if I wanted to stay in the camp they could make an ID card for me. So they issued me one, and I was accommodated at Krnjača for the next six months.

My first three months in Krnjača, I spent doing nothing, basically. Resting, chilling, since I was very tired from the journey and the whole situation. After those three months, I thought maybe I would try to migrate elsewhere. But I was thinking, I am a refugee, I will have problems wherever I go. Overall, my experience in Krnjača was positive compared to previous experiences in Bulgaria and Romania, and I met nice people, so I decided to stay in Serbia. I felt properly welcomed. I started going to high school and it was strange because I didn't know the language, but the teachers were very supportive. When I left Iraq, I didn't have a destination in mind — maybe Germany, but mostly I just wanted to find safety. But, certainly, I had never heard of Serbia before in my life.

I was still a minor, so I was provided with a legal guardian, and after those three months began an asylum application. My first interview was short, 30 minutes. Four or five months after that first interview, I got another interview, the big one, which was 8.5 hours long. Both were at the camp, and my legal guardian, a lawyer, and the police were present. Another four or five months passed, and they approved my asylum application. This occurred one day before my 18th birthday in January 2019. I was very happy. Finally, I had something, a starting point toward other achievements. My next goal is to get a passport.

In terms of work, nine months from arriving in Serbia, I found a job at an Arab restaurant through a friend. My salary at the time was €200. After working six months there, I left Krnjača and began living at Zmaj house for UASC. I lived at Zmaj for two years. I continued working at that restaurant for a while, and after I quit the restaurant I worked as an interpreter for PIN for four or five months, and after that I found this job with CRPC. In June 2020, I left Zmaj and found an apartment, where I've lived since then. It wasn't too hard because I had CRPC's assistance in finding one. I should also mention I've worked at a cafe this whole time, too, called *Kvaka 22*, or Catch 22. A woman who was a teacher at Krnjača helped me find a job there as a bartender. The concept of the cafe is like a cultural center, so they have exhibitions and things like that. When I started, I didn't know Serbian well, but I started learning through the job. Now I've been working there for four years and I'm a manager.

I'm very satisfied with my life here now, with my well-being, my job. I've had multiple offers from some friends, you know, people who are smugglers who have offered to help me cross the border without charge. But I've refused because I'm happy here. I'm also attending school but not regularly. I'm part of a program suitable for people who are working. I'm learning to be a hairdresser and a cook. In terms of my Serbian language, I've never believed that I know it well enough and I'm always trying to learn more. I know I'm working as an interpreter and I can communicate with my colleagues no problem, but I'm still motivated to learn more and I'm aware that there's space to improve my Serbian language. I've also learned Farsi and Arabic since being here, and I can understand English well, but I can't express myself at this point.

It's been pretty easy to make friends here. People here are very open. One year ago, my neighbor put out a sign on the door of the building that he would have a party that night, apologizing in advance for the noise. So I knocked on his door during the party to wish him a happy birthday, and he invited me in. That's how I met him, and now we are best friends. So it's very easy to make friends here, to get in contact with people. I've never experienced anything bad related to my being a refugee and a foreigner here. People treat me well. I feel very confident about who I am. The biggest problem here, I would say, is the lack of travel documents or a passport. I would like to travel.

I don’t have a lot of free time. I don’t like to just sit and relax. I’m always trying to find some occupation, you know, because when I’m idle I tend to think about my family and some topics which I’d prefer not to think about. So I’m always trying to find something to do, going out with friends, like that. Serbia is a very specific place. If someone from Iraq asked me whether they should come to Serbia, what I would tell them depends on the person. Serbia is a place where you have to work very hard. It’s not a place for someone who is spoiled. I work three jobs at the moment, so I’m not sure if everyone is ready for that. But these jobs are enough to make me feel comfortable. I like to switch out my car pretty often, and these jobs are enough for me to do that, for example. Nothing too expensive, but I’m comfortable. I have an idea to start a business in the next year. I haven’t decided what yet, but I have a few options and I’m going to think about it.

Mihail

Nationality: Iranian
Gender: Male

Age at time of interview: 41
Age at time of migration: 29

Status: Refugee in Serbia
Current Residence: Belgrade, Serbia

First Interview: April 22, 2022
Second Interview: July 19, 2022

My name is Mihail. I am from Persia, one of the most deathly countries in the world. My age is 41. Two months after I opened my eyes, there started a war between my country and Iraq. And I'm so sorry to say this — all of these games, one big part is your country [the USA]. I'm so sorry. I hate the UN and I hate NATO. And the USA, they make all this shit, all these games, with our country and our people without any reason.

I grew up in a city near the Caspian Sea, where we have a border with Azerbaijan. Before the revolution, my father was studying in Israel. He came back to my country, married my mother, and together they went back to Israel again. And this is one thing about my history, why we had problems with the government. Because after the revolution, Iran came to be bad with America, came to be bad with Israel. And absolutely anyone who has a connection with the government of Israel, they are in the press, they are in lots of problems. One of them was my father because he studied normally in Israel, where he was also a volleyball trainer at one university. He had lots of Israeli friends, and also a lot of Iranian friends who stayed in Israel and didn't come back. And the Iranian intelligence services a lot of times asked him, "why do you have communications with Israel? Why do you have connections with these people?" And he said, "okay, I was studying in Israel and this is a normal thing. I don't have something

special.” Even with this, I grew up normally. My father was an engineer. My mother was a teacher at a medical university. We had a normal life until I turned 14.

At this time, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN came to Iran, and they selected my father to work with them in the USA. But our shit government didn’t let my father and my family go. And this was a big pain for me, you know? Starting from here, I began to ask in my mind, what is the reason? Why are we not like normal people, why can’t we travel? I had a lot of questions about this situation in my country and they never had answers. Then, the Intelligence Service came to my home and took my father. That morning, my father was happy. They took him in a car to someplace, and when my father came home, he had lost his mind and he had lost his happiness. Why? After this, I lost my father in a traffic accident. And this accident was not a normal traffic accident. A total of 11 people died, and two others died later in the hospital.

My uncle lived in the capital city, Tehran. He came for the funeral. And when he came, he went to the police, you know, to get their report. What happened during this accident? They had been driving. To the left side you have a mountain, and the right side you have a drop-off. The brake pedal stopped working. And my father said, “hey, driver” — because my father was the only engineer in this car — “please, turn into the mountain and we will stop the car.” But the driver didn't listen. He turned into this drop-off and opened the door, got out, and sent the car down off the mountain. So, after this, we were waiting for the police report of the accident, and they said someone had messed with the tires. My uncle from here understood that there was something wrong with this story. In the end, he understood that this was like everyday terror from the intelligence service, because they are doing this often to buses, to airplanes, and this is normal in Iran. Maybe somebody is dangerous for the government, they kill them like this. But in this accident, 13 people died, in total. And this was not normal. I began questioning in my mind. Why? What is the problem? After this, our family was destroyed. One or two years later, my uncle died. And they were saying, “ah, he was sick.” But my uncle was an athlete and he didn’t have any problems. My mother got cancer, and when we tried to send my mother to another country, they wouldn’t give her a passport, wouldn’t give her

a visa, didn't give anything, and I lost also my mother. Our life was totally changed. One happy family, to everything destroyed.

I tried to go to university, flight school, but they did not accept me because of my father's communication with Israel. I wanted to be a war pilot. And because of my father's situation, in the end, I passed the fitness exam but failed the religion exam, and also the background check. So they said, "no, Mihail cannot go." But I had the right to go to a sport academy because I was an athlete, and if you are a great champion of a high degree in Iran, they can send you to sport university without the exam. Because this is what I liked. [As a kid], I started with karate. I came to be champion of Iran. I came to be an international champion. I came to be a kickboxing champion, kung fu champion, kido, Nippon Kampo. Then I came to be an Iranian national team player, and eventually assistant coach of the national team. I was also a trainer for one of the big teams in Iran. The best teams there are connected to the Iranian military. They have good money, they have good gyms. We have two branches of the army in Iran. One of them is Sepah [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps], and the other is the standard army. And both of them have the best teams in Iran. I came to train and coach with them at 22, because I didn't have a father, I didn't have a mother, I didn't have a job. And I came to be coach of one of these army teams.

In Iran, on the 22nd of Bahman [11th of February], we have Freedom Day [Anniversary of the Iranian Revolution]. And because my branch was martial arts, before this day both of these gyms said to me, "Mihail, can you make for us a beautiful demonstration?" And I made the demonstration, about self-defense, with a gun, with a knife, with the guys, with my team. Lots of mayors, generals, statesmen saw our demonstration. They liked it, and one general called my boss and said, "please, tell that guy to come here." And when I came, he said to me, "can you train our army in self-defense?" I said, "this is my job, this is my profession. But I'm not part of the army." And he said, "no problem, we can make you a contract, but you must pass some test." I passed it and with his reference, I came to be a trainer for the special forces in the Quds army unit. This is Iran's international army. And your most shit president killed our general Qasem Soleimani. No, he did a good job. We are all proud that this terrorist died.

But you know, things look very different from inside the army. From when we are children, they are changing our minds with a lot of things. One of these things is religion. They say, “Mohammed is the Messenger. After Mohammed, we have another 12 imams from his family and now the last one will come, named Mahdi.” In Iran, we have a president, but we also have a main religious figure. His name is Khamenei. They all say he's Mahdi’s assistant. He will make the world ready for Mahdi to come. And if you have a problem with him, you will have a problem with Mahdi. You know, the laws of the world come from the French and Swiss. But we have a shit Islamic law in Iran because we are an Islamic country. They have their rules, stupid rules. And these are not human rules. You have in the USA, or maybe some states, stupid rules like hanging, guillotine, I don’t know, electric chair. We have the same thing, but even more stupid in Iran. If you have a problem with the government, that means you have a problem with the big men in the religion and if you have this, they must kill you. And they kill in the hard way. Hanging, raping. They give the father back his girl’s body and say she cannot have a funeral because she has a problem with God.[77]

Just, you are afraid of God. In the army, you see the same thing at the very high level. You must kill those who have a problem with them [the religious authorities]. You know, when we are children, when we are in school, we have one phrase. *Marg bar Amrika*. Death to America. Okay, I’m Mihail, I don't love any government, but I have no problem with you. Why? I have a problem with your government, with your fucking president. But you are not president. You are a human like me. This is what I was learning from school, not from my family. My family raised me with a different culture. We are all human, all are brothers from Adam and Eva. You can say sorry to God and God can forgive you. Okay, if God can forgive me, God can forgive Zach. Zach doesn’t need to die. From here you see that in Iran we live in a prison. For me, Mihail, all religion is like a car. There are different models, but in the end, they all go to God. So if I come from Islam, and I don't like Islam, why don’t I have the right to change? In Iran, you cannot choose what you want, how you want to live. In Iran, if you're a Christian, if you

[77] Mihail and the three participants in the following section (Emil, Leila, Sina) engage in discourses of “non-Islamiosity” (Kholami) with highly critical articulations of Islamic theology, history, and institutions. To understand how lived experiences of Iran’s political theocracy lead many Iranian refugees to seek reinventions of self and social relations through secularism and/or Christianity, refer to the works of Reza Kholami, Sebnem Koser Akcapar, and Ebru Öztürk.

want to get a job there, they ask what is your religion? Everything is just for Muslim people. Nothing if you are Christian, if you are Jewish, if you are atheist, if you are Baha'i. What can they do? They must die? This is exactly opposite of the Quran. Can you imagine? They take you into the army with the religion, they kill all your humanity, and they make you into one killing machine. Close your eyes. This is so beautiful. The killer say Allahu Akbar, *ana muslee*. I am Muslim. And he who dies says Allahu Akbar, *ana muslee*. It's the same.

So I was in the army and I came to be a special forces trainer. I was best friends in school with a man whose father was a high statesman in my city. His father spoke to the mayor, spoke to the minister of sport in my city, said, "eh, we have a champion in our city, please help him." He called everybody for me and sponsored me in joining the army. I was like his son. He loved me and he supported me. At that time we were one year away from elections for the President of Iran. There were four men. One was Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the old Iranian president. The second one was Mir-Hossein Mousavi, a previous prime minister. Mohsen Rezaee was the third guy. He was the boss of the Iranian army. And number four is my leader, Mehdi Karroubi, the boss of the Iranian parliament. And you know, this is the most beautiful thing in our story. There were four options for president, but nobody from outside the government. From here you can understand, we don't have any freedom in our country. But my friend's father, as a high statesman, became responsible for Karroubi's election campaign in our city. And one day he called to us. "Guys, can you come to our office?" Okay. We went to his office. He said, "if this man becomes president of Iran, everything can change." And between all of the guys who joined to the election, this man was the most good of the four. We trusted him, and we said, "okay, we will do our best." My friend's father said, "okay, Mihail, you are a good athlete. Talk with the athletes." He said, "okay, Zach, you are good with the university people, talk with the students." We all took different parts and began working.

But after the elections, with a lie, Ahmadinejad won. After this moment, in Iran we have a war. But not like a war how you know. It was a war, a cold war, you say, between our people and the government. How? The three parties who lost with all the people on one side. Ahmadinejad, with police, with the army, on the other. In this war, the Iranian

intelligence services killed a lot of my people. A lot of our friends. They were killed. They were raped. They were tortured with electric shock. They took us into the prisons and broke us, including me because I was a leader. Four different times they took us and they did a lot of shit to us.

After this, I decided to go from Iran, in 2010. But I will say to you generally and after, with your questions, we can go into detail. I went from Iran to Türkiye. I met a smuggler, and with 28 friends and 200 other people we went up into the mountains with small vans, crossed the border at the river. At that time, the UN was responsible for refugee persons in Türkiye. But when we came to Türkiye, Türkiye said we don't give Iranian people asylum.[78] I also wanted to continue my sport. And when the boss of the federation saw me at that level, he said to me, “you don't need asylum. If you win a medal for us, we can give you the Turkish passport directly.” Three years I was in the top level in Türkiye, three years I was a champion. And after three years, I asked them, “where is my passport?” And they said, “okay, if you coach the Turkish team, we will give you a passport.” I went to train with them. One day, we were to go to another city. But for this I needed permission. Asylum seekers in Türkiye must twice per week go to the police station to sign a paper. They said, “no problem, we can talk with the asylum office, we can talk to the police and you won’t have any problems.” And I'm stupid because I love this sport. I trusted them. They didn’t make the fax and when I came back from training, the immigration police told me I must leave Türkiye.

I came to Greece by boat with 48 people. In Greece, they took a long, long time to schedule my interview. I was there two years. This was just before the Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games. Some organizations, maybe partners with the government, I don’t know, came to Greece, said, “we will have one team of refugee people.” They started training their selections, but they don't send us in the end. They said, “we don’t have money to send you to the Olympic Games. Instead, we have a European Championship. And if you are good in the European Championship, we will give to you a passport.” And in the end, they do nothing. We left Greece and went to Albania. In Albania, your country

[78] Under a geographic addendum to its accession to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Türkiye will only grant full refugee status to European nationals, not those coming from the south or east. Syrians, for example, are encompassed under a temporary protection directive. See: Arzu Güler, “Turkey's Geographical Limitation: The Legal Implications of an Eventual Lifting,” *International Migration* 58, no. 5 (2019), https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/imig.12683.

has made a problem. We have one group, terrorists, named *Mujahideen*. America made them and took them from Iraq to Albania and now there they have a camp. They killed 17,000 of my country's people. 17,000. And this is your country's shit, with your country's support. After this, we came to Serbia. After 12 years, I have freedom.

So this is the whole story, now you can ask what you want. You were [ever] in Greece? How many years have you been working with refugees? So you don't remember 2015, eh? When America and Germany fucked all of our lives. What is your opinion of what they did? Why they opened the borders? I tell you, you are totally wrong. They wanted to take all the young people from these countries, give them hope, give some asylum. Now, when they want, they can take these countries because now we have nothing, no young guys who can protect them. What is America's business in Asia? You love the people? You know, I hate your country. Your country fucked Yugoslavia. Your country fucked Afghanistan. Fucked Iraq. Fucked Syria. I see with my eyes, your soldiers rape women. If you want to find the answer, why all these people come to Europe, the answer is the USA. We had better lives in our countries. And your country fucked us. What better life do I have now? I cannot see my family. I cannot see anything. I cannot see my friends. I cannot see my city. Nothing can give us happiness. I want to, like a human, have a passport to travel the world. I want to play in my country's name. Yeah, but what? I can't support one terrorist country like Iran. And who changed the Iranian government? You did. This is what America does. You stole our money, you stole our petrol, you stole everything. What is the USA? You don't have culture. You don't have history. And nothing. Just, you take some people from other places and think you are king of the world.

I've been in Serbia three years now. I applied for asylum here. You know why Serbia? Because Serbia never attacked any country. Because Serbia is not in NATO. Everyone hates NATO because NATO bombed Serbia. This is the first reason why Serbia. Second thing. If you are a Muslim, if you are a Christian, if you're an atheist, nobody cares in Serbia. For Serbian people, if you are good, they love you. If you are not good, nobody will have business with you. Third. They know what is the refugee because a lot of them were refugees. We have a lot of similar things, similar culture. I

like that they are respectful. When I was in another country, I won't say the name, we were in line for a signature at one police station. One refugee had chewing gum. And when the immigration police saw, they said, "what is this, motherfucker?" He said, "chewing gum." They said, "throw it on the ground." And they made him move the chewing gun with his tongue, 50 meters, all the way up to me. A lot of countries have shown the green light for me to come. I said no. I don't want to go from shit to the same shit. If I go to the USA, what does that mean? I support the big terrorist. If I go to Germany, I support the racists. If I go to any country that is NATO, it means I support NATO. And if I wanted to support terrorists, I would've stayed in my country and supported them. It's better. I was happier there.

The Serbian Asylum Office is one of the best asylum offices I've seen in my life. I remember the first guy from the immigration police who came to me and wanted to take the asylum interview with me. When he saw my ears are broken, he said to me, "are you a competitor, a champion or athlete?" I said, "yes." He began to make jokes with me, like a friend, and I felt safe with him. And this is one reason I passed the first interview very well, and the second interview, too. When you go to other countries for asylum, they don't even talk to you. But in Serbia everything is friendly, everything is easy with respect to human rights. You know, they see you like a human, they don't see you like shit coming to their county. They respect us like humans. Not in other countries, which see us like animals or worse than animals.

My first lawyer was Marko [from BCHR]. And then I worked with Nikola [from IDEAS]. Nikola is the best in the world. He is the best lawyer forever for refugee people. He's not just a lawyer, he's like our brother. When we cry, he cries with us. When we're happy, he's happy with us. He helped me a lot, you know, especially during the whole coronavirus situation, everything was so terrible. Everywhere was quarantine, no job, you could not work, you could not do anything, you had no money. And in this situation, Nikola was very great and he helped us a lot. I received my positive decision seven months ago. Here, I also converted to Christianity and took the Christian name, Mihail. When Islam entered my country, it destroyed everything. But Jesus comes for love. He says, I can take all of your problems on my shoulder and I will die for you. I respect all of

the religions. But for me, Christianity is a just religion, with respect to human rights. In other religions, you cannot see any human rights.

I am working security for one restaurant here. This man from the restaurant, he said to me, “you are a good guy, I love you, I want to help.” I never asked him to give me money. He himself said, “Mihail, I want to support you.” Most famous restaurant in this area. He became my sponsor, and put up my t-shirt in his restaurant. You can go one day if you want. We can go together and you will see. My second job is as an athlete. I play and if you win, if you lose, still you will have 500 euros in your pocket. Your manager selects your fights and you get money from the tickets and the sponsors. I fight in professional matches with the Serbian flag and my flag together. One day I go to my job, two days I have a rest. During these two days, in the morning I go to the gym and in the afternoon I go to my MMA club. And another part of my life: I play music. Now, guitar. But before the guitar, I played three instruments that you cannot find here — for example, the baglama from Türkiye. When I have free time, I go to help my friends, like as a translator. Working with some organizations as a translator in the refugee camps, playing music for the children as volunteers.

I'm so happy here because I’ve found exactly what I wanted. If tomorrow you’re a father and your son says, “father, why did you leave your country?” You must have a good answer. In this new country, is it the same or no? If I go to Europe, it’s the same thing. In Europe, after 11 p.m., you cannot go with your child into the street. Why would I go to Germany, motherfuckers say to me, “eh, you have a black face, what are you doing here in my country?” But in Serbia, everything is free. I’m relaxed in Serbia. We have a lot of the same culture. Here for me, everything is beautiful. I never see anything ugly. Within five minutes, people are friendly with you. And the most important thing for me. Serbian people are good or bad, they don’t have a middle. They are very correct people. You know, if they are good, good, if they are bad, bad. Good is good. Bad is bad. If they love you, they will love you. Honestly. If they hate you, they will hate you to your face.

I love this culture. I want to stay in this country, promise to Jesus. I’ve had a lot of opportunities to go to other countries and I don't want to. A lot of refugee people search for good money. You know? My salary is 30,000 dinars (€255), and I pay for my home

with half of my salary. And with 15,000 dinars, how can you live? I have internet for my phone. Thirty euros per month. I have a bus card. I have my gym. So you see, with €80 euros per month, I live. Promise to God, what you can eat? Nothing. But I'm happy because I didn't leave my country for the economy. I remember the day I was in the prison and I said, "Jesus, give to me one day free. I just don't want to die." Other guys come here for sex, for money, economy, for drink. But in my mind, happiness is different. Happiness is what I have now. If I go with my security clothes, nobody says to me, "who are you?" If I go with my athletic clothes, nobody says to me, "who are you?" Nobody says to me, why are you competing in Serbia? Nobody touches my life. This tattoo says *sloboda.* Freedom. All of my life I've searched for freedom. Now I've found it. Yeah, this makes me happy.

There is only thing. Just. Leave it. One thing I don't like but God is big. This will be changed, but not from the government, no. [The passport?] You are very smart. But I don't want! I don't want. You know why? You know, if now I search for the passport, God will say to me, "Mihail, shame! When you were in Iran, you said to me, 'just give me a chance for life.' And now you want a passport? No, this is enough for you.'" I am very rich. Because when you want this, this, this, this, this, you are a poor guy. When you don't want anything from this life, you are rich. In the next five years, I will become a sports club owner. I will be one of the best coaches and referees in Serbia. And I will have my band, and this band's name is *Sloboda*. We are singing for all of the refugees. This is my dream.

You can ask everything you want, you can ask, feel free. Tomorrow I am working. After tomorrow I will be back, again you can call me if you have any questions. We can sit together, we can talk together. If you want to see my home, you can come see. If you want to see my training, you can come see. Because I want to say to you something — don't search for everything in some paper, in some words. Sometimes my English is not very good. You know, it is hard for me. I am an Iranian who fled to this country. If I do bad, they will think Iranian people and refugees are bad. If I do good, they will say Iranian people are good. But if you believe in God — leave God to do what He wants. See if you

can find in any country a life like I have in Serbia. No! I never hurry God to his job. He knows what is best.

Now. Do you want to come to my gym?

I met Mihail again in July 2022, outside a roštilj *restaurant in a Belgrade outskirt popular with refugees. Every few minutes, Mihail greeted a new passerby, joked with them, gave them a hug. At the table behind us, two men drank beer and blasted Afropop. When I asked Mihail for an update about his life, he went inside the restaurant to bring out the owner, Igor, to sit with us.*

I said to you about my plan, my dream. To have my own gym. And this guy helped me. [To Igor:] Zach asked me, from the last time I saw him, what changed in your life? And I say to him what changed. [To me:] So, this man, Igor — like God sent him to me. Below his home, he has a gym. And he gives me the chance to change my life. When he sees I am working hard in security and my money is not enough for my life, he said to me, "I will help you." First, he helped me to find a second security job. But when he sees this job is not good for me, say, "okay, I have a place, this is more safe for you and good money for you." And this is most important, this is your beloved job. First we go to register our organization and now everything is legal. Nikola Kovačević, you know, he also found for me a free *advokat* to help. You know, like a puzzle, God sent all the good people to me to make this puzzle. And Igor, this is the reason I said to you make this reportage here. When I have no food, this man helped me. This is his restaurant and he said, "okay, Mihail, come here. When you are hungry, every time you are welcome, come here and eat something." When he goes to some happy birthday — because he is a singer, eh? When he has some happy birthday or celebration, he takes me with him. Because with little, I can be happy. This is the reason why I say to you, "please come meet this guy." This guy is an angel for me. And he trusts me and he said to me, "okay, this is a place and this is your beloved job, we'll help you to register, we'll help you for food." I want you to meet him because I say to you Serbia has very good people. So lucky! All the time I meet good people.

Tomorrow we will go to a notary. In two weeks, three weeks I think our gym will be done. And if God gives me another chance, I want to do what Igor did. How? Igor taught me how to be good, and I need to continue this like a circle, you know. If I see somebody is a good athlete and have not the money, I will help this guy to come be big, come be a famous athlete. I will give to these guys a chance. And our plan together is that people don't use narcotics, they come to the training and they are good in training. This is our goal. Because in Serbia, there are few organizations that really care about the athlete. And in our organization, we will do something exactly for refugee people. One time in the week, maybe two times in the week, I will go to the refugee camps and see if they have some good athletes. I give them a chance for the sport ministry of Serbia to meet them. And maybe their life is changed.

These testimonies, on the one hand, are life histories. But, on the other, they are mere snapshots in time, reflections on the past mediated by the highs and lows of the ongoing present. For several months, I couldn't reach Mihail. In late November, he messaged me again, saying he had lost his previous number and had been going through a rough time. He didn't elaborate further, and he didn't mention his gym. "USA is playing England right now," he said when we called. "Yes," I replied, standing outside the bar where I had been watching the World Cup game, "and Iran and USA on Tuesday!" Mihail, in characteristic fashion, proclaimed: "Iran will fuck *the USA." And we both laughed.*

Zaki

Nationality: Afghan
Gender: Male

Age at time of interview: 21
Age at time of migration: 15

Status: Subsidiary Protection in Serbia
Current Residence: Belgrade, Serbia

First Interview: April 4, 2022
Second Interview: August 27, 2022

My name is Zaki. I am 21-years-old. When the Taliban took over Afghanistan, whatever year it was, my parents had no choice but to leave Afghanistan. They went to Pakistan, started a business, and I was born there in 2000. I look much older than that, I know, because of the beard — the beard is sunnah and I love it, but here many are afraid of people with beards, especially immigrants like me. The first thing that comes to their minds is that I look like a Taliban!

After around ten or 12 years, when Afghanistan got a new president and a government and everything, when the Americans came to Afghanistan and fought against the Taliban and other terrorist groups and Afghanistan could almost stand on its feet, the Pakistani government declared that there's no place anymore for Afghan refugees in Pakistan because Afghanistan was mostly safe. It was around 2012 or 2013 when they actually forced us to leave. We had been living in Islamabad and the government seized all our stuff, all that we had in Pakistan, and we came to Afghanistan with nothing except the clothes on our bodies.

When we came to Afghanistan, we went to our province which is called Laghman. It's in the middle of Afghanistan, far from the capital, two hours. Ninety-five percent of the province was occupied by the Taliban and the Islamic State. We couldn't

do much there. My father started a business, agriculture on the land and growing stuff. Those were really horrible times for us. My older sister was married to a guy but they couldn't stay because he was in the military, so his life was really in danger. But you can't travel from one province to another province. In your district, everyone knows each other, you understand? If you left the province, the groups would know and they'd start asking, "where have you been, why did you leave, what were you doing there?" So my sister's husband's life was really endangered and he left Afghanistan a really long time ago. And, of course, my sister, she couldn't stay there. Meanwhile, I was the oldest boy, so it was a really huge problem. You know how the recruitment was there? I mean, of course you don't know, but it is so common. I went to a religious school, and they would start from a really young age to recruit all the youth from the districts. And of course, I was known there because my father was popular as an agriculturist all around the province.

It's a really horrible story. I still remember that moment when the Taliban knocked on our door. I was not at the first meeting, but they told my parents, "we need your son, we need more people." Of course, my parents were against all of this shit and everything. They really wanted me to finish my school, do something with my life, to finish university and become someone. They rejected the Taliban decision and that was, let's say, a warning from them to my family. I was there the second time. My sister was hidden, because if they saw a young girl they would have married her off. They started beating my father and they were aggressive. This second time they told us, "there won't be a third time, there won't be mercy and we'll take him whether you say yes or no." I saw so many people, many of my friends, my classmates, who did actually join the group. Many went on their own, many were forced.

Man, we went through a lot of stuff those years there in Afghanistan. Many things, without a home or food. I can't express all of it. My best friend, he was trained in the Taliban. He died. He was killed by the Afghan military, because they were fighting against each other, firing at each other. He didn't even want to go. At that moment I decided, no, this won't be me. He died and I was like, "man, what's the purpose of living?" We come to the world and your life is controlled, your life is completely controlled by

other people. Don't get me wrong, the Americans came to Afghanistan. It didn't work. I really grieve those people who died there but believe it or not, more than them, I think like ten or twenty times or maybe more than that civilian people died. Not only from the operations they had against the Taliban, the other terrorist groups, but because of their mistakes, like drone strikes and stuff. Innocent people are in the middle of every war. It was really hard sometimes even to breathe. Our problem was we were in the middle of two groups: the government and the Taliban. You just didn't know when they would start fighting each other and nobody could go out of their homes.

We couldn't resist. Nobody could resist them at that moment. And we didn't know what was going to happen the third time. I had no idea of leaving my country. I was a child. I thought Afghanistan was the only country! We'd already been deported from Pakistan with nothing. The third time when they came to our home, my dad, he hid me somewhere and told me, "they're going to come and we're going to say that we agree." So the third time they came, they talked, my father said, "there's no problem, my son will join you. Just leave us alone and don't come to our home and don't bother us." With tears coming from his eyes, he said, "just tell me when and where I should bring my son." A few days after that, there were some people who left the area with their children. They told my father, "our son, our children went this way. Now they're elsewhere, safe, secure, without any problems. This could be a future, your kid's life is in danger. If you have the money, run. It's life-saving." So this was the only way my father could save me and my sister from these insurgents. He sold his land so he could send us. Man, it's still hard sometimes, these stories. I don't know the last time I spoke about it with somebody. I'm sorry. I need a moment.

I left behind my sisters, brothers, my parents. My father, he traded land, you know, just so we could be safe from the people bothering my family. The Taliban's mission is to kill somebody or to be killed by somebody. Once you enter, you're just done. Your life is gone. It's brainwashing of children who don't know anything about their life, about the future. It's not that I'm afraid of dying, I swear to God, believe it or not. Once you decide to leave your friends, cross all those borders to get to any country in Europe, when you're walking through the jungle, walking through borders, walking past the military and the

border police who have no mercy, they'll kill you, really, or just break your bones. But I was like, man. I don't know. There was a chance to get somewhere. But to stay in Afghanistan is definitely, you're going to kill somebody or somebody's going to kill you. And both ways, it's the same. I saw there was a chance to survive. I left there because I wanted to have a better future, not to be controlled by other people. My father did a great job, he put himself in danger and saved my life. I'm always thankful. He passed away three years ago. I've cried my eyes out. It isn't easy for anyone. It's never been easy for me. I still remember the streets where I used to live, everything. It's just so difficult to make people understand. There are many people who can't afford for their children to get out of that situation. I just feel sorry for those families and those young kids who can't do anything but stay there. To stay in that situation. I can't put myself there. I don't know. I would've just laid down somewhere and let my soul leave.

My father talked to those people and we started our journey in the middle of the night. This was in 2016. My sister and I went to the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, so that we could go from there to Iran. At the border, there were Taliban who were controlling the border. They've always been there, collecting taxes from the people who are migrating to other countries. But there is no other way. Everyone must go there and pay the Taliban so that they can leave Afghanistan. Some people might ask, "why did the Taliban let you cross if they wanted to enroll you in their group?" But they didn't have that level of contact with each other to know who to stop from crossing, and in each province, there were different leaders and rules. At the border, we stayed for three days. And that's how my life ended in Afghanistan, and started again.

We entered Pakistan and from there we went to Iran. We were 35 people in a jeep, forced in, small, through the desert. The first time the Iranians caught us. They brought us to their base and kept us for five or six days. They forced me to work there, to build a wall here, or dig some holes there. My hands were bruised, wounded. I used to work with my father on the land but I've never ever worked like that. They were really harsh on us and my sister. They didn't let us sleep. They would just bring us to this pool that they had made, an empty swimming pool. You'd just lay there at night, and if they saw anyone falling asleep they'd pour water on you. No food, no toilet, no sleep. They let us stay

under the sun and burn. After those days, I looked like a zombie. My worry was more about my sister because she's a woman. Everywhere was sand and nothing else. There was just their base in the middle of nowhere. If you got lost there, you were done. So that's how our journey starts. You have to accept it upon yourself. Either you're going to die, or you're going to reach the place that you want.

After six days, they collected some money from us and they took us to the border with Afghanistan. I was like, "no way in hell am I going back to that place." I was thinking, this is just a little beating, but eventually, I will have everything, I will have a really nice bed to sleep on, with food and everything, this suffering will pass. But no way am I going back to Afghanistan. Once I go back, I know that they're going to take my sister. The Taliban were asking about me and my father always told them, "my son, my daughter, they ran away." So, we tried a second time. We stayed in an abandoned home at the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, stayed a couple of days there and then the people again came to us, took us to the border, the same process. Taliban, taxes, and then in Pakistan, taxes, police. We went through all those places again and reached up to Tehran.

From Afghanistan to Pakistan until Tehran, we were the whole time in the mountains where there's no market, no water, no food. It's a joke of ours. We believe when we die, we go to a place to be judged, where you will be asked about your good and bad things. So everybody's collecting, you know, not willing to give anything good to another person, just fighting for themselves. In the mountains, if you ran out of water, you were done. If you did give, what were you to do when you didn't have water yourself? I don't know how it sounds to you. Only God knows how many problems are on the way from Afghanistan until Tehran. It's not funny, believe me, it's horrible. When you don't know where you're going, with whom, and the people, you just met them and you have to trust them. There's no other way. Oh, man. There was this road from Pakistan through Iran. Every single person who leaves their country, from Afghanistan or Iran or Pakistan, they know about that mountain, *Mushkil*, one of the most dangerous in the world. It's difficult for those single men to travel because smugglers want to take them the longest routes, whereas with the families they take shorter roads to prevent any problems. On

that mountain, I can assure you, there are many dead bodies you can find. There's no one even to take those bodies to their families.

But long story short, my sister and I arrived to Tehran, this time without any problems. And from there, we continued that journey. Then we were in Türkiye without any problems, about two weeks or something. We stayed all the time with smugglers in their homes and everything, people you never knew before, and they wouldn't get us food or water so we had to buy that ourselves. Then we came to Bulgaria and we stayed in a hostel for one night. When the hostel owner found out that we were illegal, they called the police. I still remember the funny face from the police officer when he told us, "we're going to deport you, but just give us money and we will not deport you to Türkiye!" And we were so innocent, we didn't know anything about this stuff. I couldn't speak English. I was just saying, "okay, okay, okay." Then when I heard deport and Türkiye, I was really worried and I was like, "man, we walked more than five days in the jungle from Iran to Türkiye. So now we're going to do that again?" Like, come on, man, show some mercy. We were in the jungle, no food or water, past all those mountains. And then from Türkiye, we came to Bulgaria, the same situation, you know, running and totally soaked in rain and freezing. Because remember, this was the beginning of winter. November, I think. So I was just speaking my language and crying, saying, "you can deport me but my sister's sick, please do something." And they were just like, "okay, give us money, we will not deport you." They knew that they couldn't deport us. They had to take us to a closed camp, which is still the rule when a migrant arrives in Bulgaria.

So that's where they took us. The closed camp was only giving you two meals a day. We were just in one big room, a hall, with 30 to 40 beds, ten to 15 families, and they would close us all inside, big metal doors like a jail. After 10 p.m., they wouldn't allow you to go out, to use the bathroom. I can't imagine what was worse than that space. Man, in Bulgaria we had the most horrific moments. People were so racist. Afghan people, they would sentence them there for 15 days. For Iraqi people, like 10 days. It was not the same rule for everyone. I think for Bangladeshis, it was six months that they stayed there. I became friends with one Afghan guy who they locked up for eight months. By the time he was released, I was already in Serbia. Now he is in France living

a happy life. In the closed camp, you'd have your first interview with the asylum office and they'd ask you only one question. "Do you want to stay in Bulgaria, or do you want to leave?" The rumor was that if you said you wanted to go, they'd deport you. So most migrants said they wanted to stay, that they wanted to apply for asylum. They were kind of forcing migrants to stay, I guess so they could show the numbers to the EU and continue to get their financial help.

After 15 days, they transferred us to an open camp called Voenna Rampa, central Sofia. We stayed there for about a month, but during this month, we tried to cross the border with Serbia three times. It was the second time we came to Serbia. There was this moment I won't ever forget in my life. The Serbian police wanted to deport us back to Bulgaria, and then the Bulgarians, they came, too. They caught us there at the border and they took us to the police station. They kept us for 24 hours, then the next day they started their procedure, to see our fingerprints and whether we were legal or illegal. One police officer was behind me and the other was in front of me. And the one in front of me, he told me to take my bag and leave. But the other guy behind me, he said, "I dare you to take the bag, and you'll see what I'm going to do." They both started shouting at me and I was like, okay, because my sister's going I can't let her go without me. So it was that moment, when I chose my bag, the police officer came from behind me and he shocked my back, my buttocks, with a Taser. I was in pain for many, many days. But I couldn't let my sister go and so I had to pick something, either way they'll both do something to me. The third time we came to Serbia, we walked in the jungle for seven days, the last few days without water, without food and everything. We drank from streams, the dirtiest water I've ever seen in my life. Man, that jungle was the worst. I went through the darkest forest. I swear to God, I couldn't see the next person holding my hand. I went through a forest where there were crocodiles. I went through forests where there were foxes and forests where there were wild animals. I don't know how I'm alive.

We arrived in Belgrade on December 13, 2016. The police caught us in a car in Novi Beograd and I thought they were going to deport us back to Bulgaria. I don't know if it was God's mercy on us, some prayers probably from my parents, but instead, they took

us to the police station, Savska. We were kept there for about 12 hours and afterward, they gave us the police paper, which just gives you a camp to stay — you know, it's just confirmation that you arrived and that you're kind of legal, but you're still illegal unless you ask for asylum. I don't remember which camp they directed us to, but it was far away from Belgrade. So we went to Miksalište, this information center. They searched the beds and said, "there's no place for you guys." So we stayed sleeping outside for three days, four nights maybe, without a coat, without a blanket or anything. It was December, already cold, freezing outside and raining as well. Then we went to that place again and they gave us another center, which was also full of migrants. But there was this guy working for KIRS. I can't forget him, he was a great guy. He came to us and asked, "what happened?" We were like, "okay, they've given us a few camps and centres and they're all full, we don't know where to stay." I told him everything. "We don't know anything, we don't know the language, we don't have money." He helped us with translation and then he wrote down Krnjača camp, Belgrade, with his signature.

It was difficult living in that centre at the beginning, too, because they were not giving us the food they were supposed to give us. They were just giving us one time a day, for almost six months — just sardines! And the queue had a huge number of people. If you reached your number, you'd get it, and if you didn't you'd just stay hungry. For six months, every day, from 5 a.m. I would stay in the queue to get the food, and they would start at 8 a.m. I still remember they came from Red Cross, giving food to the people who they would want and not giving to those people they hated. It was a kind of racist act, I suppose. I don't know how we survived that. I couldn't ask my family to send me money because I knew their situation. We didn't know the country. When I arrived from Bulgaria, they were saying Serbia and I was like, what? What's Serbia? It's like Siberia? I arrived and it was like magic. Serbia actually exists!

I started selling those sardines that we took from the camp, because eating those sardines for six months straight: no, no way. I started collecting our sardines — two persons, one week, it's like 14 sardine cans. I would take them to Zeleni Venac, the green market, and sell them there. Cold weather, no jacket, no shoes. I withstood it just to bring some food for me and for my sister. So after that, I started standing on my feet,

and I started learning languages through YouTube. Serbian, English, and many other languages. I started to learn more of them and I even started volunteering for KIRS, for about two and a half years. When I started learning, the only purpose was to help people, other migrants. I was like, I don't know, 16? I was really, really young. I was not even allowed to enter the hospital at that age, didn't have papers, so I was like, I'll grow out my beard so I can accompany migrants. When I got a bit popular among KIRS, people would come, journalists and those people, and they'd pay me a little bit to interpret, ten, 20, 50 euros. I would do this just to earn some money. And then I got into movies! It's so funny. I mean, I still don't like standing in front of the camera and that stuff. I just don't feel comfortable. Once I see the camera filming me, everything is just blocked. But I was like, "ah, I can just earn some money for my sister and for me."

For two and a half years we stayed, without trying for the *game*, because we needed to earn money. But then eventually, we decided to go from Serbia. I mean, yeah, to be honest, nobody wants to stay here. So, when we saw that we can go with that money, both of us were trying. I mean, I think I've tried more than ten times maybe. Every single road, every single way, we tried, but we just couldn't. Police would catch us because we were paying for cheap *games* instead of the more expensive *guaranteed games*, between €3,000 and €5,000 at that time. Cheap *games* are only about luck. So I was like, "yeah, it's time for us to separate. We don't have enough money, so let's one of us go and make a life for ourselves. I'm not saying it must be you, but I think it would be better, because as a man of the family I can't let you stay here and me go." We had a really long discussion, we spoke for about three months. She was not agreeing with me, saying, "no, I can't, I can't let you, it's our money, it's actually your money." But eventually, we came to a conclusion and she said yes. And she left in the summer of 2019. She's in France with her husband now.

Just before she left, I sought asylum in Serbia. I was hopeless, because I was like, man, if I go for asylum now, I won't get working permission for nine months. So what am I going to do this whole period? I have to work but they will not allow me to work legally, so I have to go for the black market? So, I don't know if I should say this, but a lot of people helped me with it. I sought asylum and there were some concerns. I don't

know, it's better to talk about those things somewhere else. I really prefer to talk about the system of government and everything somewhere different because I just don't want anybody else to hear us. So yeah, they helped me and I got my asylum here [subsidiary protection]. I stayed here. I'm still working and supporting my family. I'm sending them money every month, sometimes more than that. I'm supporting my family, my sister there, and myself here.

My job now? Ah, I'm not sure if I should say it or not, but okay, I'm working with the IOM here in Serbia. I am working as an interpreter for seven languages there. My English is fine, but I'm not speaking English like this frequently. Serbian people, most of them don't like to speak with people in English, I think because of 1999. So that's why I find it more relaxing to speak with them in Serbian, their language. And how did I find an apartment? Oh man, we're going to talk about this stuff and everything? These are the negative things which will never end. Because even if I get a passport, or I marry here, have children and everything, they will never ever count me as one of their own. I had the most difficult time in Serbia finding an apartment. Once they hear my name, Zaki. "What? *Odakle si? Kako se zoveš?* Where are you from, what's your name? Oh, I'm sorry, we have had really, really bad experiences with the migrants." I'm like, man, "I'm not a migrant! I sought asylum here. I live normally here. I work here. You won't face any problems, I've got my lawyer and they're going to fix everything, you have nothing to worry about." But they're like, "no, we can't let any migrant stay here."

I think the main problem is that Serbia, the government, I think they didn't announce our status here to their people. So what I mean is like, if I show my card — my little card that I got from the Asylum Office — nobody will trust it. Nobody knows it. If I go to the bank they investigate my card. Like, "okay, is it yours?" And I'm like, "yeah, you can see my photo on it and the stamp from the Asylum Office, there's 'subsidiary protection' written there." And I'm one of those who's actually legal in Serbia, I'm working, I have an account! So it's really bad for a country to give such cards. It's embarrassing, it's a shame. I'm living here, I'm paying taxes, I'm doing everything right. I'm never making a problem. And you know, it's written that every refugee has the right to a passport, to citizenship. You have declared that in your laws and articles and

everything. I've read it! But still, you're not ready to give that. What's the problem? What's the reason behind it? We came here and they're not giving those documents.

Have you seen the card? Let me show you. It's the biggest problem. When I'm going to look for an apartment, this stuff, they're asking for a passport, like they don't know that I'm legally here. I don't have a passport! This is the only thing that I've got from this country, and it's your country, so come on! I mean, for me, I wouldn't trust a card that's written by hand. I wouldn't trust it. But what can I do? I didn't make it, it's your country, you gave it to me, it's your institution. What have I got to do with that? Look, just look at this stupid card. I'm telling you, if a person stays in Serbia — well, first of all, they will not stay in Serbia. But if they stay in Serbia, soon they will realize there is nothing for them here, nothing. There's no support for them financially. There's no social support for them. And most importantly, they don't have any documents. So I always say to every person. "We. Are. In. Prison." We are in prison. We can't go anywhere. With this bullshit card, we can't do anything. It's a one-year card, and we don't even know the next year, are they going to give you the card again or not? You build your future, your life, everything, you stand on your feet, and then the next day you just wake up with no documents. You're just illegal. That's just such a fucked-up system. I can't understand. I'm sorry for my foul mouth.

I mean, there are a lot of people who really want to stay in Serbia. But just because of some particular things which are not available, they just can't stay here. Of course, I still hope to leave Serbia. Come on, is that even a question? I mean, Nikola [my lawyer] knows. I spoke with him last week and I asked him this question. I was like, "Nikola, just be honest with me. Is it worth it for me to stay in Serbia? Consider everything. What do you say? Is it worth it for me, for my future, for my life?" I really want to finish my education. I just want to finish my school and to have papers like everybody else. I mean, I love working with migrants, I really love helping people who are really in need. But there's my future. I just can't ignore that. I have this job today, I may not have it tomorrow. What will I do then? So he advised and said some really good things about it. I really appreciate the things he told me but I just couldn't find any of this positive energy. There was no hope. Like, it was a speech to calm the thunder you have inside,

the hot blood that you have. So I'm thinking about it, my options. I don't know. There are a lot of opportunities I really want to take that I've been denied from. I love helping migrants because when I see them, I see myself. Everybody knows that I'm available 24/7, even if they're not paying for the extra hours that I'm putting in. But I can't do this work forever.

There's a lot of grief and those things inside and I just can't put them out. The Serbian government offered me nothing except this bullshit card. I did everything, my own integration, everything. I learned the language, I found myself a job, I found myself an apartment. So no, why should I say anything good about them when there's no good thing about them and they didn't do anything for me? Nikola did help me. I really appreciate his work. He's the greatest man I've ever met in my life. Once, I got an email from the UNHCR. They told me, "okay, we have some opportunities for you, we'll cover everything, just pick what you want to study." I picked what I wanted, I explained everything, and after a month they sent me an email saying, "oh, it's not available." I said, "okay, is there something else?" They said, "yeah, there's more, we'll send you something." I waited another few months and they sent me another email. I saw information technology as an option and immediately I wrote them an email. "Okay, this is my final choice and I want to go with it." You won't believe the answer. After a month, they called me and said, "Zaki, we can't cover it, it costs a lot of money." I was like, "uh, okay, why would you send me it then?" What's the point man? Then they asked, "look, Zaki, what's your salary?" And I was like, come on! You're a huge organization, you're the UNHCR! You're telling me you don't have money? Okay, then just go, leave me. Then again, they offered to enroll me in a Serbian course. And I was like, okay, I mean, why not, yeah? Because I already know Serbian. I just need your fucking degree, the diploma. Oh, man. I mean, the Serbian teacher taught me like this. "Zaki, can you tell us what is this in Serbian?" Like, for five fucking months. She was telling me, "Zaki, what is this in Serbian. Zaki, what is that in Serbian?" And then when it was exam time, she was like, "ah, Zaki, I'm going to give you a paper. Just copy and paste."

Then, my cat broke my laptop. I had no money and I was like, okay, I'm going to ask the UNHCR because they're providing those things for students who are in school.

They said once, “Zaki, we can help you, when you want, we are here for you.” Just empty sympathy. I called them and I explained the situation, that now I can't do classes via my phone. And they were like, “Zaki, we know how much you have, we know your salary.” And I was like, fuck off. I put down the phone. Then they sent me mail. “If you want a laptop, please fill out this questionnaire.” And it was like, “what's your job? What's your income?” I was like, really pissed off. Okay, I don't need that. I called them and I was like, “okay, please don't send me any more mail, I’ll buy myself a laptop.” There’s no problem. I mean, if you don't want to give me, just tell me, that's it. In Afghanistan, we say, you as a man never should ask a woman, “what's your age?” And a woman — or really anyone — never should ask a man, “what's your income?” I fought with them, verbally. I was like, okay, I just don't need this bullshit. I can't handle this. You're sending me that mail and then you’re reporting that you helped a person do something. Don’t play those games with me like I’m a child. I’m a grown person. I had a really big discussion with Nikola about this.

Why would they make fake promises? Just tell them you can’t help them and that’s it. You’re putting me in a situation to expect something and to have dreams about it and then there’s nothing, just leaving me disappointed. I feel hurt because I don't need that shit in my life, in my head. I’m done talking with the UNHCR. They didn't do anything for me and I was just the innocent character in the picture for their donors.There’s such a small number of people, really few people who really care about migrants. There is the 95% who are just waiting for their next paycheck. They just wait for the money and don’t give a fuck about migrants, don’t give a fuck about those siblings being separated by social workers and guardians and social welfare. Everybody knows this. The system is bad. Not people. But there are some people who are worse than the system. Someday we’ll talk about this, I’m telling you, you're going to be really surprised. The other interpreters you talked to at other organizations, they all know this but they can’t open their mouths. When I’m talking, it’s all the things I’ve witnessed. I won’t be silent, I can’t just watch these innocent migrants become victims of aggression and manipulation of officials. The truth is always bitter, I don’t care if someone gets offended by my words. I just care about those innocent people who are always victims, always in the wrong

place at the wrong time. The workers at Miksalište, they're just sitting there, talking with each other, waiting for their salaries. When unaccompanied minors come into place, they just say, "you are 25, you are 16, you're going to this camp for unaccompanied minors." What the hell did you just do, sorry? There has been the separation of thousands. The problem is these innocent people, they don't know their rights. And I don't know, I don't know how to stand for them.

I have really big dreams. I just can't do it here in Serbia. I just can't. I want to have children. I spoke with my family. I was like, "okay, I'm helping you guys here, I'm working here. But I want to see myself in the next three years, four years, when I turn 25, to have my child. I don't care if you're going to find me somebody or not, but I'm going to find myself someone because I really want that." I just can't stay where I'm at now. Someday, I want to get married and have a child. Come on, why not? I can't wait to turn 25 first. Next five years, I'm definitely not going to stay in Serbia unless they change some laws. Then maybe I would change my mind, who knows what will happen. I want to finish my education, learn more languages and start up my future. Here, I had planned to open a restaurant, but it's so corrupt, this country, more corrupt than my country. Believe me. I had planned to do some business. I thought I could stay here and rely on the business, you understand, instead of on a contract which you don't know if you'll have in six or seven months. But I've spoken with more than 100 people and not a single person gave me a positive comment about opening any business in Serbia, especially a restaurant. Especially since I'm not from Serbia, it makes it harder. It really, really opened my eyes. If I put my money into this, I won't get this money back. I'm going to go crazy, man. No way I'm going to open any business here. No. It's not going to happen. Not in Serbia. We'll see.

I met with Zaki again in August, back from a long week interpreting at Adaševci camp, sitting with a friend of his, another refugee from Iran, at a Coffee Dream in downtown Belgrade.

I wanted to meet with you again to tell you about the situation with my brothers. Since the Taliban took over in Afghanistan, everything for my family has become worse. My family left Laghman because of the Taliban recruitment, for Kabul. My two brothers had to leave and they crossed to Iran, but they were caught by the Iranian police and held in prison for one month, even though they are minors. They were deported back to Afghanistan. They tried a second time and reached up to Türkiye, but again they were caught by the police and held in a centre where no one was allowed to be in contact with them. After two months they were deported back to Afghanistan. The situation was even worse then. The Taliban closed the borders and they questioned my entire family, you know, the entire country is in the hands of a terrorist organization. They warned my family not to go anywhere, but my mother, she worked in a hospital and now she cannot work. So, the third time, my brothers had to leave again, anything for them to be safe. But the older one decided to stay, to be with my mom. The younger brother wanted to come and he went to Iran, then tried to cross into Türkiye, but they were kidnapped at the border. For four days they were held, tortured, beaten so badly. On the fourth day, my brother called my mom, crying blood. He said the kidnappers wanted $3,000 within the half hour. It was Friday, so all the banks were closed, but we managed to transfer the money through a bond system. My brother is in Tehran now, he's rehabilitating. When he went to jail he was 70 kilos. Now he's 50 kilos. And they killed two people in that jail. When I talked to my brother and he told me everything, I didn't know what to say. I just said, "I don't know what to tell you. But you're really strong."

I wanted to share this story with you because no one realizes, firstly, why we leave our countries. This is the reason that we leave our country. And all the time we've been judged for so many things we haven't done. We've been called terrorists, we've been called so many names, we've always been judged. No one ever recognizes a single difficulty that we've faced on our way. It's mania to leave your country illegally, and when you reach your destination, wherever it is, these people are judging you. They're misled by leaders, many websites. There are people who believe all the news and everything. I just wanted to tell you that it was not easy for us to leave our country. I left my country to save myself, to support my family, to be alive, to *not* kill other people. If you call me

these bad words, I don't care, but it's going to affect my psychological well-being. If you keep calling a person crazy, he will become crazy.

It was my choice to leave my country, so I have to adapt to this new society. And instead of encouraging me, they're saying stuff that's not true. People are going out here in Belgrade, demonstrating against migrants, calling them names. People never understand this part as well: There are people from this country who are getting paid to work with migrants. If there weren't migrants, these people wouldn't have jobs. It hasn't been easy for me in Serbia. Trying to find an apartment, making friends, talking with strangers. Sometimes you feel depressed and you want to talk with someone. You want to go out for a walk and people are looking at you in a bad way. It kills you. Your first mental response is, "what the fuck am I doing here?" They just don't see you as existing here.[79]

For example, now in Šid, no one recognized my ID card, can you believe? I went to Western Union to withdraw some money, I gave them my ID card, and she told me, "I don't like your ID card." *Ne sviđa mi se tvoja lična karta.* Come again? This is the ID card that's been given. You explain to them, you speak Serbian, you work here, you pay taxes, you do everything, but they just won't recognize you. That's the situation. There are many migrants who will stay in Serbia, but because of this situation, no one wants to stay in Serbia. When I spoke to my lawyer, Nikola, he told me that I have to do what's best for my life, for my future, but he also said that they're fighting for these things in Serbia. And if no one stays, there's no one to fight and no one to fight for. I'm stuck on those words.

But, I mean, I want to see my family. It's been seven years. I never got to see my father again. And I miss my brothers so much. I left my country to support them, support my family, so that my brothers could be safe and go to the university they wanted to go to and everything. And I feel like I failed. I don't know. If they don't make it easier, if they don't give us the proper papers and everything — which is the law in Serbia — I'm going to leave soon. I will definitely leave soon. My sister is in France. She got her papers and citizenship and everything, and I am still here. I have my shitty card which is

[79] Aleksandra Bobić, a psychologist at PIN, told me that refugees in Serbia suffer from numerous mental health stressors, chief among them feelings of helplessness, depression, and distress resulting from lack of integration structures and subjection to long periods of waiting and bureaucracy. A 2022 PIN report screened 80% of their respondents in Serbia (including asylum recipients and those still in transit) as acutely psychologically vulnerable.

not recognized. I'm no one. I just want to tell everybody, before you judge somebody, try to think about it first. Words can be too sharp. Once you're wounded by it, you cannot erase it.

For work, I'm going around to the camps, to Kikinda, Šid, Adaševci, Principovac. For now, it's been five days a week at Adaševci because they don't have any other translators. It's a small centre with a big number of migrants coming every day. The capacity is 500, but there's about 1,200. It would be good for you to see the other centers. You'll see the way they treat them. You'll realize these are unprofessional people hired by blind people to work with migrants. They don't know how to work with migrants. Either blind, or they're all relatives. That's how they got their jobs. They're not educated and they're working with migrants. Beat them, curse at them, slap them. Psychologically, you're killing those migrants. But they don't care about their mental health. We're talking about thousands of migrants. Children, adults. We're talking about those in need. No one actually wants to live in the camps because of the treatment, the food, the capacity. But nobody reports on this, what makes them leave.

If next year they make everything all right, I'll stay. If not, I will leave Serbia.

III. Another Way

Serbia's incorporation into the EU border regime has always had its tensions. In February 2016, as the humanitarian corridor approached its final months and more people-on-the-move found themselves 'stuck' in Serbia, then-Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić addressed press with a refrain that has become oft-repeated. Serbia "won't be a parking lot for migrants," he said, additionally rejecting the premise that Serbia had accepted money to hold the EU's borders.[80] Migration management in Serbia has thus hinged on the cross-currents of three often contradictory agendas: the EU's desire to secure its external borders; Serbia's desire to accede vis-à-vis the EU's agenda; and Serbia's simultaneous desire to maintain territorial integrity, appease ethnonationalist factions, and further its third-way politics between the Eastern and Western blocs. This latter point has led Serbia to seek close relationships with several governments blacklisted by the EU, which, in turn, has led to an exchange of ideas, capital, and people that often challenges the EU's own aims in the region. The most clear-cut clash of these agendas occurred when Serbia opened a visa-free regime for Iranian citizens in August 2017 — the first of its kind on the European continent, and a new pathway of movement that saw 15,000 Iranians visit Serbia before the policy's revocation (upon pressure from the EU) a year later.[81] Though most Iranians used Serbia as a transit stop, 190 Iranians applied for asylum in Serbia in 2018, the most of any nationality that year.[82] An examination of the asylum decision of one Iranian family shows how this visa-free regime created a safe, negotiable migration path for potential asylum-seekers — in direct contrast to the dynamics of the 'crisis,' and in turn showing how state policies can facilitate informed migration decisions and integration.

---

80 "PM: Serbia won't be a parking lot for migrants," *B92.net*, February 3, 2016, https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2016&mm=02&dd=03&nav_id=96915

81 "Serbia Ends Visa-Free Travel For Iranians, Citing 'Abuses' By Some," *RFE/RL,* October 12, 2018, https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-abolishes-visa-free-travel-iranians-citing-abuses-by-some-migrants-to-eu-/29539329.html

82 Nikola Kovačević, *Country Report: Serbia 2018,* (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2019): 7, https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/report-download_aida_sr_2018update.pdf.

The Rise and Fall of the 2017-2018 Iranian Visa-Free Regime

The Serbian government lifted visa requirements for Iranian citizens on August 23, 2017, following bilateral talks on ways to improve relations, investment, and tourism between the two countries.[83] Iran and Yugoslavia had been strong partners. The blueprint for an economic rapprochement between Iran and Serbia already existed, and was explicitly cited by then-Minister of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications Rasim Ljajić as Serbia moved to expand relations with Iran in 2017: "Iran was the former Yugoslavia's most important trading partner in Asia with an exchange of 800 million dollars … It's logical for there to be an economic interest in returning to a market of 80 million people."[84] The opening of the visa regime almost immediately led to an influx of Iranian travelers, which increased further in 2018 upon the introduction of Tehran-Belgrade flights and the increasing notoriety of the route.[85]

However, it quickly became clear that many of those arriving had no intention of returning to Iran. "[D]irect flights connecting Belgrade and Tehran have been coming into the country full but returning empty," wrote *Radio Free Europe*.[86] NGOs began receiving large numbers of Iranians seeking legal aid and other forms of assistance, some residing in camps, but most booking private accommodations in Belgrade's Savamala district, the main migrant hub of the city. That spring of 2018, Iranians as a percentage of Serbia's refugee and migrant population ranged between 25% and 35% — up from 1.6% in August 2017. Yet, Serbia was not the final destination for most; it was a launching pad. Upon interviewing 16 newly-arrived Iranians in 2018, Save the Children found that respondents were "nearly uniform" in believing that few of their compatriots would stay in Serbia, while fewer than 20% of the respondents said they themselves would stay in Serbia permanently.[87] Instead, Iranians used their time in Belgrade to rest,

[83] "Iranian, Serbian Parliament Speakers Discuss Closer Ties," *Tasnim News Agency*, August 6, 2017, https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2017/08/06/1484874/iranian-serbian-parliament-speakers-discuss-closer-ties; "Serbia expects more tourist arrivals from Iran," *The Tehran Times*, August 27, 2017. https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/416258/Serbia-expects-more-tourist-arrivals-from-Iran
[84] Dušan Komarčević, "Srbija i Iran u senci odnosa Vašingtona i Teherana," *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, August 2, 2017. https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-i-iran-odnos-vasingtona-i-teherana/28653040.html
[85] Bethany Ellis, *Iranian Refugees in Serbia: Drivers of Migration*. (Belgrade: Save the Children North West Balkans, 2018).
[86] "Serbia Ends Visa-Free Travel For Iranians."
[87] Ellis, *Iranian Refugees in Serbia,* 2018: The report notes that 43% said they would stay in Serbia, but that two-thirds of those 43% were doing so temporarily as they saved up resources to continue further to the EU.

save money, make contact with smugglers and other migrants, and, ultimately, decide whether or not they should attempt to cross irregularly into the EU.[88]

As monthly Iranian arrivals climbed above 300, the majority then continuing, Serbia received increasing pressure from the EU to regulate the movement. In July 2018, the European Commission chastised Serbia for its non-alignment with EU visa policies, stating: "Serbia needs to monitor and control the implications of the visa-free regime with third countries, especially with Iran. Serbia is encouraged to refrain from further diverging from the EU common visa policy with which it is expected to progressively align."[89] Finally, in October 2018, Serbia's Internal Affairs Minister Nebojša Stefanović announced the abolishment of the visa-free regime due to its "abuse."[90] News media reported that EU leaders had been ready to revoke the Union's visa-free regime for Serbian citizens had Belgrade not adjusted its Iranian regime.[91] A fourteen-month experiment came to a close, as Serbia found itself unable to juggle the central paradox of globalization under capitalism — how to facilitate the movement of capital yet restrict the movement of people — simultaneously with its EU accession campaign.

What's remarkable about the migration pathway facilitated by the 2017 Iranian visa-free regime is its simplicity and dignity. Gone were the packed voyages in dinghies across the Aegean, the brutal pushbacks at the Bulgarian border, the most dangerous sections of the Balkan route collapsed beneath the wings of a plane. Iranian arrivals were not always treated well or fairly by Serbian authorities, and, crucially, those who wanted to reach the EU still needed to rejoin the irregular route at Serbia's northern borders. However, the Iranian visa regime revealed something important: the only difference between a dangerous and a safe migration pathway is whether the state expends political will to turn the former into the latter. Neither does this produce an unmanageable crush of forward migration. Indeed, in 2018 Iranians were also the group most likely to utilize the IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) program, showing how state-created migration pathways produce breathing space for

[88] Ibid.
[89] European Commission, *Serbia 2018 Report: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions*, (Strasbourg: European Commission, 2018), https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2019-05/20180417-serbia-report.pdf#page4: 37.
[90] "Serbia Ends Visa-Free Travel for Iranians," *RFE/RL*.
[91] Ibid.

individuals to utilize legal institutional mechanisms and make an informed decision to continue, stay, or return.[92] Ultimately, this leads to a refugee population that is more settled and more amenable to a profound and purposeful integration. We can see all of these dynamics in the stories of Emil, Leila, and Sina: an Iranian family that's made their home in Serbia for the past four years.

Emil, Leila, and Sina

Though most Iranians stayed outside of the system during their time in Serbia, between September 2017 and October 2018 the MUP did issue 1,891 intention registration certificates to Iranians in the country, while in 2018 Iranians filed 190 asylum applications (more than half of those received that year).[93] Emil, Leila, and Sina were among them, three of some several hundred Iranians who arrived in September 2018. They had, however, been studying Belgrade from afar for months — its culture, its business scene, the feasibility of making a life there. Unhappily living in Istanbul, Emil had made a scouting trip to the Serbian capital in the summer. "I studied the economy, I studied the people," he said. "And I saw that everyone here was very welcoming." He discussed with Leila, and then he asked Sina, nearing completion of his studies in Budapest, to take a trip south. The city took some warming up to. "[First day], I was like, no way, I'm not gonna stay," Sina said. "Second day, I was like, maybe I will stay. Third day, I'll stay." Leila, too, was skeptical at first. "But after that," she said. "I saw the people are very calm, and it's a peaceful situation here." Ultimately, the family decided they could make it work — it was what was available. As it were, the family made their move in September, the next month the visa regime closed — and they were still in Belgrade.

The visa-free regime afforded Emil, Leila, and Sina an opportunity not afforded to most people-on-the-move — the ability to travel to a potential destination country, see whether they liked it, evaluate financial and other conditions, and ultimately make an informed decision to stay or return. All without consequence, without risk to life or livelihood. That this type of movement seems so contrary to the contemporary image of

[92] Ellis, *Iranian Refugees in Serbia*.
[93] Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, *Right to Asylum in the Republic of Serbia 2018*, (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2019), http://azil.rs/en/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Right-to-Asylum-2018.pdfp: 10

mass migration speaks to how few legal, safe pathways states have created globally for human mobility. Emil, Leila, and Sina, in fact, never intended to be asylum-seekers. They wanted to live with a "normal foundation," as Emil put it, and start a business. However, after the closure of the visa regime, they had no other path available to legalize their long-term status. In Iran, they'd known Christians and become curious about the religion. In Serbia, welcomed by the Orthodox Church, they'd converted. Coming from a country where apostasy is punishable by imprisonment or death, they declared asylum and received an uncommonly fast positive decision within seven months. Now, as residents of Serbia for nearly four years, Emil and Leila run a doughnut shop in Belgrade's Vračar neighborhood, and Sina is a business student at a private university with a long-term Serbian girlfriend and an online business venture with his friends selling footwear.

Class and Christianity

There are two particular dynamics worth exploring here that can help explain the comparative ease of Emil, Leila, and Sina's migration and their largely successful integration in Serbia, which can in part be extrapolated to general Iranian migration trends in Serbia. The first is the role of social class. Both Emil and Leila have advanced degrees, having worked as a businessman and professional academic in Iran, respectfully. In general, Iranian arrivals during the visa-free period were more affluent and highly educated than other migrant groups.[94] "You immediately recognise Iranians," Gordan Paunović, director of Info Park, told *The Guardian* in September 2018. "You see Syrians, Afghans, they all look poor. Suddenly you see a group of kids with backpacks, who look like they're on [a] school excursion." This level of affluence was also crucial for securing Sina's Schengen visa to study in Hungary — the possession of which, Sina supposes, also made Serbia's Asylum Office more likely to grant the family status.[95]

In this way, as the family's financial well-being opened up new pathways of mobility, such greater mobility in turn allowed for the greater accumulation of wealth

[94] Ellis, *Iranian Refugees in Serbia*, 2018.
[95] Hungary, like most Schengen countries, requires visa applicants to provide proof of financial means, as well as other class markers such as travel insurance, health insurance, prearranged accommodation, etc.

and education, and so on. Emil says he lost many of his assets to seizures from the Iranian government, but notwithstanding the family retained the means to rent an apartment upon arriving and a business space one year later, and have since purchased an investment property in the luxury Belgrade Waterfront developments. The opening of their business, a doughnut shop in a popular neighborhood made possible by the family's already stable financial situation, has been key to their integration. A 2018 UN report on refugees' social integration in Europe found employment to be the "most important factor securing the integration of migrants," not just from a financial standpoint, but in "enabling more informal contact with society" and building interpersonal connections.[96] Both Emil and Leila noted how their business has led to their recognition in the community, while Sina said he believes his parents "had enough money to not work actually … but they really wanted to blend in with the society." Notably, the business venture is not commensurate with the couple's qualifications, Leila's in particular — an experience that the UN report noted often causes discouragement and disappointment among refugees. Nonetheless, class and education have afforded the family flexibility, however muted by Serbia's economy — forced, as is common for migrants across the world, into jobs well below the pay and expertise of those possessed in their origin countries.

The other element is Christianity. Jafar and Mihail, too, are Iranian converts to the religion — the five participants among an estimated half million to one million of their countrymen to have done the same. Iranians who arrived in Serbia under the visa-free regime, NGOs and researchers have reported, primarily said they were Christian converts or of another persecuted category, such as the LGBTQ+ community or political opposition.[97] The severity of punishment for these groups, converts particularly, creates an urgent and visible protection need that states have difficulty rejecting without violation of non-refoulement. States have thus grumbled over perceived "fake" converts, and have found creative ways to reject cases predicated on this supposed golden ticket

[96] Mihaela Robila, *Refugees and Social Integration in Europe* (New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) Division for Social Policy and Development, 2018). https://www.un.org/development/desa/family/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2018/05/Robila_EGM_2018.pdf: 10-11.
[97] Ellis, *Iranian Refugees in Serbia: Drivers of Migration*, 2018; Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "'Iran was like hell': the young refugees starting new lives in Serbia," *The Guardian*, September 28, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/28/iran-refugees-europe-eu-serbia-belgrade-asylum-seekers

to asylum. However, European judiciaries have rightly ruled that it's affiliation with Christian institutions, not the depths of one's faith, that places even the most lackluster convert in danger.[98] Many Iranian refugees encounter missionaries in Serbia and other transit countries, Orthodox as well as evangelical Protestant actors, who work purposefully among populations in mobility and speak to a certain spiritual harm inflicted by Iran's all-encompassing theocracy, which inhibits most individual agency, personal expression, and the development of independent social relations, especially between genders.[99] As such, the Iranian convert is likely to order pull factors differently, safety above livelihood, freedom of expression above all, which might make them more amenable to staying in a country like Serbia, which fulfills these criteria even if it lacks a strong economy or familial and diasporic connections. Churches are also a bulwark of support for asylees: they provide a community, can cooperate on an asylee's case, and serve as a needed guide for integration into society. Nonetheless, the rejection rate in Serbia for Iranians on grounds of religion is still quite high and the Asylum Office's practice is inconsistent.[100] In general, Iranian Christians are not likely to receive asylum, though Iranians who receive asylum are likely to be Christian. Mirroring the ethno-religious nationalist orientation of post-Yugoslav Serbian regimes, the Asylum Office appears to have shown a greater predilection to Christian religious persecution claims before such claims became common grounds during the Iranian period, granting status to an Egyptian Copt in 2012, a Tunisian Christian in 2014, and a Kazakh Christian in 2015.[101]

Emil and Leila's testimonies make obvious the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church as their most important entry point into Serbian society. For Emil, St. Sava Temple in Vračar became his "place for talking with other people about the culture of Serbia … to learn more about Christ, Christian rules, the Bible." Leila, who received a master's in theology in Iran, similarly described "religion [as] a good way to make connections with the people of a country. Maybe I could go to the disco … but for me, I

[98] In 2019, immigration courts in the United Kingdom cited violent passages from the Bible to claim an Iranian convert was not a true Christian, as the convert had previously described Christianity as "peaceful." See: Anna Schaverien, "Rejecting Asylum Claim, U.K. Quotes Bible to Say Christianity Is Not 'Peaceful'," *The New York Times,* March 21, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/21/world/europe/britain-asylum-seeker-christianity.html
[99] As an example, see: Nicky Andrews. "Seeing the Iranian church grow...in Serbia." *OM*. October 16, 2018. https://www.om.org/en/news/seeing-iranian-church-growin-serbia
[100] Kovačević, "Regular procedure."
[101] Ibid.

prefer the church." Baptized by an associate of their landlord, both partners painted their relationship with their *kum* and *kuma*, their godparents, as one of unmatched and continual importance. Sina, who described himself as irreligious, nonetheless said he accepted Christianity as a means to "respect [this] society by just saying I am a part of this." The family shows a strong inclination toward what Ebru Oztürk terms conversion as "home-building," a strategy for reclaiming "ontological security" through accepting and meaningful relationships with religious communities in the host country.[102] Seemingly, this has created a stable social base for Emil, Leila, and Sina, who expressed confidence in their relationships with Serbs as ones that were mutual, supportive, and genuine.

"I want to live like other people:" Futures amid no path to citizenship

Despite their class, religion, education, community standing, and status as business owners, Emil and Leila still express a certain degree of restlessness, a predisposition to continued mobility, stemming from the same issue as all other interviewees: the non-issuance of passports, citizenship, and proper identification documents. For the family, this is not so much a matter of free travel. They still possess Iranian passports, and Sina has been able to obtain Schengen visas to visit Austria with his girlfriend. Rather, it is a question of whether they can say, truly, permanently, that they belong to Serbian society — whether, before its eyes, they will be deemed worthy of the same rights as its citizens.

When I first met Emil and Leila, in March and June 2022, respectively, their outlooks on the future in Serbia were predominantly positive, though both did mention their frustrations with the identity document issue. Emil wondered why he couldn't vote. "I'm a free man," he said. "I want to live like other people." Leila noted how authorities' lack of familiarity with her refugee ID card had led to hours of airport questioning even when traveling on her Iranian passport to visit family in Türkiye. Hers was the more skeptical perspective. "I'm not hopeful about the future … I want to have equal

[102] Ebru Öztürk, "Finding a new home through conversion: the ontological security of Iranians converting to Christianity in Sweden," *Religion, State & Society* 50, no. 2 (2022): 224-239. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09637494.2022.2061828

treatment, not as asylees, with problems everywhere." Canada beckoned faintly, her brother there and, Leila believed, a better social safety net for retirees. When I visited the couple at their doughnut shop in July, however, it was Emil who had soured. He'd spoken recently at a UNHCR conference about his worries: the anxiety that comes with waiting for the renewal of status every five years, how he can't gain equal footing with Serbian business owners. "I will wait because Sina is in university … When Sina is graduated, we should be very seriously thinking about this case." He looked out and over a customer-less storefront, Belgrade emptied in the summer, gone to Greece, to Montenegro, to places Iranians can't travel without a visa. Only Leila offered a small counterweight. "For us, we would have to start again everything. It's better for us to stay here and think about how to solve our problems. Because everywhere we go, has some problems. Wait."

In the essay collection *Waiting*, anthropologist Ghassan Hage describes that titular state of mind as something tying us to life, imbuing everyday experience with meaning and stakes. When possessed in anticipation of something concrete, chosen, and eventually delivered, it's a currency well-spent and a reflection of cultural norms well-followed. When hinged upon something maddening, actively withheld, against which the hopes of the waiter are repeatedly dashed and, crucially, through which the waiter can see the resolution of others' waiting, there emerges a sense of "existential immobility" — the feeling that one's life will not and just cannot progress.[103] Without a pathway to permanent residence and citizenship, even the most successfully integrated of Serbia's refugees will remain in paradox. Existentially immobile, yet "stuck in mobility." Nowhere to turn, save for anywhere else.

[103] Ghassan Hage, "Waiting out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality," in *Waiting*, edited by Ghassan Hage, (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2009): 96.

Emil

Nationality: Iranian
Gender: Male

Age at time of interview: 55
Age at time of migration: 50

Status: Refugee in Serbia
Current Residence: Belgrade, Serbia

First Interview: March 21, 2022
Second Interview: July 26, 2022

My name is Emil. I selected this name while still in my country, because this name is a Christian name and I wanted to change my religion, from Islam to Christianity. So when I came to Serbia, I selected a European name in the church, and I changed my name to Emil.

I am 55-years-old, Iranian, and I have lived in Belgrade, Serbia, for about four years, where my family has a doughnut shop. I was born in Tehran and I lived in Tehran. For eight years, I taught mathematics in middle school and high school, but when I was about 30-years-old, I left my job and started as an entrepreneur. I ran a steel business. As you know, in Iran you are up against many problems in the government system and the economy. All of these conditions impacted my life and I couldn't continue like that. First, I decided to change my son's residence to a country in Europe. I was searching Europe and I had the opportunity to send my son to Budapest. So at first, he went to Hungary and started high school. He was about 17-years-old. My wife, Leila, and my son, Sina, went there, but my wife could not stay in that place because she needs a visa. My son had a long-term visa, but my wife only for one month. So my wife came back to my country, where I was still working, and I saw I didn't have any good

motivation to keep working in my country because of all of these things. I don't like the government system and I cannot have freedom in my country. I spoke to my family, my countrymen. I had enough. I was really nervous about my life. As you know, many Iranian people, they live in the USA, go to all of these countries, Canada, Europe. I think, really, one of the main reasons is inside, in my religion. In Iran, most people are Muslims. My parents were Muslim. I think this religion doesn't create good conditions for the country. The religion, as a symbol, is not good for life. The religion alone — it will be fine. But it's the combination with the government, in your life, that you should be following all these rules. I decided to change.

First, my wife and I moved to Istanbul. I didn't have any idea what to do when I left my country, but we could get to Istanbul by plane. We left Tehran in January 2018. I was in Istanbul seven months. Leila, six. I understood this place, it's not a good place. I think it's the same as my country. The government system doesn't push people to attach to their religion, but the mentality of the people is Islam. I think I cannot reach my conclusion here. Türkiye, it is not my aim. I decided to change. I didn't have a large selection. I cannot select, basically, with the visa. When I went to the U.S. Embassy, I saw maybe I can't take a visa for the USA or Canada. But I can reach some place. I studied about some of the countries that are visa-free. At that time: Georgia, Armenia. And for one year, the Iranian people had the opportunity to travel without a visa to Serbia.

So when I lived in Istanbul, I decided one time to travel to Serbia and learn about Serbia, in the summer. Leila and I went for three or four days. When I went to Belgrade the first time, I studied the economy, I studied the people. I understood that people can communicate with me. Most of the people, they're educated, they like to speak the English language. The second language in Serbia is English. As you know, for starting your life, the language is very important. In Türkiye, unfortunately, most people could not speak good English. Here, not everyone is professional in their English, but I can have a connection with the ordinary people. And I saw that everyone here was very welcoming. Three or four days I spent in Belgrade and I understood this place: it's good. The economy, as you know, the buildings, the city is not a very new city. It's very old, and the

economy, it's in the middle, maybe it's bottom of middle. But the people, they are okay with communication. It's a democratic country, they don't push people for the religion, for the politics. When I compare with other countries, I think here it's good. The people, it's half and half. Half of the people, their mentality is close to the East, and the other half it's close to the West. It's a good situation for democracy.

I returned to Istanbul and spoke with my wife. I went to my son and asked him one time to go to Belgrade, since he was close, in Budapest. I wanted to know his idea about the place. He wasn't loving Budapest, and he drove down to Belgrade and said, "it's better than Budapest." He said in Budapest, people are not really warm and he was bored. He could not make good relationships with the Hungarian people. He was a foreigner there, maybe he had some difficulty because of that. So we decided, he would come here, to Belgrade. We came back again, my wife and I, one by one, without the visa, in September 2018. And then, after one month, they closed the visa-free regime, and we were here. I didn't want to go to the police officers, be an asylum-seeker. I wanted to live here, with a normal foundation. But with the rules of Serbia, this was not enough for me as a foreigner. When I went to the police, I said I have a problem because now I am here, I want to continue my life here and if I go back to my country it's quite dangerous because now I've converted from Islam to another religion.

I had studied about the Christians in my country. I had a friend, an Armenian friend, and sometimes we went to the church in Tehran.[104] We spoke about it. They didn't invite me to join as a Christian, but he was a very good man. He had good ethics. And the religion and the policy, they're not combined together. As you know: Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan. Most of the countries in the world, when they believe seriously in Islam, unfortunately they don't have a democracy. They have dictator conditions. They have the rules, they push, all the time they push, push, push. In other countries, it's separated, it's okay. But when it's not, I hate it. So when I came to Serbia, I tried to educate myself about Serbian culture, Serbian religion. Little by little, I understood here. I understood that most people are Christian but they're Orthodox. I accepted. I accepted Orthodoxy because I believe all of these Christian denominations are the same, there's not a large

[104] The historical Christian minority in Iran, predominantly of Armenian origin, is more-or-less allowed to worship as birthright Christians. However, conversion from Islam to Chrisitanity in Iran is criminalized, as is Christian missionary work.

difference between them. And my wife, she has a Master of Science in theology from Tehran, so when we were married, she helped me learn about other religions. When we moved here, we had a lot of free time, so we were going to St. Sava Temple two times a week, three times a week. As you know, it's a very good place for talking with other people about the culture of Serbia and many things. We wanted to learn more about Christ, Christian rules, the Bible. And during our last interview for the asylum process — I don't know how, maybe security had a hidden camera — they had this picture of us in the church. We were very surprised because we didn't know they were searching about this, maybe they wanted to make sure we were actually converted. But they accepted our condition very quickly because of this, I think.

The first time I came here, I had a private lawyer who helped me rent an apartment. We had a good connection and it was very easy for my family and me, for rapport with the police officer because he was Serbian and the lawyer was Serbian. [That first visit], we talked with him about residence in Serbia. When we came back to Serbia, unfortunately he said that it is not normal, if you want to take residence in Serbia you should return to Iran. From Türkiye, it is not possible to take a visa for Serbia for long-term residence. We started with him, and then we changed to a lawyer for asylum-seekers because the other lawyer was not a professional in this case. We found Marko from BCHR, he's a very good lawyer for asylum-seekers. During the asylum procedure, they emphasized that it would be good for us to stay one night in one of the camps. But before that, they sent us to someplace near Niš, I don't remember the name. For three nights we went to Niš, but they allowed my family to go to a hotel, so we didn't spend any time in the camp there. And when they called me, I went to the camp and negotiated with the officer that I wanted to change my residence because I had an apartment in Belgrade. "Why are you keeping us in this place? We have money for this life, we don't need help from the government system or the UNHCR. We don't need money for life in Niš or Belgrade." But no, they pushed us for three nights in Niš. And one time near Belgrade, a police officer said to me, "it's better to stay in this camp for one night." I said, "okay, for one night, but as you know I have an apartment in Vračar and I will not make any cost for you, we should go back to our home, we are not in prison." I

said, “okay, you can decide. If you don’t like it, okay. If you don’t like you can reject it.” But they accepted and we went back home and continued our life, waiting for the answer from the police officer. Within seven months, they had granted refugee status to my family. Very quick, very rare for it to be so quick.

You know, I am an entrepreneur. When I came here, I understood I could not compete with the companies here because I am borrowing a lot, I don’t have enough money. I put my assets in my country. I left there. I had a contract with the bank, bank of Iran, and now that I’ve left my country, I cannot control my assets. As you know, the economy in my country — it’s not private, it’s not separate. They came to get my home. They seized all of my assets, home, factory, office, all are now involved in this case and I cannot access this money in my country. I selected a lawyer in my country, he defended the case but I don't know yet what is their conclusion. But here I decided I should be starting a business, supporting my family. We have good experience, my family: my wife, me and my son. We studied about the businesses, small businesses in this place, near my apartment. My home, it's very close to here, less than 50 meters. I saw which places were closing, like this one old-generation shop. I rented and I renovated and studied about some of the businesses. And I focused on the businesses of doughnuts in the USA.

At first, I employed four students part-time, minimum of six hours-a-week, maximum of 20 hours-a-week, because I cannot really speak the Serbian language. And we also hired one worker who is a professional in decoration and had experience with doughnuts. We understood from some videos on the internet what was their favorite, the Serbians’ favorite, with the chocolate, with the jam. We understood they most like the Boston Cream, with the full filling. We combined her knowledge and our knowledge of the American doughnut. One time we had a problem with the raw material from the shop, I complained to that company, they transferred me to the top of the company and I saw that they have a kitchen, a professional kitchen for teaching. And I said, “is it possible for us to come here again, to learn how to make doughnuts?” They said to me, “it is possible and you are welcome.” And until today we have a connection with them. I opened the business soon after we got asylum, about one year after we arrived,

September to September. As you know, all businesses are in a weakened condition when compared to previous times, before COVID-19. But now it's not bad, the conditions are normal. I think, so far, we have succeeded.

I don't want to say that I know all things, but I feel I know many things about Serbian culture. I think what we decided, to start with the church, it was really good. We came to learn about the foods, the thinking, the relationship with family, other things. And Serbian language. The language is the first thing, if you move to another country, it's very important that you should learn. If you move to the USA, seriously you should be a student, learn the English language. In other countries, it's the same. It's the first element. Someone who wants to live in Serbia should learn the Serbian language. My wife and son started learning Serbian at the *filološki fakultet*, the philology faculty — my son was educated for three semesters at that place, and my wife for one semester. And then the UNHCR started a class for us, a classroom for the Serbian language. I participated in that place for three semesters with my wife, us together. We have a diploma for A1 and A2.

I think that when someone knows the English language, it's better for us, for the communication, and we can learn more and more when we have a common language. If someone cannot speak the English language, for the business it's okay. The business language, maximum 200 words. It's enough for the communication, for the business, it's enough. But then if they see we are foreigners, they want to speak more and more and we have a problem. My son speaks Serbian well, and he can speak English very well. He has daily communication with foreign friends and Serbian friends, and they have this good facility for learning two languages, improving them. My son is a student at the private university, which the UNHCR helped him arrange. Sometimes also he has an online business for the shoes, Nike, Adidas, the new models. Sometimes I ask my son, because, I don't know — in Serbia, the USA, the parents are always thinking about the children. My country, it's the same. Some other countries, maybe it's different. But I ask him, "would you like to move to another country?" As you know, he had a Schengen visa for one year, and then he applied the next year, so two times he had a Schengen visa. And I said to him, "we can go to Germany, Austria, it depends on you, we can move there

if you'd like, live there together. I can do it, and if they don't permit it and I have to stay here, we're very close to the European border and I can pass." After two months, three months, he said, "no, here is good." And again I asked him, "do you like living in Serbia? Only for your girlfriend?" And he says, "no, because my girlfriend has lived in Salzburg, Austria, and now she's here, but she could go there if she wanted." But he says, "no, if I move to another country, I'll lose what I've made. I want to focus on my life here." I think he is satisfied with life here.

And my wife, the same. When she compares Serbia with my country, she says here is better for the religion, for the government system, everything. When you compare Serbia with my country, absolutely here is better. We had the chance — maybe, maybe — we had the chance to move to Canada because my brother-in-law lives there, in Toronto. He is already a rich man in that place and he could support us, we could move there. And for asylum-seekers, maybe the conditions in that place are better, for job vacancies and other things. I negotiated with my wife. "Would you like to move to another country? Would you like to try this?" She said, "no, here it's good, the economy is reasonable." Now we've bought an apartment down on the Belgrade Waterfront. It's very nice, near to the river. In the future, we are thinking maybe to change to that place. They're saying maybe in the next two years it's finished. We are working here. The people are very warm and welcoming to my business. They don't have something against my business. "They are from Iran, we don't like buying from foreigners" — no, no. They are very normal people. Maybe in this place, I don't know. This is Vračar, maybe in Dorćol, too, the center, the people are okay, they don't have a grudge against the foreigner. I think they have many immigrant people here. They have racist people, too. But it's a small number. We cannot say that most of the people, they are racist, no. Compared to other countries, here they are not. We think they give a warm welcome to the immigrants here. I think maybe my culture is close to this culture, I don't know. We are very friendly with the people here.

We have only one family of Iranian people who we are friends with. Our other friends are Serbian. As you know, in the rules and Serbian culture, they have the godparents. *Kum, kuma*. It's very important. When we wanted to be granted into the

Orthodox Church, the church told us, “you should find a *kuma*.” The owner of my apartment is Italian, but her consultant for the apartment was a Serb. I had lived here for about one month, and I said to her, “is it possible for you to come to the church and accept me as my *kuma*?” She said, “why not?” That was very surprising for me. And then I understood, the *kuma*, it’s a very important person in your life. She or he, they are responsible for supporting you. And many times, she asks me, “do you have a problem? I can help you, I want to help you.” Oh, my God. They really, really support us. You don’t need this, but as a condition for becoming friendly with Serbian culture, I think it’s relevant. All of the Serbs, they have their partner, their kids, and their *kum* or *kuma*. When they are a child, their godparents are chosen by the parents. And when they want to marry in the church, again they have the *kum* or *kuma*, maybe the old one, maybe a new one. It’s a very good thing. They are like a chain. Chain family. Excellent. One day, they invited us to a party in their home. They had a very small place for their life, but all across the New Year, they invited us, and then every month after that. Now, she’s not a consultant for the owner of my apartment. But she’s still thinking all the time about us. She’s choosing to support our family.

I talk with my brother-in-law every day. Every week, three times, four times, I have a connection with him. And I talk with him about the business here, about the life here, about the connection with the Serbian people. He says, “I’ve lived in Toronto for more than 30 years and I don’t have this connection.” As you know, 500,000 Iranian people live in Toronto, all in Toronto, and in Los Angeles, it’s the same. My brother-in-law and his family, they have Canadian friends, American friends. But we are thinking, we are family with the Serbian people. Really! We have a very good relationship. If we have a problem, they support us. I love this place. Everyone here, they say that they're *komšija*. Neighbors. All of the *komšija*, they want to help us. Every day, they ask, “are you good? How are things, good? Are you satisfied? No problems?” I say, “no problem.” They want to speak with us. They want to learn my mother language, Farsi, and make a connection with us. It's nice. Excellent. I'm so satisfied. When compared with Canada and USA, I know, the economy here is a limit. I know. But after 55 years, for me, this condition, it's so nice, it's so excellent. My thinking and my son's, we're thinking very differently. I’m

close to being a *penzioner*, retired. I think this condition is good for spending the retirement. So excellent. I have many friends when I am walking in the street, so many people know me. I changed my barber about two months ago. When I sat in that chair, at that barber, she said to me, "oh, my friend!" They said, *domaći krofna*! Homemade doughnuts! "*Krofna* man! How are you?" I say, "thank you." They're very warm.

One thing that is not good. Here, they don't have good rules for legal aid. In Germany, when someone has lived there for three years, and they make money and they don't need support from the government system, they grant a passport to them. But here they don't. I don't know what to do with this case, because I don't like to use my Iranian passport. Without a Serbian passport, we don't have a guarantee of good treatment. And sometimes, when we need to go to the Iranian embassy, really we don't trust them, we don't like to make a connection with them. Sometimes it's good, other times they are very bad.

It's not about travel to other European countries. For my family, it's not a problem. We have a good budget. We can pass. Now we can travel to other countries. My son, two times after being granted refugee status, traveled to Austria. He can get the visa very easily. Last month, I went to the Italian embassy, and I asked, "this is my document, would you accept me for a visa?" They consulted and said, "yes." I wanted to participate in this exhibition. I changed my mind about going, but you see, I think for traveling to other countries, it's very easy. But I'm not sure. I expected the Serbian government to understand my condition, to believe my condition. The lawyer said to me, "for the next five years, you're granted short-term residency in Serbia." But I am looking for a more ordinary condition. I would like to participate in the vote. Why can't I? After five years, six, why can I not join a political party? Why? I'm a free man. I want to live like other people. This case, and these rules in Serbia, they're not very clear. We are just looking for citizenship. Only this.

In this conversation, the *kum* and *kuma* and the chain family, that was very important. We understood it was very important to join in this. Some of the asylum-seekers, maybe they don't know about this because their case is different. Sometimes I think we were wise to join the community. We selected Orthodoxy, I was

thinking all of the Christian models are the same. In their mind, they're thinking that Orthodox is different than Catholic. It's the same! All of them. Some of the rules, demands, change. But it's one thing, with the same God. It's all the same. And most of people here, as you know — before, they were in socialism, communism. So the people are open-minded. It's very different than Türkiye. We are very close to the European people and they travel there and to the EU, and the politics are different. I cannot compare here and Türkiye. So different. I'm thinking, it is very good here.

For the second interview, I met with Emil and his wife, Leila, together at their shop in Vračar. Emil spoke more about the passport and identity card issue.

About the passport, I've waited for a long time. I have a challenge because we don't have direct contact with the MUP. We have the connection with the UNHCR and BCHR, the main offices for refugees and asylum-seekers. Many times I'm talking with the lawyer in that place and the staff. As you know, they are Serbian, but they don't know how to help do this, to reach permanent residence. They say, "you have permanent residence in Serbia." But five years is not permanent. It's temporary residence. A long-time, yes, it's not six months, it's not one year. But five years, it has a limit. Maybe the MUP will make a decision not to continue this situation for us, we don't know.

We push, every day, every time when I find the opportunity for talking. For example, in the conference of the Game Changers by the UNHCR. I was a member of this conference for entrepreneurs. And I said, "really, I am so nervous because I don't have an equal situation with the businessmen in Serbia." The businessmen in Serbia have credit in the bank, they are very easily traveling to other countries. I told you, I was one time rejected [for a visa] from the U.S. embassy. I'm thinking, my passport, it's very important for this thing. Because when I compare with the other bakeries in Serbia, I think we have better potential.

[When my Iranian passport expired], for one year, I didn't go to get the passport from the Iranians, I'm afraid to go to the embassy. For one year. I know, for us it's very different. And all of the refugees, they're afraid of going to the Iranian embassy. [The

staff there] are very kind, they are different because when they move to other countries, their thinking is so different than the mentality of the Iranian head government system. For example, two or three staffers in the embassy of Iran, they married in Serbia, for a long time they have lived in Serbia, they have children in Serbia. But I am afraid for one year. And I'm thinking about Leila. Leila was so nervous, so nervous, because she cannot go see her family. For one year I waited. Maybe we can push the government system in Serbia. Unfortunately, BCHR said to us, this task is impossible.

In Serbia — for the second time I say to you — if we continue to have this situation in Serbia, we are thinking to go to another country. We are thinking. The situation is not good. The identity in Serbia. We are waiting. I am thinking, maybe two years I will wait because Sina is in university. And after two years, when Sina is graduated, we should be very seriously thinking about this case. I hope that the Serbian government changes this procedure and they grant us passport and identity cards that means we are in Serbia, that we are active in Serbia, that we are honestly working in Serbia, we bought a home in Serbia. Please. If you have an opportunity like me, you will say my opinion about this case.

[Fewer] than 50 persons, like us. Like us. They granted 200, but I am sure that 150 people have moved to other countries. Switzerland, Sweden, Norway. And they move to these countries because the rules of the country are fair for the migrant. The procedure for granting asylum [in Serbia] is very, very hard. More than 4,000 or 5,000 searching for asylum in Serbia, less than 200 [granted]. BCHR told me. Less than 200 granted here. Canada is different. Thinking about this. We are an old generation, and the weather, and it's close to Istanbul and meeting with family. It's a good position. We have basically good conditions for living here. Because we have the business, we are active here, all things are good. Why should we have to change to Canada? But when we don't have an identity card, maybe we change our decision. So sorry, I talk a lot about this. Leila?

Leila

Nationality: Iranian
Gender: Female

Age at time of interview: 50
Age at time of migration: 45

Status: Refugee in Serbia
Current Residence: Belgrade, Serbia

First Interview: May 26, 2022
Second Interview: July 26, 2022

I am Leila, from Iran. I'm 50, born in 1972, and I grew up in Tehran. My family. Some live in Tehran, others in Toronto, others in Melbourne. Iranian families are scattered all over the world because of the economy, political situation, and other things. I studied theology at the University of Tehran, and after that, I did a master's in the history of Iran. I studied philosophy, different religions, different poems — that was my favorite. For 20 years, I wrote encyclopedias about Iran and Islam. It was good for me, because I worked in a big library with different kinds of original sources. That centre in Iran now, I think, has 21 or 23 books published. When I came to Serbia, I tried to work in my field of study, but I don't have any relations with people at Belgrade University, and I prefer to work and make money because life is very difficult. When someone decides to change their country, everything becomes a challenge, like a revolution.

At first, I left for my son, Sina, because I wished — no, I decided — to create a good, stable life for him. I could not do it in Iran, because of everything, the political situation and all. Everything, every day is changing, and not for the better. I was with Sina in Budapest, but just for a short time. I wasn't happy with the people in Budapest. But if I decided to go to Canada, another country in the West, in Europe, I would have a problem. Because of that, I had to go back to Iran, get a visa, and after that, go to

another country. I went back to Iran and after that, with my husband, went to Türkiye. But we weren't thinking about staying there for life. No, no, never. Because Türkiye is not a place for freedom and things, no, no. Good for a little time, for enjoying, for the weather and other things, but not enough for a long time. We decided upon Serbia because at that time Iranians didn't need a visa. Because of that Emil and I found a good situation and came here. But if it had not been possible for us to come here, maybe we would have gone to Budapest and after that decided to go to another country.

When I first came to Belgrade, I didn't like it. I didn't see something wrong in the people, no, no. I only saw the building and the streets, and I saw that it's very, very old, that it's not modern. I came from a very busy, modern town. But after that, I saw that the people are very calm, and it's a peaceful situation here. Now, when I see the streets, I don't see the buildings, I don't see the things that the first time I saw. No, I see the good things. For example, the friendly treatment of people and that I can walk without any problems, without worrying about the hijab or other things. Freedom, yes. Freedom is very important.

In Iran, I studied about all of the religions a little bit. I respect all of the religions, all of the religions are good, all of the religions say one thing. One message in different languages. For example, I can speak in the Islamic language, and another speaks in the Buddhist language. But the followers are different. I recognize that at this time many followers of the Islamic religion in the world are not reasonable. In Iran, our best friends were Christian. Very peaceful people. And when I came here, I saw the followers of this religion. After two or three months here, we made good contact with the church here. Everyone was very calm, relaxed, normal. Religion is a good way to make connections with the people of a country. Maybe I could go to the disco! For other people, this might be a good way to make relationships with people. But for me, I prefer the church. My family in Iran, they are Muslim, but they are okay with my change. They know I am Leila, and they don't have any problems with me. This is the reason for my conversion to Christianity, but I don't know for Sina or my husband.

For our family, the asylum procedure was easy for us. I don't know, it's different for every person here. But for us, it was very easy. The police saw that we can live here

without any help financially. And they also saw in our passports, in Sina's passport, visas for Budapest, and that we had begun to seriously learn the Serbian language. We have certificates for A2 and B1 level, and it was very hard, we struggled for that. First, we had a private lawyer, who helped us with appointments and sending our documents to the police. Then we had a lawyer from BCHR, Marko, very professional, who helped us for the interview, what we must say. He helped us a lot.

After receiving asylum, we started the business here. It's very different from my work in my country. All of my life, I had worked as staff. I didn't know anything about business but my husband is a businessman. I wanted to help. I'm at the shop every day and I'm happy because I like the work. When our business has a problem, that is not important. Every business has ups and downs, it's normal. The idea for the doughnuts was Sina's suggestion. At first, we wanted to have a shop selling building materials. But one day Sina said, "no, I saw one shop in the centre and saw that the Serbian people like doughnuts." So Emil and I studied and studied, and then we decided to try it. At first, one person from a *pekara*, bakery, helped us, but that was not enough. So Emil and I went to a factory and studied and trained there and learned how to prepare the doughnuts. In all of my life, I hadn't prepared one cake! My business in this country is so different. My role is very important. I work in production, I prepare the doughnuts and buy the ingredients, and I stay in the shop and have relations with the customers. I'm working on every case except the financial. That's Emil and our accountant.

I have good relations with the Serbian people, no problems with them. I can speak enough of the language, sentences connected to our work. Sina and I went to the philology *fakultet*, me for one course, and Sina for two. And after that, the UNHCR made very good Serbian language classes for us, and Emil and I went together. It's a hard language, with my age, everything. All of the people I have met are very friendly. Maybe Sina sometimes has problems, but I don't know, in every country you will find such people. People here don't have any problem with asylum, religion, if I say I am Muslim, if I say I am Christian. Our best friends, our *kum* and *kuma*, are Serbian. All of the people near us are our friends. For example, one day I didn't work, I didn't come here, and all of the people were searching for me, asking, "are you good, is everything okay?" Very good,

very polite people. I think Sina is very satisfied, too. He has a very good girlfriend. I like her so, so much. Very friendly, very polite. We live together here as a family, and for me that is very important. Some people can live separately, it depends, but for me, no. And Sina, too, likes living together.

There is only one big problem for us. The passport and the identity cards. It is difficult for me and for Sina it is the worst. Not everyone recognizes our cards, and when Sina goes somewhere and that place wants Sina to show his card — it looks really bad! For example, I've gone three times to Türkiye to visit family. Every time I've come back to Serbia I've had a problem, because the police don't recognize this identity card. You made these cards! You don't recognize it? Every time, I stay for one hour in the airport, in Türkiye and in Serbia. I have to travel on my Iranian passport, but it's hard because it's sanctioned. So many people here, after getting asylum, have this problem and they don't stay here.

We work here, we pay tax, everything, but we cannot live as Serbians. If we had proper identity cards, it would be very easy. In other countries, if a person stays for three years, four years, and they pay tax, after that they get their legal situation resolved as residents. Because of this, I'm not hopeful about the future. I don't know when this problem will end. My husband is very hopeful. I am not negative, but I am thinking, when? I want to travel. It's not good that every time I go, I have to stay for over an hour in the airport. The identity card and passport are very important for us. For the future, I've learned not to have many expectations. But I want to solve our problem with residency here. To be as a free person, to have equal treatment — not as asylees, with problems everywhere. Nothing else.

If we went elsewhere, maybe I would prefer to live with my brother in Toronto. He went when he was very young, around 16, though he did come back to Iran and then left again for Canada. I talk with him about life in Serbia and in Canada. In some cases, I prefer here. After 15 years, I have changed. I no longer like the big cities. When I've had experience in both, the small city for me is better. I liked the modern cities, but now, this is very peaceful for me. When I speak with my brother, he tells me he only goes

shopping in these big centres, everything clumped together. Here, I can walk in the streets, I can go shopping like this and I prefer it.

But when we talk about retirement. Wow! They have so many things for retired persons, but here, no, here is very poor in this case. The old men and old women have a very difficult situation in old age. But in Canada, in old age, people can rest, everything is relaxed. But here, the old people have to stress about money, about everything. They don't have enough money to have dreams, to buy some things for their grandchildren. That is not good. In that case, I prefer Canada. Maybe in the future, we will stay in Serbia, maybe no. For now, I am satisfied. But I don't feel obligated toward anything.

For the second interview, I met with Leila and her husband, Emil, together at their shop in Vračar. I asked her what had changed in her life.

I think every day is new. But historical somethings that have affected me in my life, are another thing. In this time, in the summer, all of the people go *na more*, to the sea! And we don't have enough customers. It's difficult for us. And Emil was rejected for the USA visa. [Laughing.] Maybe it's better. But during this time it is important for us, every summer, all of the people here go to travel. All of the summer it is really hard for us, this problem. Because if we want to travel, we must take a visa, we must make plans, two or three months before.

[About leaving Serbia]. Yes. For Sina, yes, maybe. But for us, we would have to start again everything. It's better for us to stay here and think about how to solve our problem. Because everywhere we go, has some problems. Wait.

Sina

Nationality: Iranian
Gender: Male

Age at time of interview: 22
Age at time of migration: 17

Status: Refugee in Serbia
Current Residence: Belgrade, Serbia

First Interview: April 29, 2022
Second Interview: August 9, 2022

My name is Sina. I am 22-years-old. I was in high school in Iran, almost finished it with a third-grade diploma, exited Iran, left it for Budapest for study purposes, and studied there for almost a year.[105] Then, I came to Serbia as my family was here. Our family is small, so I thought it would be good support to be with them. And also, I was kind of homesick. I mean, for the real home. Where your family is.

Life in Iran. I can actually more refer to the last days I was there, because I was getting more adult and being more responsible. So it would be nice to tell you about those last days, as I can still blurrily remember this stuff. I want to go ahead directly for the problems I had, the roots that are still alive in me, and I'm trying to kill them, which was sexual separation. What do I mean by that? From the first day you step into school, you are divided by sex. Genders, female and male, completely divided. So the biggest questions in my brain were like, “how do relationships go? Can you ever have a friend, a normal, friend, as a girl? How does it really work out?"

105 A third grade diploma, referring to the third of three institutions Iranians attend before the university level (primary, junior, senior), is roughly equivalent to a high school diploma.

I mean, it's a simple question for a lot of people. But for me, I actually developed some very harsh mental problems. Because relationships start by normal talk, by trading emotions. And after that, when you're an adult and at the age of being ready to have sex, you're actually pretty much producing dopamine in your body. It's a natural drug to calm yourself down. Imagine that you're completely resisting that drug. What kind of side effects might you have?

So for years, when I was in Iran, I was struggling with that subject. It was a major thing. The dictatorship was running through your most private life, to the point that you couldn't even think of some subjects, you couldn't ask questions of yourself. Religiously, I was not really agreeing with what was going on. I was playing a sport. And whenever they wanted to punish me, because I was not going to the religious events, they were cutting me off from the sport team. And I was like, "why can you never explain it logically to me?" You know? So the dictatorship was going through a lot of things. For me, mainly it was sexuality, relationships, and how you are not able to ask yourself questions. It's also in the families.

I was 17-years-old when I left, because when you turn 18, technically you must serve in the army. So it was good to leave before that. As a kid, I had a lot of private teachers. English private teacher, math private teacher. I had a private teacher for English for two years, but I couldn't make a sentence. I only learned English when my dad said, "your ability to leave Iran is dependent on your language test scores." I was like, "leave it to me." Four months, six months, constantly I was just learning English. Non-stop. Movies, whatever I could. I got into a college preparatory school in Budapest, general sciences, preparing me to do information technology at the University of Budapest. Hungary was the easiest country to get the visa because their requirements were mostly money-related. So we provided all they wanted. Acceptance from the university, the assets that we had, and a few important documents. But mostly unimportant documents. I remember a stack, like a one-meter stack of big documents. You just had to pass it to the ambassador to get some stamp on it. You didn't know really what they were, and they didn't even know what they were. They just wanted to

make the process harder and harder in order to deny you the visa. But I achieved it. Luckily, I don't know what it was, but I achieved it. It was a good feeling.

We wanted to make it a bit economical, so we didn't get any agent who did it for us. There were a lot of people my age who were going to Budapest to these colleges. So I remember these agents were doing everything, you know, they were providing all the documents, they had connections with those in the embassies. So their documents were processed more quickly than a person who is going without an agent, like me. So it was the hardest in the beginning. But then we gave all the documents, and it was done. I can tell you, in two months, I got the visa faster than all those people with agents, which was very interesting. Maybe it's because of my marks, maybe because of the assets. My dad put assets in my account to make the process a bit faster, and to show them that financially he's not going to rely on the government. So that was the main point there. And we got it. I booked my flight, said goodbye, and went off to Hungary with my mom in September 2017. Actually, I was late. The classes were started already. The visa, even though if I got it fast, still fast in Iranian measurements needed like, two months, or like, a month and something. Before that for like six months or five months, we were just collecting documents and going and getting documentation.

When I first arrived, it was too many emotions involved. I'd never been in Europe. I had traveled a lot, you know, Singapore, Malaysia, China, Thailand, Türkiye. But not Europe, because of the visa problem. So what I had in my imagination was like, wow, Europe! Something that people think about America, I had it for Europe. So when I arrived with my mom, we got really disappointed. It was a beautiful city, but not really the picture that we had of Europe. Because we agreed that we had a bad culture from the Middle East. We were like, "oh, they are in the EU, they might have some standards. We are ready to learn from them." But as much as we were observing their behavior, we were like, "really? This is what we thought is the ideal one?" We thought, let's not be judgy, it's the first day. But nothing changed. We just saw more and more problems. We went to the university. The manager of the university tried to pretty much steal from us, charging us for something that was not in the contract, very informal, for ten bucks, for example. If you're the manager of this big university, why would you take this small

money? So our impression was getting worse and worse. The streets were way more wild than what we thought. The police were completely different. We had bad police in Iran and we thought, Europe is this fair place. But Hungary was not. So when we got there, we interacted with all these different parts of the society. It was an amazing experience in the beginning, which turned to something like a nightmare.

My mom was with me for two months, and after two months she left. I was in school, and alone. I grew up not in a conservative family, but in a family that was Iranian, dictatorship in my brain all the time. Imagine that. Leaving your country at the age of 17, peak of your emotions, peak of your excitement, and peak of the feeling of achieving freedom, and being actually free! No guidance, with no adviser, and no person that, logically, actually, can tell you what is good, what is bad. So you have to experience everything, or you have to be afraid of everything. At first, I was afraid. But then I saw that if you're afraid, nothing changes in you. So I was like, time to experience. And those experiences were without guidance. And it went very wrong. Very wrong. And the dictatorship in my brain became reversed, from do not listen to those people to *only* listen to those people, which is black and white. We want the gray zone. At school, I stuck mostly with other international students. I had this idea, right or wrong. Hungarians, I can't really blend in with them. Believe it or not, I had only a few interactions with them the whole entire year. I know, it's very weird. "Where is the corridor? Where is this office?" And that was it. Sometimes I'm asking myself, why did I do that?

It's interesting because Persian parents are mysterious. You never know what's their next step. They look right, but they shoot left. When I spoke with my dad, he never mentioned he wanted to leave Iran. He had the facilities to stay there, and I was like, "okay, everything is normal." But one day, I think it was January or February 2018, my dad oddly asked me, "Sina, what do you think about Hungary?" I said, "what do you mean? A million times I've told you, I don't like it here." He tried to trick me. He was like, "no, I meant how are foreign business owners doing there, is it working out for them?" I knew a few foreign business owners. I was like, "yeah, they're having good business here." He was like, "ah, interesting." And hung up. Again, talking another day. "So what do

you think about Austria?" So what do you think about this? What do you think about that? And then I understood. He was not confessing, but I understood from his words that he is planning to go somewhere else than Iran. He preferred Europe, Canada, and Australia. But I knew he couldn't go to Australia because of the points. Even before I left, he was counting them, and because of his age and because they're strict, he knew, low chance. So he turned toward Europe.

First, they went to Türkiye because in Türkiye it's easiest to export your assets, and as an Iranian there are some similarities. My dad was like, "I just want to get out of Iran as soon as possible, Türkiye seems European to me." But he didn't like it at all. Zero chance. He searched around, where else, where else? So my parents went to look at Belgrade. I remember, my mom didn't like it. She told me, "Sina, stick to Hungary. Belgrade is like Budapest but forty years ago, before it developed." But my dad said a different thing. He was like, "well, actually I liked it." I asked, "why?" He was like, "it seemed very good for business, not many competitors." And literally, this was his example. "You can sell beers by the can, the business scene is that empty." These explanations seemed weird to me. But I had finished my exams in Hungary, my contract at the accommodation was finished, I was done there. I went to look for myself and I thought, I don't have much stuff, I'll just carry it with me and if I want to go back to Hungary I can.

My first impression of Belgrade was bad because I came past the Belgrade Waterfront, but when it was still destroyed factories. I was like, "no way, I'm not gonna stay." Second day, I was like, "maybe I will stay." Third day, "I'll stay." It's funny. I can describe it in a good way. Belgrade for me was like an ugly, kind girl. When I came to Belgrade, it was this ugly girl that, at first impression, you say, "no." But when you're more patient, that ugly girl grows up, not only gets more beautiful, but also you understand the good behind the appearance. So that was how it worked. I saw how they're poor, but not in the culture. I'm not saying they're perfect, no. But compared to how is it economically and the history and what they have been through? They could be much more hateful. I expected much worse things. They surprised me a lot.

But my father was mostly concerned about my studies. He told me, “divide yourself from us.” I still had the Schengen visa. So my dad was like, “do not hesitate, if you don't like it, don’t worry.” They had their own plan. They were going around the city to find a proper way to establish their company and their business. Our paths were actually completely divided, and my dad wanted it like this. He was like, “I know if you stay here because of us, you will be sad. So go ahead, find somewhere that it is your dream.” But when I convinced him that I actually like it here, I don't want to go, they were like, “okay, I think we agree on something.” Then the three of us started a search for a business. It was a very short period, actually. First, I came to a hotel my dad had reserved for me, for five days maybe. Then my mom came, we rented an accommodation again for a few days, then my dad joined us and we changed the accommodation because it was too small for three people.

My parents wanted to do their very best not to go through the asylum procedure. They wanted to get a visa. In Iran, if you tell your family that you are residing somewhere as an asylum seeker, they are concerned, and they are actually getting sad. They think you are in the camp, what you see in the news, they think just like that. Not only that, he knew his status would change. Normally, the people you have seeking asylum, they are people coming from tough situations. For example, if they are a doctor, they normally run away without any certification or any history, so they have to prove themselves again. My dad was like, “I already have my everything. I don't need to start from zero.” But there was no other choice, right? There was no other choice. You have to start the visa process from your origin country. It was like, “that's unfortunate. What do we have to do?” Almost every day, we were cooperating with our lawyers to find a way to establish a company and not register for asylum. And we couldn't. In those last days, we were just sad.

I know it sounds wrong, but this is the best way to describe it. My family is one of those families that wants to do everything safe. So as I told you, they wanted to stay safe, stay nice and stay in the prestige they had in Iran. They *were* someone in Iran. That's a reality. They were factory owners, educated persons. They always tried to push themselves into that category of higher-level people, even in a country that is not

developed. I could understand them on that point. They wanted to avoid it so much because of whom they were in Iran. When they went to the police for asylum, they went with the lawyer. “Lawyer, you go on, you’ll introduce us!” The police were like, “I don't care who you are, just go in the line.” And as their kid, fortunately or unfortunately, I had that mindset. I shouldn't have. I can tell you I was a spoiled kid. Yeah, I was just sad about, what are other people gonna say about me? I wish I was not that spoiled and that close-minded. Asylum in Iran was always in the form of Afghans.[106] I was always judging those people. So we were always pretty much having this racist, bad, closed-minded and very limited idea about these people. I was very ashamed. I didn't know how to tell my girlfriend, even though she was very open-minded. And then, matter of fact, after three months or four months when we got through that situation, I was very thankful and I understood how it works.

In the interviews, we told them pretty much everything. Because, as I told you, you're zero. They want to know who you are. “Why are you here? What do you want to do? What is your religion? How do you think?” They want to make sure of everything. So literally, everything, everything. Personal and non-personal, business-related, religion-related. Everything, everything. We had an easier path, because a lot of things were written, so we didn't have to explain a lot. We could provide a lot with papers, except for personality. But we are familiar with interviews. I mean, for Budapest, I did a lot of interviews. For the Austrian visa that I got here in Serbia, again interview. [About converting], my main reason was not that I love Christianity, I just didn't like being Muslim. In any society, I respect that society by just saying I am part of this. But mentally, I am not related to any religion. Now that everything is done, I could argue with them about it and how they are wrong about any religion. But I was happy not being Muslim because of side effects that I suffered — not from Islam itself, but from Iranian religion.

Since then, life has started to go in an amazing way. In Iran, my mom worked at a research institution. She had a book published and translated about Ancient Greek women. My father, on the other hand, was a businessman in the steel business. When

[106] Iran hosts 780,000 Afghan refugees and an estimated further 2.1 million undocumented Afghans. Of the five million Afghans displaced globally, 90% are hosted by Iran or Pakistan. See: UNHCR, “Refugees in Iran,” *UNHCR*, https://www.unhcr.org/ir/refugees-in-iran/.

they came to Serbia, well, definitely, it was hard to find a way to keep doing what they were doing. The chains they had in Iran completely got lost. And they were like, let's find some good business. One day, my dad came home. He was like, "yeah, I got this place. I just rented." I was like, "rented? For what? Which business?" He said, "doesn't matter, the location is good. We'll find a business for that." One day, I just recommended to them a doughnut shop, because I tried one doughnut in the centre. It was not high quality, but there was a lot of demand. I was like, "well, I believe you guys can make it better." Me and my dad tried it and we didn't really like their doughnuts. So they started to make doughnuts for two months, testing and testing to come up with their own formula. They started socializing with people, communicating, having people as workers around them, you know. They had enough money to not to work actually, I'm sure about that. But they really wanted to blend in with the society. That was the whole point.

Myself, I started to learn Serbian and started to make friends, started to have a business, talking to locals in the street. I got a job at a grocery store, IDEA. I applied for that myself. I just wanted to have that experience. I started out at one university but changed because it was super Serbian, I couldn't really understand how it functioned. My dad really wanted me to go to university. So I was like, let's make dad happy, but at the same time, myself as well. So university was on, but I was off. I started hanging out with some Serbian YouTubers, filming, seeing how they're functioning, trying to be one of them. I don't know if you've noticed or not, but the views are crazy in the Balkans. I think I'm generally bad at making friends at the university, especially with the very nationality that I am. I don't have too many friends from university. I really don't. I have no idea why it happens. Maybe because a lot of people do not attend the classes. [But with YouTubers], it was just like, "look at that, they're all having fun filming it and they're making money." And then I met the YouTubers and I saw a lot of them are poor people, kids, students that are hustling. I saw that they are working their ass off. They're, you know, filming in the morning, they had university, they had this, they had that. It was interesting for me, so I was hanging with them, filming, being cameraman, helping them with the content, making my network bigger and bigger. One of these friends, who's now

a one million subscriber YouTuber, introduced me to my girlfriend, and we've been together three years.

What I've been doing now is online work with me and my friends. We are selling premium goods, footwear goods, sneakers, pretty much. We're selling them online, doing the custom tax, shipping, and customer service. Marketing as well. I'm the project manager of the team. It's not just selling the product, we're analyzing a lot, we're studying behaviors. I got involved with this very randomly. I mean, Persian families, they always have good houses, good cars, but they never give you pocket money. Especially if they emigrated somewhere else. Now all the money's for investment. And as me and my friend were both spoiled, we wanted to buy some good sneakers, some expensive sneakers. And of course, parents do not give that money. Especially in that situation. We were like, "okay, what is the best way to buy those?" It's to sell some. We sold some to our friends. And after that we could not only buy the pair that we wanted, we had a beer to grab at the end of the day. So first, it started with money. But the purpose is not money anymore, it's just making a bigger network. It's building knowledge. Our cash flows, it's a lot, but what we are taking for ourselves is very little, because it's just coming from orders and going to purchases just in the system. So yeah, what we are getting, we're still broke.

Well, next five years. Well, let's talk about the present, then future. Present, very satisfied. Very happy, very relieved. It's the first time that I feel like I'm doing what I really want to do, not my parents forcing me, not my government forcing me, not my visa forcing me. It's just me, going wherever I want, choosing what I want to do. Of course, wherever you go, there will be challenges. You go to heaven, and it's challenging because you have to be too good. But I'm satisfied with the challenges. In my origin country, you were worried to open your mouth. And here, at least the person, even if he or she is disagreeing with you, still stands in front of you and hears you. Right now, I live with my parents. I don't like to spend a lot of time with my parents even though I like them. They get sad, but they understand this. I'm like, "I can't!" You know, today my dad was asking me some business questions. He was like, "Sina, if you agree with me, say I agree. If you don't agree with me, go away!" I'm like, "this is the most dictatorial way of

forcing me to answer you!" And my mom is really dependent on me because I'm the only child. I know if I go too far, I'm torturing her, but also if I'm home every day, I'm torturing myself. So I'm looking forward to making a balance of living with them and getting space from them at the same time.

In terms of the future, five years. It passes so fast. First, I want to be financially comfortable enough for limited needs. You know, because it's never enough, material needs, but I want to grow my business and help other people through this. In terms of whether I will stay in Serbia, I really don't know the answer. Today, I have only a few things to deal with, but tomorrow it might be different. I would like to be in Serbia, next to my parents, next to my family and the society that I already accepted as a good society. But if it happens, me leaving, it happens. I'm not planning for it, but it might happen.

I spoke to Sina again in August 2022 and asked him what was new in his life. I also asked him about the passport and identity card issue.

Not that much, you know, still in the same way, same goals. Yeah, of course, something new happens every now and again. But, you know, the general stuff didn't really change that much. Just, still I have same goals, same direction I'm going. And yeah, in details, of course, there are differences. You know, trying more, blah, blah, blah. But not a huge, let's say, change. I'm still having those projects from university to finish up. I have only one project to finish off. So, yeah, I can say, I am less busy and having more pleasure time for my business and my life.

[The passport issue], it is frustrating. Because, for example, this summer, I saw my friends were traveling, not only the ones here, the ones also in America, my Persian friends. But, you know, when you go there, when you get the residency or citizenship, it is way easier for them to somehow get the passport and have this kind of freedom for traveling. For us, of course, it's still an issue. It is frustrating, it's not cool at all. Because, you know, for example, my girlfriend asked me to go. Or me, I wanted to attend some business events which are in Europe, but I was like, "will I get the visa? Ah, screw it." You

know, paying that much money, I would rather invest it now in my business. It’s like a whole investment for normal, short-term trips. So it is frustrating, of course, same for me. But as I know, another Iranian family, they didn't even get any papers so they could travel at least with their Iranian passport. So when I saw them, how they are, I’m like, “okay, okay, okay.” Like, I understand that the situation here, it's a bit harder. I can imagine how frustrating it could be for them. But yeah, that’s kind of turning into a big issue, especially after three and a half years with residency here. The expectations are going higher. And eventually, we might take an action for that.

IV. New Migrations

When I first came to Belgrade in 2019, I volunteered at The Workshop, a pro-bono language education centre for refugees run by RAS, one of two organizations now sponsoring this project. At that time, the student demographic was primarily Afghan. The room swayed with Dari and smelled of parsley and coriander during our bicultural *slava*. When I returned to The Workshop in 2021, I found students from a different world entirely — Burundi, a Francophone East African country of just 12 million people, 8,000 kilometers away. Burundians, across my year at The Workshop, remained our predominant student body, peaking at nearly 25 such students per day in spring 2022. They were joined by students from other countries who didn't fit into that popular image of 'crisis'-era migration, a Middle Eastern exodus en route to Europe. Instead, they came from Cuba and Ghana, Togo and Guinea, Congo and Comoros. Strangely, most studied only Serbian. Strangely, it seemed, most wanted to stay.

This final section explores these new mobilities and the future of migration in Serbia by focusing on Cuban and Burundian refugees in Serbia. Here, there are many echoes of the Iranian visa-free regime. These new migration pathways have emerged from Serbia's unique geopolitical inheritance. They are also the unintended consequence of Serbia's agenda in the international arena post-Yugoslav dissolution, particularly on the issue of Kosovo recognition. In turn, the featured stories of Belquis, Yurdelis, and Abdul complicate discourses in which Serbia appears solely as a transit country. All three individuals came to Serbia through these mobility paths purposefully. They hope to stay, having escaped threats to life and existential immobility in their home countries through a loophole in the global border regime separating the wealthy from the dispossessed. It is precisely Serbia's peripheral position that creates this loophole, hence why the EU continues to expend so much energy seeking its incorporation into the fortress. For while some, like Belquis, Yurdelis, and Abdul, see Serbia as their new home, others who've traveled along these new routes find themselves increasingly squeezed out of the country — facing low recognition rates, discrimination and confusion in the asylum procedure, and poor camp conditions and job

prospects. There is also the specter of EU pressure, already wrought upon the Burundian regime, forced to close on November 20, 2022. Of course, should the EU succeed in ending these legal paths, Cubans, Burundians, and others won't return to their home countries; they will forge irregular pathways to the EU in the footsteps of their Afghan and Arab compatriots, as they've already begun to do.

Belquis and Yurdelis of Cuba

Belquis, Yurdelis, and their daughter, Ilsena, touched down in Belgrade, Serbia, via Frankfurt, nearing midnight on November 2, 2017. Later many would ask them: you passed through Germany yet didn't stay? But "we weren't looking for Germany," said Yurdelis. "Serbia was the country that suited us." Escaping threats related to Yurdelis' political activity in Havana, Cuba, the couple wanted a safe place and a safe route — no boat journeys or surreptitious border crossings with a young daughter in tow — and Serbia was that place. Serbian officials themselves hardly believed their intentions, nearly separating the family before sending them to Bujanovac, a remote camp solely for those in transit, where after eight months the Asylum Office seemingly realized the error and processed their application. With the support of NGOs to find housing and employment, Belquis, Yurdelis, and Ilsena would later settle, after receiving asylum, in Lajkovac, Serbia — a town of 3,000 people roughly 70 kilometers southwest of Belgrade, where they are certainly the only Cubans and perhaps the only foreigners at all. Belquis works as a butcher and Yurdelis as a construction worker. Ilsena, as Belquis puts it, "is Serbian, the only thing is she's black." And overall, they express great satisfaction with their lives, the town's reception of them, and the fulfillment of their primary goal: physical safety. Though rather atypical compared to regional Cuban migration trends, Belquis' and Yurdelis' story illustrates several phenomena well: the inaccessibility of Serbia's asylum procedure even for those who want to stay; certain familial and hyperpersonal factors that inform integration; and the potential of visa-free regimes to create safe travel paths for those in need of international protection.

Cuban refugee migration to or via Serbia has been a prominent trend since at least 2016, when a record 92 Cubans registered intent to seek asylum in Serbia, though

there had always been small numbers of Cuban registrants in the years prior.[107] As such, it is perhaps not accurate to classify this trend as a "new migration." Its dynamics, however, are markedly different from others discussed in this report, as its spatial aspects clash with the 'crisis' imaginary and its infrastructure in numerous ways. Traditionally, the Cuban route has run through Russia, and then onwards to Serbia — where Cubans don't require an entry visa, due, once again, to the strong binational relations forged during Yugoslavia's time as the leader of third-way socialism. From Belgrade, Cubans tend to move opposite of typical Balkan migration trends — south, toward Greece, from where they attempt to reach Italy or Spain. Many Cuban asylees perceive these destinations to be the most amenable to their asylum cases and cultural integration.[108] In 2022, IOM has also noticed more Cubans moving via BiH, in line with routes taken by other nationalities.[109] Both of these Cuban routes are at their highest rates of use due to many factors: pandemic and sanction-related hardship in Cuba, perceived difficulty of receiving asylum in the USA, and renewed political repression in Cuba following large protests in 2021.[110] The spatial peculiarities of Balkan-Cuban migration often collide with the securitized infrastructure of 'crisis'-era migration management. For example, NGOs and press have documented instances of Cuban asylees pushed back from Greece to Türkiye, a country through which they have never transited — recalling Karoh's experience and the intentionally circular, disorienting nature of the EU border regime.[111]

A considerable number of Cubans do, however, try their luck in Serbia. The Asylum Office registered 92 Cuban intentions to seek asylum in 2021, the sixth-largest country of origin, and has to date granted protected status to seven Cubans via five decisions.[112] Yet, BCHR also noted the denial of entry to 344 Cuban nationals at the

[107] Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, *Right to Asylum in the Republic of Serbia 2016*, (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2017): 24 http://www.bgcentar.org.rs/bgcentar/eng-lat/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Right-to-Asylum-in-the-Republic-of-Serbia-2016-2.pdf
[108] John Psaropoulos, "'This is a new wave': Hundreds of Cubans seek refuge in Greece." *Al Jazeera*, November 30, 2021. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/30/cubans-struggle-to-apply-for-asylum-in-greece
[109] Conclusion drawn from data reported in IOM's Bosnia-Herzegovina snapshots, across which Cubans constituted a progressively greater percentage in the first half of 2022.
[110] Nikolina Milić and Zachary Goodwin, *Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub Data and Trend Analysis: Regional overview 2021*, (Belgrade: Save the Children, 2022): 8. https://resource-centre-uploads.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/refugees_migrants_balkans_overview_2022.pdf
[111] Roshan de Stone and David L. Suber, "What the expulsion of Cuban asylum seekers from Greece reveals about EU and US migration policies," *The New Humanitarian*, March 30, 2022, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2022/03/30/expulsion-cuban-asylum-seekers-greece-eu-us-migration-policies; Lauren Markham, "A Cuban Doctor Fled Havana in Search of Asylum. He Ended Up Stranded in Istanbul Instead," *Mother Jones*, December 16, 2021, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2021/12/cuba-greece-asylum-refugee-turkey-pushback-biden-castro/
[112] Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, *Right to Asylum in the Republic of Serbia 2021*, 16; Kovačević, "Regular Procedure."

Belgrade Airport in 2021, a site of continued scrutiny due to well-documented practices of border officials detaining and forcibly refouling potential asylum-seekers.[113] Cuban applicants also face a high rejection rate. In 2021, every Cuban asylum case decided on merit was rejected.[114] Potentially, the geopolitical aspect of asylum comes into play here. Cuban refugees are predominantly anti-Castrista dissidents fleeing a regime with whom Yugoslavia had traditionally good relations. However, the ideological bent of the contemporary Asylum Office doesn't appear consistent. In the case of Libyans, it has granted status to both anti-Gaddafi dissidents and members of Gaddafi's tribe persecuted after his deposition.[115] Syrians, meanwhile, have good chances for protected status in Serbia, including on grounds of draft evasion,[116] despite the Assad regime's ties to the Non-Aligned Movement. As such, while these relationships have been crucial in facilitating certain refugee movements to Serbia, it is hard to say whether they influence how the Asylum Office decides cases.

Returning to Belquis and Yurdelis' story, we can see that even for those who want to stay in Serbia, the asylum procedure is not straightforward. Despite declaring, again and again, their desire to apply for asylum, the family spent eight months in a transit camp. Before that, police officers — either not believing the mixed-race family to be a family or, as Yurdelis posits, trying to dissuade them from staying in Serbia — almost sent Yurdelis to a separate camp from Belquis and Ilsena. These problems are endemic to the Serbian asylum system, despite 2018 reforms that introduced potentially expediting features, such as the ability to file an application in writing.[117] Yet, legally mandated timelines for procedural progress (i.e., from application to first interview, etc.) are almost never respected, and additionally, all forms are served and must be submitted in Serbian Cyrillic, despite a shortage of state-provided interpreters.[118] Belquis and Yurdelis eventually succeeded because their case caught the attention of a particular asylum officer and because of support from BCHR, the UNHCR, Grupa 484,

[113] Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, *Right to Asylum in the Republic of Serbia 2021*, 27.
[114] Kovačević, "Regular Procedure."
[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Zachary Goodwin, "How Accessible is the Asylum Procedure in Serbia?" *Medium*, April 5, 2022, https://medium.com/@zacharycgoodwin/how-accessible-is-the-asylum-procedure-in-serbia-ff5994af6b52 (informed by author interviews with Irena Abdelmaksoud, Info Park, and Milica Švabić, KlikAktiv).
[118] Ibid.

among other NGOs. More commonly, the inaccessibility and undetermined length of the Serbian asylum procedure deters potential asylum-seekers and contributes to high levels of abscondment, or asylum cases discontinued because the applicant has left the country. One example of good practice in Belquis and Yurdelis' case, however, was the presence of an interpreter during all of their interviews with lawyers and the Asylum Office — a Chilean man who'd resided in Serbia with his family for eight years, Belquis told me.

A similar story holds for Belquis and Yurdelis' integration in Lajkovac. Following the family's incorrect assignment to Bujanovac camp, Serbian officials moved the family to a proper asylum camp in Bogovađa, Lajkovac municipality. Upon receiving asylum, it made sense to stick to familiar surroundings. Lajkovac is also cheaper than Serbia's major cities and, crucially, the UNHCR had connections there that helped Belquis and Yurdelis find their first home and first jobs. The family has managed to make a life in Lajkovac mostly out of extreme patience and determination. They are bothered by Serbian bureaucracy, what they called *modo polako*, which they experience even more acutely because of their refugee status. At the same time, they expressed that they've simply learned to make adjustments, and to be patient. Further, they feel welcomed by Lajkovac's small-town feel and Serbian hospitality culture. Their employment and progress made in learning the Serbian language are also key. I believe the root of their successful integration, however, to be that they possessed and resolved just one push factor — physical safety — and that they've been together as a family unit and thus avoided many other interfering pressures (such as the monetary and family expectations of those interviewed from the 'crisis' period). Belquis and Yurdelis fled political persecution with their daughter, toward a continent where they had no other family. The decision whether to remain in Serbia, in other words, could truly and entirely be theirs.

Abdul of Burundi

Abdul is one of 80 Burundian students who attended language classes at The Workshop across the first six months of 2022, predominantly from March to May 2022,

packing our space beyond its capacity after low attendance during the winter months. Burundian students were The Workshop's plurality in the last months of 2021, too, but still numbered fewer than ten. Indeed, this sudden rise in Burundian students rippled out from a similar change occurring before the MUP and the Asylum Office: 134 Burundian intentions to seek asylum in 2021, 83% of whom registered in the year's final quarter, and a total of 29 Burundian asylum applications, the year's largest country-of-origin group.[119] Students' class choices mirrored this seeming desire to stay: they only wanted to learn Serbian. Then, just as suddenly as they arrived, the large groups stopped coming. Many had either found jobs or left the country, Abdul and a handful of remaining students told us. A rumor, not unfounded, had spread among the Burundian community in the camps that Serbia's Asylum Office would be harsher on their cases than most. Abdul, however, has kept learning Serbian, and says he hopes to live his life in Serbia. I include his story here, despite the fact that he's the only participant still in the asylum procedure, because I believe it demonstrates Serbia's particular pull factors in the Burundian case, as well as the deficiencies of the Serbian asylum system. Through Abdul's story, we can also see the slow evaporation of 2021's major trend — how and why many of Abdul's compatriots, after coming to Serbia, began to see their lives elsewhere.

Burundian migration to Serbia follows a similar pattern to Iranian and Cuban migrations, in terms of a connection between visa liberalization and a Serbian geopolitical agenda influenced by the Yugoslav era. In February 2018, as part of a larger rapprochement with Belgrade, Burundi withdrew its recognition of Kosovo, the southern Serbian province which declared independence in 2008.[120] In so doing, Burundi became the second state to withdraw a previously issued recognition of Kosovo, preceded by Suriname and since followed by 13 others.[121] The unspoken quid-pro-quo made itself apparent three months later. Serbia dropped visa entry requirements for Burundian citizens, and became Burundians' only visa-free country of access on the European

[119] Nikola Kovačević, *Country Report: Serbia. 2021 Update*, (Belgrade: European Council on Refugees and Exiles / Asylum Information Database, 2022): 8, https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/AIDA-SR_2021update.pdf; Zachary Goodwin, "How Burundians became Serbia's third-largest refugee group," *KlikAktiv*, February 28, 2022, https://klikaktiv.org/journal/how-burundians-became-serbias-third-largest-refugee-group
[120] "Burundi povukao priznanje Kosova," *Radio-televizija Srbije*, February 17, 2018, https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3041793/dacic-burundi-povukao-priznanje-kosova.html
[121] Papua New Guinea, Lesotho, Comoros, Dominica, Grenada, Solomon Islands, Madagascar, Palau, Togo, Central African Republic, Ghana, Nauru, and Sierra Leone. In May 2022, President Aleksandar Vučić's administration said four further states have withdrawn recognition, but he did not offer names.

continent until the regime's reimposition on November 20, 2022.[122] Serbia's derecognition campaign against Kosovo occurred in earnest between 2017 and 2020, an echo of Yugoslavia's last war of dissolution and a continuing point of impasse preventing the entry of both Serbia and Kosovo into European institutions.[123] The consequences of Belgrade's coupling of visa liberalization to this geopolitical agenda have been little discussed. Aside from Burundians, citizens of five other countries who've withdrawn recognition of Kosovo do not need visas for entry into Serbia: Suriname, Dominica, Grenada, Palau, and Guinea-Bissau.[124] Additionally, several major countries who have never recognized Kosovo do not require visas for entry into Serbia — namely Russia, China, and India.[125] Until recently, Tunisians did not require visas either.[126] To date, five nationals of these four countries have received protected status in Serbia, while Indian and Tunisian nationals are also prominent among the transitory population.[127]

Yet, so far, Burundians represent the only mass migration realized through mobility paths opened by Serbia's Kosovo derecognition campaign. The only other relevant number is of Guinea-Bissauns, 24 of whom registered an intent to apply for asylum in the first half of 2022.[128] Likely, this is due to population size and conditions in Burundi. Already, Burundi has suffered from the exodus of its citizens since 2015, driven by poverty, political repression, and the legacy of genocides in 1972 and 1993. More than 100,000 Burundian refugees currently live in Tanzania.[129] There just existed no straightforward path for Burundians to flee to Europe — until 2018. However, this route did not gain notoriety until three years later. Before 2021, Burundians accounted for only three positive status decisions in Serbia. In 2020, Burundians filed 17 asylum

[122] Društvo Putnika Srbije, "Srbija ukinula vize za državljane Republike Burundi," *Društvo Putnika Srbije*, June 21, 2018. http://www.drustvoputnikasrbije.rs/srbija-ukinula-vize-za-drzavljane-republike-burundi/
[123] Heather A. Conley and Dejana Sarić, "The Serbia-Kosovo Normalization Process: A Temporary U.S. Decoupling," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 27, 2021, https://www.csis.org/analysis/serbia-kosovo-normalization-process-temporary-us-decoupling
[124] Whether or not Guinea-Bissau actually withdrew recognition of Kosovo is disputed. Serbia claimed in 2017 that the country had withdrawn recognition. In 2018, the Kosovar government shared a *note verbale* from the Guinea-Bissaun government seemingly nullifying the withdrawl. See: https://twitter.com/pacollibehqjet/status/959439612526575616
[125] Serbia abolished visas for Indian citizens on September 2, 2017. See: Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, *Right to Asylum in the Republic of Serbia 2018*.
[126] For a discussion of Tunisian migration to Serbia, see: KlikAktiv, "Tunisia - Serbia - EU?" *KlikAktiv*, May 20, 2022, https://klikaktiv.org/journal/tunisia-serbia-eu.
[127] Russia (3), China (1), Tunisia (1); nationals of India had the seventh-most registered intentions in 2021, according to BCHR.
[128] Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, *Right to Asylum Periodic Report for January–June 2022*, 6.
[129] Goodwin, "How Burundians became Serbia's third-largest refugee group."

applications, the first sign of an oncoming increase.[130] But it was during the final quarter of 2021 that rights groups received record aid requests from Burundians arriving at the Belgrade Airport, continuing into the new year, as news of this migration pathway spread slowly, then exponentially, by word of mouth. Kovačević of IDEAS told me that among his Burundian clients were many who were related, grew up together, and/or attended the same schools (Abdul confirmed this as well). Additionally, in 2021, a small group of Burundian nationals already residing in Serbia for extended periods began to advertise the route and charged those interested thousands of euros for "arrival papers" — despite the fact that, under the visa-free regime, no such papers or payments were required for entry.[131] This scheme demonstrates how the mere existence of borders, regardless of the visa regimes mediating them, presents innumerable opportunities for exploitation.

The Burundian influx caught the MUP and the Asylum Office without the relevant institutional knowledge, such as proper interpreters and developed best practices for country of origin, which has led to a number of arbitrary and discriminatory practices. Abdul, for example, arrived in Serbia hoping to first gather his impressions. With 30 days of stay permitted under the visa regime and Abdul's proof of accommodation, round-trip flights, and means, this should have been allowed. Nonetheless, Abdul said the border officers told him upon arrival, "you will ask for asylum here like the others because Burundians don't come just for a visit." After this, Abdul and others had their biometric data recorded and were issued documents to proceed to Preševo Reception Centre (380 kilometers from Belgrade). Indeed, border officials at the Belgrade Airport seem to have developed an ad-hoc and arbitrary screening process that informally reimposed restrictions on the visa regime — detaining some Burundians, forcing others onto return flights, and compelling still others to register in the asylum system even if that was not their original plan.[132]

[130] Thérèse, a former Workshop student who received asylum in 2020 with her daughter, was featured by BBC Srbija. I hoped to include her oral history but she has largely stopped attending The Workshop since finding a new job in 2022. Read her story here: Jovana Georgievski, "Izbeglice, azil i Srbija: Zašto je mlada Afrikanka došla u Srbiju po bolji život," *BBC Srbija*, August 10, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-57861050.
[131] Saša Dragojlo, "'False Hope': Burundians Duped into Paying Big for Serbia Asylum," *Balkan Insight*, March 23, 2022, https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/23/false-hope-burundians-duped-into-paying-big-for-serbia-asylum/
[132] See: Nikola Kovačević, "Novak Djokovic, X., and Y," *Peščanik,* January 15, 2022, https://pescanik.net/novak-djokovic-x-and-y/

Following this ordeal at the airport, Abdul proceeded to his prebooked private accommodation and in the days following went to Miksalište info centre in Belgrade, managing to change his camp assignment to the much closer Krnjača camp, where he arrived late at night and with some apprehension upon seeing the living conditions.[133] In the camp, Abdul made contact with the NGO Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), which explained certain aspects of the asylum procedure to him and others. He eventually had a consultation appointment with a lawyer at BCHR, during which Abdul said he only wanted to share limited details of his story. During this time, Abdul said, no one from state institutions followed up with him regarding asylum. Since then, Abdul has found representation before a different NGO, which has submitted his application. The delay is regrettable as it will delay his work authorization and full integration.

Facing discrimination, arbitrary treatment, a lack of legal aid and knowledge, and poor camp conditions, it is easy to see why many Burundians have instead joined up with irregular routes toward elsewhere in Europe. Via BiH seems to be the most popular route, according to conversations I've had with staff and beneficiaries of The Workshop and Info Park, as many Burundians seem to think they will face easier passage and better treatment there. Without the same connections and communal knowledge as Afghan and Arab migrant communities, whose networks of smugglers and irregular passage span continents and decades, the Burundian 'route' is still in development. Nonetheless, by June 2022, Burundians constituted 17% of new registrations in BiH — up from 7% in May and numbers so negligible in months previous they didn't even make the UNHCR's monthly updates. This exodus is also driven by a high Burundian rejection rate in Serbia compared to other nationalities (73.25% on average across 2020 and 2021), which is outpaced still by a climbing rejection rate across the system since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (45.5% in 2018, 67.5% in 2019, 72.8% in 2020, 76% in 2021).[134] Belgium, the former colonizer of Burundi with a sizable diaspora, seems to be the preferred final destination — it saw Burundian asylum requests rise from 34 in May 2022 to 263 in July 2022, with most arrivals saying they reached Belgium via

[133] Krnjača is considered one of the better camps but the situation in 2021 was made more complicated by arrivals from Banja Koviljača camp during renovations to the latter. There is also little privacy in the camp, smuggling groups operate openly, and women often register concerns about their physical safety. See: Tošković and Trifunović, *Right to Asylum 2021*, 74-76.
[134] Percentages calculated via statistics available in the Asylum Information Database's annual country reports on Serbia, 2016 - 2021.

Serbia.[135] Abdul said he wants to stay in Serbia because he finds his quality of life vastly improved from Burundi — no more harassing phone calls, able to move freely. He expressed that he's made good relationships with Serbs, namely his first boss, who has given him tips for cultural adjustment and who Abdul described as a "gift from God." Abdul has also taken to the Serbian language quickly. These factors have given him a head start on integration — though without a formal work permit, his ability to support himself is tenuous.

The Burundian visa-free regime, however, reached its end on November 20, 2022. In a near mirror of the Iranian trend in 2018, across the Fall of 2022 the EU launched a pressure campaign to force Serbia's visa realignment, which, again, included the threatened revocation of visa-free Schengen travel for Serbian citizens. On October 21, Serbia announced the reimposition of visas on Burundian and Tunisian citizens, to take effect on November 20. An "important step" for Serbia and a great "improvement," said the European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, Oliver Varhelyi.[136] But it's hard to find cause for celebration amid this domino effect of securitization and this death of another safe road to asylum, forcing even more people into the dangerous landscapes of irregular migration.[137]

The Future of Migration in Serbia

In the realm of migration, Serbia sits at the intersection of two geopolitical currents. The first, as was most evident across the first two sections of this report, is the expansion of the EU alongside its simultaneous securitization. In practice, this has entailed Serbia's piecemeal inclusion into EU regimes of free mobility and trade in exchange for Serbia's policing of the mobility of third-country nationals approaching the EU via its territory. Yet, at the time of writing, irregular entries into Serbia are at their highest since the 'crisis,' as we find ourselves at another moment post-pandemic characterized by record economic insecurity and violence around the globe. Across just

[135] Dylan Carter, "Eight times as many asylum seekers from Burundi to Belgium," *The Brussels Times*, August 10, 2022, https://www.brusselstimes.com/270074/number-of-asylum-seekers-from-burundi-increases-eightfold-in-belgium.
[136] For dates and quotes, see: Saša Dragojlo, "Serbia Ends Visa-Free Regimes with Tunisia and Burundi," *Balkan Insight*, October 25, 2022, https://balkaninsight.com/2022/10/25/serbia-ends-visa-free-regimes-with-tunisia-and-burundi/.
[137] See: Zachary Goodwin, "Burundi, Serbia, and Fortress Europe," *Medium*, November 15, 2022, https://medium.com/@zacharycgoodwin/burundi-serbia-and-fortress-europe-889a39a63a79.

two weeks in July 2022, Info Park recorded 873 new arrivals in Belgrade, primarily Afghans coming via Bulgaria.[138] Accompanying this, the MUP has escalated violent deterrence-focused operations against people-on-the-move in squats in Serbia's north — including mass arrests, expulsions, beatings, and destruction of property — couched in reinvigorated language around eliminating people-smuggling rings.[139] Continued escalation alongside heightened arrivals likely means more stories like Jafar's, Fazal's, Karoh's, and Zaki's — a small but growing number who apply for asylum in Serbia because the borders simply won't let them pass.

Yet, the stories of Iranian, Cuban, and Burundian migration in the third and fourth sections demonstrate a different, contradicting influence: the legacy of Yugoslavia and third-way socialism, which, despite or perhaps through its dissolution, has shaped the current nationalist agenda of post-Yugoslav Serbian regimes in the international arena. In other words, Serbia's pursuit of its own, non-EU-sanctioned geopolitical relationships and goals has brought new mobilities to the EU's edge — mobilities that the EU, through harmonizations across member states, has otherwise limited. These mobilities are likely to proliferate. Even with the Burundian visa regime closed, recent bilateral meetings between Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi hint at a potential new mobility route for Egyptian citizens.[140] Meanwhile, should Serbia resume its Kosovo derecognition campaign — something the current government claims to be setting in motion — this, too, could lead to more reciprocal visa liberalization and new migration pathways.

Proposed reforms to the asylum law, under current consideration in the legislature, provide changes of mixed impact — some positive, expanding rights to education and free movement, and others negative, changing judicial procedure in ways that further restrict access to asylum.[141] In a best-case scenario, the positive changes would facilitate the ability to stay in Serbia among those traveling these new routes who,

---

[138] Info Park, "Record numbers of new arrivals in Belgrade," *Info Park Bi-Weekly #113: 20 July - 2 August 2022*, https://mailchi.mp/04b09289435f/info-park-weekly-024-24-30-june-20236341?fbclid=IwAR09_sufZg4RpB-3lwP8Aa6IvA_aJks_zzPyymcDI90B22MxGoaUbGze8aA&fs=e&s=cl

[139] "Policija otkrila krijumčare i 120 migranata kod Malog Horgoša," *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, July 26, 2022. https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/31960307.html.

[140] Mohammed Magdy, "Egypt, Serbia launch new chapter in relations amid war in Ukraine," *Al-Monitor,* July 26, 2022, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/07/egypt-serbia-launch-new-chapter-relations-amid-war-ukraine#ixzz7c8YlXoOr

[141] KlikAktiv. *Still on the Move to the EU: Situation of Refugees in Serbia Annual Report 2021,* 16-17.

indeed, came to Serbia with such an intention. The until-recent option for a Burundian, for example, to leave his country, travel to Serbia regularly, and then complete the asylum procedure there, was a remarkable example of a fully legalized territorial pathway to asylum, linking a country of origin to a distant safe haven. Nonetheless, it existed only anecdotally, marred by Serbia's practice of pushbacks by air and by most arrivals opting for onward irregular migration due to Serbia's poor asylum and integration systems. Now, it does not exist at all. Will other routes open? Recent Serbian government rhetoric, promising further visa changes before the year's end, suggests a newfound dedication to harmonization — but I am not convinced this will hold permanently, that the legacies of Yugoslavia and the ambitions of the current government will so easily fade.

There are a number of trends and demographics with future potential I have not discussed here. As mentioned previously, one is the growing prevalence of gender-based claims to asylum, accentuated by the comparatively large number of single women and mothers arriving from Burundi and other Francophone African countries. The gendered dynamics of these migrations through the Balkans raise a number of interesting questions about how women navigate the patriarchal spaces of the refugee camp, the migrant-smuggling economy, and the family unit. It also represents a change from the largely male migrations of the 'crisis' era and thus will push the Asylum Office to standardize best practices on gender-based protection claims.

Another pertinent trend is the Ukrainian refugee exodus, which, in Serbia, has also been accompanied by an influx of regular Russian migration via the last flight route connecting Russia to a European country.[142] Prior to the invasion, 10 Ukrainians had received protected status in Serbia, in fact at an acceptance rate higher than any other nationality. All of these refugees, however, based their claims on Russian ethnicity or pro-Russian sentiments.[143] Recalling earlier discussions of asylum provision as ideology, these decisions signal Serbia's close relationship with Russia on account of economic cooperation and Russia's support of Serbia's Kosovo agenda before

[142] Idro Seferi and Rüdiger Rossig, "Russians are increasingly flocking to visa-free Serbia," *DW*, August 13, 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/russians-are-increasingly-flocking-to-visa-free-serbia/a-62792799.
[143] Kovačević, "Regular Procedure."

international bodies. Meanwhile, Serbia issued a temporary protection provision for Ukrainian refugees in March 2022, which it's extended to 950 nationals as of September 2022, and has granted subsidiary protection to a three-person Ukrainian family on the *sur place* principle.[144] The more uncertain fates, however, might be those of the several thousand Russians who have fled to Serbia to escape insecurity and army mobilization, arriving in a country where the state position has been one of tacit support for the Russian state project in Ukraine. Indeed, if a "Russian refugee crisis" emerges, Serbia will be heavily involved.

Asylum decisions in Serbia across the past three years show greater diversification in terms of national origin, as all of these varied mobility paths have intersected with greater and greater frequency at the major geopolitical and territorial crossroads that is the Balkans. I hope the stories of Belquis, Yurdelis, and Abdul can provide one small window into how these new migrations might promise regional change, for the better. "I think this is becoming the second story of my life," Abdul told me of his journey. Serbia's decision to close a legal asylum pathway for Burundian and Tunisian citizens is a squandered opportunity. But I am still hopeful that, buried somewhere in these new migrations, there is a second story of Balkan migration: a safe pathway for asylum-seekers, a new life, a turn away from the European project and its violence.

[144] Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, *Right to Asylum January–June 2022*: 10-12, 15-17; UNHCR, "UNHCR Serbia Update: September 2022," *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, October 17, 2022, https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/unhcr-serbia-update-september-2022#:~:text=UNHCR%20profiling%20of%20new%20arrivals,August%20and%2013%2C425%20in%20July).

Belquis & Yurdelis

Nationality: Cuban

Gender: Female

Age at time of interview: 30
Age at time of migration: 25

Gender: Male

Age at time of interview: 37
Age at time of migration: 33

Status: Refugees in Serbia
Current Residence: Lajkovac, Serbia

First Interview: March 22, 2022
Second Interview: Written Correspondence

Belquis

My name is Belquis. Yesterday, the 21st of March, I turned 30-years-old.

Yurdelis

Ah, you're getting old!

The old one here is you!

I turn 38 in June. I'm Yurdelis Pimienta Sosa.

Look, there's no need for all that.

Or Yurdelis Pimienta, as you like, but here they know me as Delis.

We've known each other since I was three-years old.

Brother, that's a story! I was 11-years-old.

We were neighbors. But really, when we were bigger, that's when we started as a couple. And now we're going on 13 years.

Bueno, in Cuba, I worked for a long time in a bakery. I was in charge of the quality control department. That's to say, to make the bread, you have to follow a formula, and my job was to ensure that this formula was correct. I was there approximately 10 years in Havana, where we were both born.

I graduated as an economist, from the University of Havana, and after that I was working for the telecommunications company, Etelsa. Then, for two years I ran a business, like a cafeteria where you sell products, snacks, drinks, those things. I decided to be in the private sector because I understood I would have more time. Because at the other job, the schedules were a nightmare and I didn't live that close to my place of work and it took a lot of time to go and come back.

We left Cuba because … look, this is quite a story. It can be said that the main architect of us being here is my grandmother. My grandmother was a syndicalist, the boss of a factory. She always told me that you can ask a question and you can receive an answer, but it's up to you whether you're satisfied with that answer. So from there, I began to question things. For example, in Cuba the education system is free, but everything rises to the level of propaganda. I asked myself, "and if I don't want to be like Che?" I never knew Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. But those who had always been with me were my grandmother, my grandfather. I wanted to be like them. My mother, for her part, is militant for the Communist Party of Cuba. She studied accounting, economics, but she was part of what the Communist Party calls *los cuadros profesionales*, professional cadres, a select group of people who they choose and those people go from school to school, from school to school. If I told you the number of titles my mother has, you would say it's impossible that a woman of 50 years had that many titles. I saw that

everything goes in a circle. By rotating people through roles, the Party maintains complete control over everything. I'm a person that doesn't conform. I ask, "and this, why?" And my mother, who is a person indoctrinated by the Revolution, she doesn't understand. Those were some long discussions, to the point of her telling me, "get out of the house, get out of the house!" I apologize if I'm talking a lot. I'm showing you one of my greatest virtues, and at the same time, according to Belquis, one of my greatest defects, which is that I have the ability to remember almost everything that has happened to me.

Well, close to my work there was created a [political] party that's called the 30th November Party of Frank País. I had a friend. We would discuss. "Hey, how does this look to you?" I tell you, in Cuba the education system has a ceiling but it's very good. You're informed of almost everything and you talk a lot about politics. I participated in a semi-clandestine meeting. At that meeting, sincerely, I didn't notice if there were police, if there were photos, nothing like that. What I wanted to do was go to see and listen. Then the second meeting. We were awaiting the visit from Barack Obama at the beginning of 2016. There was a lot of expectation. Imagine, an African-American president and the first president to travel to Cuba after 1959. There was much commotion, that Obama was going to meet with certain dissident groups. So they told us in the meeting, "let's see, when you speak with President Obama, what are you going to say?" "No, we're going to propose this and that." And I said, "but don't you think he already knows what you're going to tell him? He needs to have the solution. Why don't we propose that we want to create a funding base to make a party, with seats in all of the municipalities?" We reached a consensus and this is what we were going to propose. The question that came after was, "who is he?" All of those parties, all of the opposition are infiltrated by state security.

After that, the intelligence services in Cuba came to my job and asked for my work file. Modesty aside, I am a person who likes to do my job and who likes to do it well. My boss called me to his office and asked me, "come, we have to talk. Yesterday an official

came to investigate. What problems are you in?" I told him, "none." He told me, "they came asking how you act around people, if you're recruiting people." Because I'm a person who likes to talk a lot. You'll have realized. He told me, "stay calm." And after that I did begin to notice a car here, another there, the same person in different cars. Then my mother received a visit, since they considered my mom, being a professional member of the Party, capable of tying me down. They suggested that there was a problem with me, that I was a possible dissident. And so my mom spoke with me, but like I was a militaryman. "From now on I don't want you here." And so on, and so on. "Excuse me, ma'am, but I'm an adult. I don't understand why you're saying this to me." The reason for leaving Cuba was that they called my mom into a meeting and told her, "the situation with your son is this and this … he'll be taken prisoner and this can get complicated, they'll invent whatever charge." I went approximately six months without speaking to my mom, but one day she came to the house and said, "hello, can I enter?" She told me, "you fucked up well, you have to leave Cuba." "I don't have to leave Cuba, why?" She told me, "because you're at risk." And me, "that doesn't matter to me." "Ah, it doesn't matter to you? And your daughter, and your wife?" I knew lots of people who left for the USA because of economic problems, but I never thought of leaving Cuba. Then she told me, "look, there's a phrase of José Martí's that says, I lived in the monster and I know its entrails. That is to say that I've spent many years working with these people. I know what they're going to do to you and I can't do anything. I'm just your mother." And she said, "if I hadn't been anyone in this country they would have gone above my head, for you, for your daughter and your wife. They would have disappeared you and no one would have known." And me, like, "no, I don't want to, I don't want to." That was a discussion that lasted until the early hours of the morning.

But my final decision arrived when I took the girl to school. I spoke with a teacher who had been mine when I'd studied at the same school. She told me, "hey, Pimienta, you know things about bread and such, I need to make a cake. Come here." Well, when I entered, I thought she was talking about a real cake! But she grabbed me and told me, "sit down," and she spoke softly. "They came asking after your daughter, what problems

are you in?" "Oh, they already came here?" No, I took my daughter from school, my wife was at the bakery. And so, I arrived with my girl, asking her, "how was school? Did you have fun? Did you play?" And I noticed that a car was following us. That day, I'm not messing with you, I couldn't sleep. I woke Belquis and told her, "we need to leave the island." She told me, "give me time, I'm going to speak with my mom." We begin to investigate about various countries. Mostly we were looking for a country that would admit us, and Serbia was one of those countries. We left Cuba on November 1, 2017, at 12 a.m. We left behind our families, we left our jobs, friends, everything.

We're a pair, we're a team, we're friends, we're everything. It's difficult because I'm an only child and my parents aren't young. I'm everything for them, I'm the only one who supports them, but really I'm forming my own family. I have my daughter, I have my husband. And really these are the decisions in life that you have to make, and I made the decision. My mom and dad were in agreement. I won't lie to you, there was sadness, there was crying, but my mom told me, "it's your future, it's your family. We're already a pair of old people, what are you going to do? You're going to lose a good man? You're going to separate your daughter from your husband?" We're a family, where one goes, we all go. We arrived here without knowing anything of the language, without knowing anything about anything. Now there's a little bit more internet in Cuba, but when we were there, there was no internet. There were some parks where they'd put some antennas and so you went, you bought a card, you had to sit in one place, and there you used a restricted and controlled internet. See what you find, because when you search for countries you can enter without a visa, they're very few. We're a family, we went with the girl. We couldn't go like this*, a la loco*, crazy, we had to investigate, what to do, where to go. And when you search for Serbia, what appears is war, Kosovo, things that don't have anything to do with reality. You look for photos and you don't find anything, you see photos of war, but no photos of anything destroyed. And okay, good, "we're going here."

We arrived in Serbia on November 2, 2017, at 11 at night. Brother, so cold! Cold, cold, cold, and in fewer than 15 minutes they ripped us off. No, you don't feel scammed, but

later when you begin to talk with friends, you find out. We arrived at the airport. At customs, they asked, “where are you going?” “Here, Serbia.” “Accommodation?” “Yes, yes, we have our accommodation, this is the hotel.” “Money?” “Here’s the money.” “Okay, go on.” When we exited, a nice heat. But when they opened that door, my brother, and that cold passed over me. Uyy!

And as you don’t know anything, you don’t know directions, you have to get a taxi driver to take you to the place you want. The address of the hotel was on the reservation, *Bulevar Oslobeđenja*. We were in a small hotel, like a residential department. There you had a kitchen, you had a room, bathroom, hallway, terrace. Ten minutes from the airport. Fifty euros! But we didn’t know anything about directions!

And then came the second scam. We arrived at the hotel, but as I told you it’s a residential apartment and it’s only open until 8 p.m. If you don’t have the combination for the door, you can’t enter. We knocked. Knocked and knocked and nothing. A couple arrived and spoke to us, but I don’t speak English. If it weren’t for her [Belquis, who speaks some English], we would’ve been stuck walking. Belquis told the woman, “we’re here, look, we’re passing through.” And [the woman] said, “I can give you the entrance, but do you have a key to the room?” We were like, “no … We’re going to sleep in the elevator.” She told us, “you can find another hotel for one night and tomorrow come and enter the accommodation normally.” I took [Belquis] and said, “it’s too cold, you stay here, I’m going to walk.” I went walking and I found a man and I asked him, in English, but poor English! And he said to me, “hotel? Ah, yes, look, here’s a hotel.” I looked and it said 24-hour hotel. I didn’t walk any further. So cold! I went and told Belquis, “get the bags, let’s go.”

We arrived at the hotel. The porters told me, “one night, 100 euros.” From 12 a.m. until 6 a.m. One hundred euros! At 6 a.m. we left for our place. It was simply to pass the night. And there’s more. We arrived there and there were three cans of soda, some little cookies. And as we hadn’t eaten in 24 hours, we said, “for the girl, eat, eat.” And our girl,

she ate everything! When we left they asked us, “did you consume anything?” She said, “no, yeah, everything.” The woman told us, “no problem. It’s 47 euros.” Excuse me?! One-hundred and forty-seven euros, in six hours, brother? Also, for the phone SIM, I gave 3,000 dinars, when what it costs is 300 dinars.

You could have bought a SIM and changed out your phone!

Indeed, ay! But okay, we are people who always try to see things in a positive light.

You learn from the bad. And from there we began to search for what we were going to do. We saw how it was with the immigrants in the camps. And I said, “okay, and what do we need to do to be legal?” And asking for asylum was one of the options. We didn’t have a record of how the process would be, what was needed, because you can’t go just to go and that’s it. And okay, we got into that, “we’re going to go to the police and figure it out.”

And from there I’ll go to another question that I think you wrote on your questionnaire. Many say, “no, Serbia isn’t good because of the economy.” It depends on your point of view. If you came searching for a better economy, believe me that Serbia is not the place. But if you came for the solution to a problem, I think that Serbia is the country. And that was a debate, when we said that we wanted to stay in Serbia. We went to the migration police at Savska. An asylum official told us, “you guys have been the only asylees since 2008, if I don’t remember poorly, who have declared asylum in Serbia for the true reason that you need asylum. You have been the only ones.” And it’s for this reason I’m sure you’re seated there. I’m sure they told you, “they’re a good family.” No, eh, we’re the only ones. We entered Serbia and seven days later we went to the police and asked for asylum. It’s not like others who spend here, I don’t know, six months, one year. And those same officials who were there told us, “are you sure you want to ask for asylum in Serbia?” “Well, yes, we’re sure that here is Serbia.” “It’s a bit of a cumbersome process. Are you sure?” That was the word that most stuck out. “Are you *sure* that you

want to declare asylum in Serbia?" Because at that time, there was the migrant route that went toward Germany, toward the EU. And so when they asked us how we arrived to Serbia, we told them, "we left Havana, from Havana to Frankfurt …" "You were in Germany and you didn't stay in Germany?!" But we weren't searching for Germany. Serbia was the country that suited us.

We were searching for security, for the certainty that we would be, how would you say it, legal, because once you entered here you legally had three months, but with the visa you didn't have a problem in transit. And so [we said], after three months, we will see. We only knew that we wanted to stay here, but we knew absolutely nothing. We began to search for information, what we could do, how we can be legal here, without problems. And since the internet is open, it gives you more options to look for more things. And that's how we found out about declaring asylum.

I think the first test they made for us in Serbia was at Savska, with the migration police. There was an incident. They assigned me to one camp and her and the girl to another camp.

They sent me to Bujanovac and you, the men, they sent to Bogovađa. I was the one who read the documents and I noticed this. The only thing I understood was that the documents needed to be exactly the same and when I read them, compared one to the other, I said, "this isn't the same, this isn't the same. What is this?" And it was a different place from the other.

And I think when they presented us the documents, they said to themselves, "they don't know." We don't know the language, but we know how to read, we know that these three papers that say our three names need to be exactly the same. It doesn't matter if it was only for a short time. We all go to one place, or nothing.

Also, it's just logical, if we're a family. You can't divide a family. We presented a marriage certificate and the birth certificate of our daughter and only then did they send us to the same camp. And with that and everything, we had already said we wanted to stay in Serbia and they sent us to Bujanovac, which was the place where everyone wanted to go to Germany. When we arrived at Bujanovac, the first thing they asked us was, "and you, where are you going?" "Nowhere, here in Serbia." "Here in Serbia?" And they were all like, "that's not good, here it's miserable."

If you ask me, they sent us to the camp to try to spoil our opinion. Imagine, three against 400, all telling you, "not here, Germany!" It's very easy to change your opinion if you don't have a clear objective. But we had a very clear objective. "Hey, where are you headed?" "No, here in Serbia." "But look, Germany, the girl will have more opportunities." If I told you they didn't ask us this daily, I would be lying to you.

We were in Bujanovac for eight months, waiting, waiting. And since no one was expecting that an asylum-seeker would be there, because it's transitory, we were just waiting.

All of the lawyers that go to that transit camp, what they're doing is preparing papers [for people] to take to Germany. That's to say, there wasn't a single lawyer that would do what we needed here. So, BCHR called [a lawyer] in Niš. And he had to come from Niš to Bujanovac to attend to us, because we were the only ones. You understand? The process was very slow, very slow. The man told us, "you have to be patient, we know it's not easy, the procedure here in Serbia, it's very gradual."

Polako mode.

You know when your phone is on airplane mode? That's *polako* mode. Serbia is *polako* mode.

And so, this mess only changed when the EU closed to more immigrants. There was an inspection to see how many people already were with this status. And for this inspection, we came out. “And you, where are you going?” “Nowhere. Here, Serbia.”

I tell you, the inspection came from the roots of the Asylum Office. In our camp, there were almost 400 people. And all had entered illegally. That’s to say that when they arrived at the border between North Macedonia and Serbia, they opened the border and said, “pass.”

Yes, they had entered illegally and when, in this type of situation, even if you’re going to Germany, you have to go to the police and say, “I am here in Serbia and my intention is to ask for asylum in another country.” And they send you to a camp. It shouldn’t be like this, but they communicate among themselves. “I am in Serbia, but in Bujanovac camp.” And then the family, the friends, what they do is they enter from North Macedonia and they go directly to the camp and at the camp they open the doors and they don’t manage anything.[145]

We were in the camp asking, “*bueno*, what’s happening? I see a lot of people moving around.” “Well, what’s happening is this and this. Tomorrow two buses are coming to take the people who haven’t done the papers legally.”

In Bujanovac camp, the only three who remained were us, because we were the only ones who had papers.

We three were the only three who had papers and the Commissioner said, “no, you guys aren’t going.” All the others went on buses and we remained alone in the camp. “And here, what’s happening?” “No, they don’t have [transit] papers.” Okay, and that’s when we met the asylum official who took our case. She opened the door to our room and asked

[145] What Belquis and Yurdelis describe here doesn’t correlate with a singular policy in place at that time period (2017/2018). In 2015, Serbia and North Macedonia did issue 72-hour transit visas to people-on-the-move, regularizing onward movement toward the EU (see: Beznec et al., 2016). Here, Belquis & Yurdelis are likely describing the issuance of registration certificates, which Serbian authorities issue to almost all encountered people-on-the-move, even those who desire to keep moving.

us, “okay, name and last name. Where are you going?” She gave us a form. We filled out a form and when she read the form, she said, “wait. Two university graduates, from another continent, who say they want to stay in Serbia. What are these people doing here?” And so she went to the Commissioner’s office and said, “hey, and these people?” And the Commissioner said, “they’ve been here eight months. They’re a family of Cubans who came to stay here, but they sent them here from Belgrade.” And she said, “but this is bad.” And she came back to interview us, with good manners. “Can we talk?” She did kind of like a mini-interview. “We entered legally, we came through the airport, we passed through Germany, we passed through customs, we had accommodation in Belgrade, we went to Savska, the migratory police, we said we wanted to stay in Serbia, they filled out this paper for us.” We Cubans are addicted to saving papers.

We have the saying that papers talk.

Exactly, and that’s served us well, because it was like evidence. When we got here she asked us, “it says here you graduated from university. What do you have as evidence? “Look at my degree.” “How old are you?” “No, we have this.” “And you’re married?” “Yes, we have our marriage certificate.” “And how did you enter the country?” “Look at our passports, look at the Serbian visa in the passport, look at our plane tickets.” And she said, “but what are you guys doing here?” After that, we were in the camp one month. She told us, “I’m personally going to take charge of your case.” Then one day they called us, “you’re going to Bogovađa.”

In Bogovađa, when they saw our file, they saw something very perfect. They said, “look, here we only see people from Pakistan, from India, from all of those countries below.”

Well, all of these are things they don’t tell you, but you realize.

You notice. And many things, many came and told us, “okay, if we have to go to Germany, they don’t permit singles, which is to say you can’t go alone, but you’re a family

and they prioritize families." And so you saw things like, "we're not friends, no, you're my wife and these are my kids." And like that, going to Germany. Look, they weren't adapted to this mix of races, I mean Africans, because I'm African [mixed] with her family. They said, "no, but if he's black and she's not? How?" So in Bogovađa, they threw us into another process. In the room we had, they put a single man. And so we went to speak with them. "Okay, we're a family. I don't understand why he has to be in here if there's a large room for singles?" And they told us, "Okay, that was a document error." But alright, you shut up and realize what they're doing is testing you. After that, what they did is compare our behavior in Bujanovac and Bogovađa to see if in Bujanovac we had been pretending. I don't know, that's my personal opinion. But sorry, our behavior was the same. We aren't lying, we're a pair, a marriage of thirteen years and who knows how many more, if she doesn't kick me out.

And, we have our daughter, Ilsena. She was seven-years-old and she was eight months in a camp. We tried to make it so she didn't feel this change because for kids of that early age it's very traumatic. In Bujanovac, we took the room and we divided it practically in half. Here we slept and here Belquis created like a classroom to give classes to Ilsena, to write, draw, so that she wouldn't lose these habits for when she was incorporated back into society. Because there in the camp what the kids did was play, mess around, you know, they didn't teach anything to those kids, they didn't prepare them. We came from a different system, where the kids have to study. She created a mini-classroom. She said, "Sit here."

In that camp [Bujanovac] they sent our daughter to fourth grade, at that age she should've been in second grade. They didn't want to change her, arguing that she needed to finish the school course. And we decided to create the mini-classroom in our room to have our own classes so she didn't fall behind. In Bujanovac, there were organizations and workshops but they weren't very active. Where we really began to learn more of the language, take classes, and get diplomas was in Bogovađa. There was more active work with the kids as well as with women. Organizations like Grupa 484

worked with the kids and parents, The Red Cross with women, language classes, courses with diplomas, Caritas, UNHCR, this organization was and has been a fundamental part of our integration. And with Ilsena, really we had luck with the teachers who attended to her, because in the centre [Bogovađa] they did activities, whether it was to play, to draw, to learn something, and I always tried to make sure she was in the activities she liked. Go, go play, but I didn't leave her too much. Because, you know, there were a lot of ethnicities, a lot of personalities, many customs, and they collided. At first we let her be, but later we noticed things we didn't like and we didn't want her to be in the middle. We tried to occupy her with productive things. I tried to look for Grupa 484, who took really good care of the kids. Really, they work so well with the kids, and so I tried to, I don't know, to help them with basic things. I told the women who worked there, "let me know when there are drawing activities or when you're teaching a course," because they were also teaching English. So I asked that they tell me so Ilsena could go, and that's how we carried on, finding a way so that she didn't depart too much from our routine, so that she didn't feel so confused.

And with respect to Grupa 484, if we're talking about teams that really do their job 100%, it's this group. They asked our girl, "ah, what's going on in your room?" And the girl responded, "no, my mom has a classroom." "A classroom?" "Yeah, she's teaching me this and that." And they realized, "This family isn't like the others around." Currently, among our group of friends here in Serbia, there are many who worked for that group. They talk with us, call us. "Tell me, how is the girl doing in school? If you need anything, we, the organization, can do it." In my opinion, if they had seen that we were disinterested parents, that we didn't care, they wouldn't act like this.

Continuing on. We entered the process on November 7, 2017, and they granted us asylum on March 19, 2019. Approximately one year and eight months.

Let's see, once they give you asylum, you have to look for a place outside of the camp. We were crazy to leave the camp, to work. But the process doesn't allow you, it's better

to wait out the process, and once they give you papers, then you leave. But since we didn't know anyone, it was difficult. The government gave us some assistance, but to get the assistance, you had to be outside. We were saying, "How are we going to go out if we don't know anyone?" Because when you speak with someone about renting their house, that person needs someone who will give their word on your behalf. We spoke with the Serbian workers, in this case with the office, with the directors there in the center, because we needed help to find a place outside, work, something so that we could leave. And the woman who attended to me at that moment told us not to worry, that she was going to call and someone would come to speak with us, that we'd have an interview to see what we needed and how they could help us.

The next week, those people came and they interviewed us and we explained to them our situation and what we needed. [They were] from the UNHCR, who helped us find work and rent. They asked us, "where would you prefer, in Lazarevac or Lajkovac?" We could have also looked in Belgrade, we could've looked anywhere, but okay, we said, we're going to look here closer, where we more or less know about it. Because we knew a little bit about Lazarevac, and here to Lajkovac we had come a few times. If there was an opportunity here close, we were going to take it because it wasn't too expensive either. Belgrade is much more expensive. And with the assistance that they give you — €200, which is all you can count on — you had to pay rent, to eat, to buy food. Then, yes, they got us here in Lajkovac a possible place. After that, I was the first to get a job, in a *kafana*. As a *konobarica*, a waitress, and I took it, what are we going to do? I'm an economist, it's true, but this is starting from zero, you have to do what comes to you, so I began to work there.

As I told you, here everyone is family in the *pueblo*, the village. The owner of the *kafana*, one of his best friends is my current boss.

He's *penoso*, bashful. I'm a little bit more daring. I'm like, "eh, do you have a job here? Because my husband is looking for work." And I was able to get him a job and up

through today he works for that same company. I also was working for a long time in that *kafana*, but then it closed and not even two months passed before everything with the coronavirus began. I was about six months without a job. Thanks be to God my husband didn't stop and in some way, through the organizations, they helped us on all of this, we've made it out, thanks be to God. Currently, I work in a *mesara*, a butchery. And *bueno*, in July it will be two years working there. And my husband's been three years working at that firm, as a construction worker.

In the *mesara,* there's a girl who's also the granddaughter of my boss. See how I told you that everyone is a family? Everyone. With this job, I've had the opportunity to go to Čačak, Bujanovac, Belgrade, many places. And so I've had more chances than her for this clashing, confrontation. When the brigade arrives and everyone begins to get down from the *kombi*, the van, and they see white and white and then black. "And him?" They say, "no, no, he is from Cuba." At my work, we've gotten along well. We mess around, we have fun. And so when [people] notice how I act toward them and how they act toward me, they say, "and him? And you speak Serbian?" And I tell them, "slowly." The other day we were working in Lazarevac. And the brigade arrived, but there was one person who said, "and him? He lives alone here?" And they told him, "no, he lives here with his wife and daughter. He came from Cuba." And he comes and says to me, "*zdravo brate.*" And it so happened that I didn't hear him. They told him, "this guy. Ah! He's a mime! He's a mime!" And there they were, dying of laughter. And they told him, "speak with him, but you have to speak slowly so that he can see you speak." And he says, "*ez-dra-vo*." And, "ah, here in Serbia*, dobro ili loše,* good or bad?" At least he's trying. OK, I began to work, but my material ran out and so I had to speak, and I said to him, "*zdravo!*" And he says, "ah, you speak?" "Yes, I speak!" So what's up with this, "*ez-dra-vo*." *Y ya*, we went to drink *rakija*. Here we're doing well.

We were always interested in learning Serbian, because really we wanted to begin living here. And in Bujanovac there were classes and we took those, also English classes. Anything there was that could help us. This is the Serbian diploma, saying that we

already have the basics. But once they give you asylum, this is one of the stipulations, that you have to study Serbian.

We learned Serbian more or less here. Our daughter speaks it perfectly. Ilsena, yes, she speaks it, she writes it.

Hey, Ilsena is Serbian, the only thing is she's black!

She's Serbian, she's Serbian. We eat rice, or things like this. She likes *pavlaka*, bread*, burek*. We don't eat with bread. She does. If there's no bread, she doesn't eat. But with kids it's more direct, her little friends in school, you go and ask about Ilsena and everyone knows who's Ilsena. We had to confiscate her phone because she was receiving so many messages. "What are you up to?" I don't know what else. "Get to studying and after you finish, we'll give it to you." And the school tells us, "no, no, the girl is exemplary, academically she's really good. The problem is that she talks a lot." What girl doesn't talk?

She speaks in class. It's good, it's good. It's what normal girls like, what can you say, but she's a good, good student.

And as I told you, from the door inside is Cuba, but from there and out you have to speak Serbian.

You have to speak Serbian. You have to have relations with them, but it's not that you have to stop being like you to be like them. Simply, you respect so that they respect. You understand? There are things, because I also joined a work collective, and more or less I know how they think, more or less how they like things. But there are things that I can't stop being in order to square with you.

But nonetheless, they like that about us. I think this also has to do with the question, why Lajkovac? Many people who come from abroad, many decide to go to the capitals, because there are more opportunities, because there are more cultural groups, more ethnicities, you understand? And it's easier, how would you say, to make your way. But we were born in a capital and we know how it is. Many go to these big capitals and they get eaten, they swallow them alive. And so, we arrived here. Here we're among families.

Everyone knows one another, which is what I told you. What happens here in Serbia is also like, "I know so-and-so, and so-and-so." I understand it on their part. I'm not going to trust something of mine to someone I don't know. I understand it, but it makes it hard, because we're good, we're hard workers, but no one knows this. First, we were in a house. Then the owner sold that house and we had to leave. We found this. We're consistent with the pay. We don't like to have debts. Now you have a trajectory, everyone knows. But at first, they don't know anything. The owner asked us, "hey, you work?" "No, I don't have a job." "So how are you going to pay the rent?" It's difficult. When we were in the camp and we had to figure out where to go, the organizations that can help you are in Belgrade. They have more contacts there. Here they didn't have any contacts, they had some but only a few and on one occasion they said to us, "why don't you come to Belgrade? Here the people are also more used to immigrants." Here to do any errand is a whole job. I got the driver's license and it was a whole process for me. I was delayed a month because they didn't know what to do with me, how to work with me in the system. "What papers do you need?" I had my foreigner's number. You would think that with this number you could do any type of transaction, but they don't know how to put it in the system.

The Serbian number has 11 numbers. Ours has 13. And they see this and say, "look, this is a new number, where there's 11, how'd they get 13?" "Hey, you don't know what to do with this?" "I don't know, I don't know."

At the police station, everyone knows me. The woman comes, the one who attends to me, and she says, “let’s see, now what is it, what do you need?”

And you need police permission for everything. A little while ago we went to register the car. We had paid completely, but when the man got to the technical part, the part about the taxes, he forgot to pass along 100 dinars [€0.85]. And for 100 dinars we had to return and wait again for the process, a month, in order to register the car. But okay. That’s the way of the *pueblo*.

That’s how it is. What I like is the tranquility. Besides, we’re not often at others’ houses. We have friends, we go to drink a coffee, we hang out, but it’s normal to be at home. Our hours, when we’re the three of us in the house, we decide to be together, *tranquilos*, a weekend at home. What we mostly do is walk, every once in a while. I at least feel like in the big city there are more opportunities, but okay, here we work, we have friendships, here we pay rent.

And it’s very safe. Above all, it’s safe. Our daughter’s school is 50 meters from here.

It’s right here. Everyone knows it.

And as I told you, in a town where everyone is family there are never any problems.

Look, in Cuba, when people talk about abroad, they say that abroad is bad. Abroad there’s hunger, there’s denigration, there’s racism, there are murders, rapes, drugs. It’s not that we believed everything, because we had friends, family who had traveled, who had left and given us different viewpoints. But one worry we had was how it would be, because we’re black. In Europe, it’s all white. How will it be? No, there will be racism, I don’t know, but from our side, nothing about racism. Really, we haven’t suffered any of it. It might be that there’s been a case, but it’s not extreme racism like, “hey, you, negro.” No. They look at you out of curiosity. “A black person, and where is he from?” What they

ask you is, “you are from Africa?” Because here they tend to think that black people are from Africa. No*, mijo*, you’re mistaken, in the USA, Germany, what you mostly have are black people, in France you mostly have black people, but the Americas are a total mix and I’m a mix of black with white, Galician and Indian.

When we went around here, a woman came up to me and said, “can I take a photo with you?” Because for them a black person is something exotic. “Sure, it’s not a problem.” Ten meters later. “Hey, brother, a photo?” I said, “no, okay, I’m going to start charging 100 dinars per photo.” Brother, I won’t need to work! At first, as we came with that suspicion and that fear, we thought, “they keep staring at us.” But upon speaking with people, it’s curiosity because these people don’t know who you are.

So you speak with people and as time passes you realize that many behaviors are out of curiosity. There are people with certain ancestry, like Romani.

Romi, zigane. They call them Roma and gypsies.

Fine, they call them that. And so I more or less have their skin tone and they think that I’m of that ethnicity and that he’s from Africa. And when they see us, they say, “and them?” The other day there was a woman who said to my boss [about me], “hey, why this and that,” and I don’t know what else. I understood and I just stayed put. Because sometimes, why are you going to correct people, why are you going to give them your time? There are those people who are a little bit more suspicious. They don’t like it. But fine, I’m of the opinion that we are all humans and we all deserve respect.

It can be difficult. I don’t think that Serbs change. I think that we are the implicated ones, the ones who came from afar, the ones who have to change. They tell you, “*pavlaka*.” And you say, “*pavlaka*? I don’t want it.” And they say, “try it,” and you say, “ah, it was good.” And they say, “you see, you didn’t want to try it!” So I don’t think that they’re the ones who have to change. You understand? If we don’t have the same opinion, you have

your opinion, I respect it. But no, I don't think that I arrived to change anything. Not long ago we were talking about how the prices now, gas, oil, things like this, have gone up so much. And [Serbs], they're not accustomed to these changes. These changes throw them off, and they tell me, "and for you, how is it going?" "Normal." What you have to make is an adjustment. Go by bike or foot to the places you can, look and see and make your own adjustments. They're not capable of making these changes. We are! "Hey, there's a problem with this." "Okay, we'll make a reserve."

Yes, I'm always messing around, always laughing, always making mischief. They tell me, "*mija*, you're on drugs, drunk," and I'm neither drunk nor drugged. The thing is, why should I be so serious, sad? One day I said, "I'm 15-years-old. Fifteen in the mind, fifteen in the legs, and then you add it up." You have to be like this, because they're very serious. It's their way of being. Look, they're movers, but they also have their way of being and you have to respect it. What you have to do is understand. When you immigrate to a place, you have to adapt to the place. That doesn't mean you stop being you, leave behind your essence, but you have to adapt to the place to be able to complement who you are, to be able to climb, as they say. It's the reality. It's difficult. Not everything has been beautiful but there have been many good things and as much from the good things as the not-so-good things, we have learned and these are the experiences of life. *Y ya*.

We're used to processes being quicker. Here there's a lot of bureaucracy, and we're less adapted to it, but it's *polako* mode, as I told you.

And as time passes you come to know it, you become accustomed.

That's how it is, but we like it. What I've seen here mostly in the village, I love it. This familiarity, that everyone is a neighbor, you walk and they greet you. "Hey, and tell me, how is the family?" "My friend, my daughter is in university." No, and they tell you, "let's go get a coffee," and you tell them no and they get offended. They tell me, "good, let's sit and talk a while." I like this. Another thing, I've had to learn it here, about the village.

Directions are like, “did you see where Zach lives? Two houses to the left, that’s where he lives.” Everything is by lastname. “You saw where Rajković lives?” “Which Rajković?” “Brother, the son of so-and-so.” We go walking and sometimes people greet us and I don’t even know them. “Hey, Delis!” And it’s like this. I love the village. Well, at the beginning we said, “okay, we’re going to start here.” When we settle in and have a more comfortable lifestyle, when we understand the language better, we can, how to say it, fend for ourselves more independently, we can find a job, we can find a home, then we can go to Belgrade. Not even two months later, I told [Belquis], “you can go to Belgrade alone, I’m staying here.” I love Lajkovac. I love it.

No, and really everything is so easy to find, because everything is relatively close. Things are much cheaper, rents are much cheaper. We have the habit of buying once a month our food and then seeing [what’s left]. And slowly, you come to realize what you need. The first thing you pay is what you have to pay: rent, expenses. Also, the people here sell their own harvests and it’s much cheaper. In Belgrade no, in Belgrade you have to buy everything in the market.

And many times, not in our case, but here sometimes people don’t pay with money. Sometimes they say, “hey, I need three pounds of tomato, give me two pounds of meat. Later, I will pay you.” “Okay!” Because they’re family! “Later, I will pay you. “Go on, it’s not a problem.” “Okay, and when should I pay you?” And they say, “no, no, we’re family.” He knows that I’m not going to fight over 1,000 dinars (€8.50).

When we buy, we go and we pay.

Exactly. And they say, “if you’d like, you don’t have to pay everything.” *Con calma*. Mostly what there is in the village is trust. Here they don’t lock doors, no. They invite you to parties, weddings. I say, “no, okay, I’m tired.” “You have to go, you have to go, because I already told everyone that I have a black brother. Just for a little while, my brother, three hours, a little while!” I love it. Staying here is our objective. We are going to stay here. I’ve

spoken with her [Belquis'] parents. There's always the worry of a mother and father. And her mom says, "I can see you're so happy." I can't speak for all of Serbia, but I love it here. Even the president of the *opština*, the municipal president of Lajkovac, we know him. He came up to us in the market. "How are things, how's it going? Say hello to the girl."

For as long as we have a paper here that says we're legal, we'll stay. The rest doesn't concern me. Wouldn't it be better to be citizens? Yes, but they don't give this. They tell us, "yes, they grant it, but it's not common for foreigners to come and naturalize here." In the USA, you arrive and after five years of legal residence you can appeal to apply for citizenship with an exam, I don't know how it is, and they give you your citizenship. Here it's not the same, here it's by merit. Here there are people who have received Serbian citizenship, but it's a different process. It's because the country considers that you're more Serbian than you are of your country of origin. And they give it to you.

In the meantime what they give you is like residence, what they call a "white card." I would like to [naturalize], but really they don't give out citizenship. But yeah … it will come, it will come. We've had the opportunity to see changes. There are people who because they live their lives so fast, they don't see these changes, but if you come from another country, from a different system and you come to this system, you're sure to notice the changes. When we arrived here in 2017, there were maybe 150 black people in all of Serbia. And of these people, there were 30 who were athletes, who played football, basketball. But they weren't very involved in Serbia, they lived here but they worked for foreign enterprises. But then we began going to Belgrade, to work, on my part. And they would tell us, "hey, you're black." At first, you would walk and people would look at you, but now, no. One goes and it's normal. Serbs aren't people that open easily. First, they have to get to know you in order to trust you. And I am seeing the changes. You can see the changes, at the government level, you can see them.

There are other Cubans who live in Serbia. There's one, Tito Armendía. He created a dance studio, for music. Raúl Pulido, another one who plays music. There are a few. We write to each other. "When are you going to come around here?" We're in communication, but really we don't have time. I go to work at 6 a.m. and I return at 6 p.m. Today we're not working because it's *praznik*, a holiday. This is another thing about the Serbs, they're very religious. They have their days, they call them *post*, they don't eat meat, eggs, things with fat. There are the *slavas*, they invite you, these are celebrations of their saints. And also when people die. I've gone to funerals in Cuba and all of the family members are crying. You come here and the car comes by and you hear the music, *tra-tra-tra*. And I'm like, "it shouldn't be like this!" I went with my friend and he said, "Delis!" I was like, "where is it [the funeral]?" He says, "it's here." We park the car and when I entered, "we're going to drink *rakija*!" "But, man, didn't someone die?" And he tells me, "no, here when someone dies it's a party, you invite friends and family and you remember them with joy, singing, and when we drink *rakija* we say, *živeli!*

We always look at the positives. And the negatives, we look at them, but we don't give them too much import. We arrived here and it's like, ah, no, so much bureaucracy. OK, but for bureaucracy, the solution is time. If they're telling you the process will take a year, I'll wait a year and a half. We've made our adjustments. When I don't understand something, I ask. And also Serbs ask me, "how do you say *zdravo* in Spanish?" And I say, "*hola*." And I learn, and we like this. For the most part, things are going well, everything's calm. Someone once told me, "listen, Delis, here in Serbia, you graduated as an economist, you should work as an economist." And I told him, "but it can't be exact. My wife is an economist, but she works in something else. Everything has its moment." We just arrived in Serbia, we have to earn our place through our behavior. And in the meantime, we keep learning. We have a saying. "Knowledge doesn't take up any space." It's not hindering. Everything you can learn, learn it. And don't be ashamed of asking. If you don't ask, you're ignorant, but if you ask, you stop being ignorant. Here we are. I don't know, I don't know. If you have any questions, we'll answer them.

Well, if it works for you, if we covered the expectations, everything's good!

I messaged again with Belquis in August 2022. What's new?

Really, there's not much new. My husband was without work, but okay, thanks be to God, we found something for him. It's not very stable but we move forward. For another thing, a little bit of frustration, because with our status to do any errand is a whole ordeal with obstacles. The banks tell you they can't open a bank account because you don't have property. But I think it's more from lack of knowledge, of not knowing what to do. But to end, we're waiting for this to change and for them to open up more to foreigners and create the framework.

Abdul

Nationality: Burundian
Gender: Male

Age at time of interview: 26
Age at time of migration: 26

Status: Asylum-seeker in Serbia
Current Residence: Asylum Centre Krnjača, Serbia

First Interview: June 15, 2022
Second Interview: August 22, 2022

My name is Abdul. I was born in northern Burundi in 1995. I am the oldest child in a family of three children. I have a younger sister and a brother. We lived there from when I was born until 2012, if I remember correctly. That's when I left and went to study in a high school. As for the situation with my parents, I can say that it wasn't bad but it wasn't very good either. I lost my father when I was 7-years-old. I lost my mother at the same time, but she didn't die, she left us to live with another guy. She died when I left the town in 2012. We stayed with our grandmother, my father's mother. She is still with my brother and my little sister and she takes care of us to this day. I can say to this day, even though I am not there.

I started primary school in 2000 and I attended it until 2009, when I started secondary school. I studied there for three years. These three years, I was in years 7-10. And then I looked for another school, to study the third cycle. That's from year 11 until year 13, in Burundi it's called first year until third year. I finished school. If you finish year 10, you can choose what you would like to study. I chose to study industrial electricity at a technical school situated in the south. That's where I got my

degree A2. And then, I finished school in 2017 and I moved to Bujumbura. I arrived in Bujumbura, my life started to get a bit more difficult. I looked for a job, but couldn't find one. That's when I started to work as an independent photojournalist. That helped a bit because I wanted to go to university, but I didn't have any luck, because I didn't have money and a way to pay for university. That's when I started to cover events and I found a place where I could study this. It was at another house of journalism that's in Burundi. I continued to do this until 2019, 2020, and in 2021, too. In 2021, I continued to do this job, and then in 2022 I came here.

[Leaving Burundi], I think this is becoming the second story of my life, because it started with the same job. I remember it was a day when there was an event for a party, the ruling party. It was for the Imbonerakure. We can say that it's not a paramilitary group, but what they [do] in Burundi [is] basically they act as soldiers or policemen.[146] The ruling party organized it to prepare the young people [Imbonerakure], I don't know if it was for something bad, but it was like military training. I went to cover it, as usual, so I would earn some money. Before that, they forbade me. "No, we don't know you." We do all this and I said, "no, why not, I am independent and I will come." A bit further in the back, there were three of us, but I didn't know the other guys. We came as independent journalists, but I think that the others, they had cards and I didn't. I sold my photos to a certain guy from the opposition. They told me over the phone with a masked number, they told me, "I will send you the money if you take photos." And they said, "and then you have to send the photos to a different guy, to a different mister." It wasn't the same mister who gave me the money. End of story. I didn't know what they would do. I just needed the money.

After a while, I learned that the other guys disappeared. I don't know if they left the country or if they were kidnapped, because in Burundi, if someone does something bad, they would take them and torture them and ask questions why. I learned that the other guys weren't here. I got a message that said, "you can leave the country." And I said, "no, why, I work here, I earn money here, I earn to help out my younger brother and

[146] The Imbonerakure are a semi-formal, militarized, youth wing of the ruling CNDD-FDD party. They have been implicated in disappearances, murders, and rapes of dissidents or perceived opponents of the government, including of refugees in neighboring countries. See: ACLED, "Impunity, the Imbonerakure, and Instability in Burundi," *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, October 25, 2018, https://acleddata.com/2018/10/25/impunity-the-imbonerakure-and-instability-in-burundi/.

sister and where could I go?" I didn't have anywhere to go. That's when I said, "no, I have to stay here a bit longer." I stayed in the country. And after a while, I received another call. They called and said, "you are Abdul?" "Yeah." "You are a journalist?" "Yeah." "And you were present the day we had the event?" I thought they were asking too many questions. I said, "no, I don't know you, I don't want to tell you." I thought that it was someone from the government but I don't know. They decided not to tell me their name. And they said, "if you cherish your life, you will leave the country and look where you will go to." But I didn't have anywhere to go and I didn't have any money.

That's when I continued to live in Burundi and after two months, I met a mom and I told her my story and I asked for her help. "If you could help, that would mean a lot." I can say [this was] another connection that started with an event. There was an event at her place and someone suggested to her to hire me. And so I went there and took photos during her events. I continued to take photos during her events, each time she organized an event, she would call me. And then when I heard what would happen to me, I told her, like my cry out for help. I opened up and asked for her help. And she said, "go, I will tell you if I find something, if I can do anything for you." After three days, I think, she called me and saidm "I found a place you could go to. Visas are free." And I said, "where?" She said, "Serbia." Since I didn't have any luck and couldn't do anything and didn't have any money, I asked, "but how will I go, I don't have any money?" She said, "I can pay for your ticket and the hotel, and what will happen afterward, I don't know. You are a man, you have to figure it out on your own." And I told her, "thank you for your help," because she found someone who could help me with the documents and all that. I already had a passport. That's when I came here. I can say, [from journalism] I made a living from 2017 until the end of 2021. Since they told me you have a trip, I decided to sell the equipment that I had bought. And I was left with $300 that I brought here. I had the transit visa for Türkiye and the paper to visit this country. Also, I had the COVID paper.

I entered like a tourist, since visas are free, and I came to the airport in the first months of 2022. Bujumbura, Addis Ababa, Istanbul, Belgrade. First of all, because I didn't know Serbia before, I wanted to look around. I even had the documents that

allowed me to visit and I even had the phone number of someone from here. I don't know if it was a tourist agency, but I had already paid them to show me around the country. When I was at the airport, I didn't have time to offer them the number or to call, because they told us not to use our phones there, and because the police were pressuring me, I didn't think of it, to use the number. When I arrived at the airport, I showed them all of my documents. Before they let me in, they saw other Burundians that came with me, but I didn't know them and they had these documents. When I arrived, I counted 10 [Burundian] people at the airport. They told me these are the papers to claim asylum. They showed the documents to the police, and the police said, "okay, come, sit." They took them aside. I didn't have those papers. But I also thought, if I decide that Serbia is a country I can stay in… well, I couldn't go back to Burundi anyway. I said, "no, for me it's the first time." And the police officer at the airport told me, "no, you are Burundian, you will ask for asylum here like the others because Burundians don't come just for a visit. All the Burundians that come, they stay here, they don't go back." And I said, "oh, really?" Because I didn't know, and I said, "oh, really?" The police used to do this before, in February. I don't think they do it [now].

Okay. After that, I talked a bit with the police and they told me, "no, you have to come through here like everyone else." I said, "okay, as far as I'm concerned, that's not a problem." That's luck for me because I wouldn't get another chance to go back home, maybe for political reasons, even economic reasons, because I also wanted to change my life so I could look for a way to be with my little brother and sister. They told us not to leave without having our fingerprints taken. They took our fingerprints with a document they filled in. It was in Serbian as well, they took our measurements and they even took photos. They only gave us back our passports after they took our fingerprints. That's when they gave us papers to go to Preševo [camp]. I said, "no, I can't go right away, first I have to go to the hotel because I already paid for it." So I went to the hotel. I paid for nine days. I stayed eight days at the hotel and on the eighth day, that's when I went to [a different] camp. On the internet, I found where is Miksalište here in the city. I went there and told them I wanted asylum and asked if they could send me to a different

camp, one that is closer to the city. That's when they told me, "okay, you can go to Krnjača." So I went there.

My impressions [of Krnjača] were not good, because when I arrived there around 9 p.m., they made me stay in a room called confinement. If someone comes during the night, they bring them to this room to wait for the opening hours. That's where I was for a day and a half, and I had to stay there with someone from Egypt and another guy from Guinea. We were three people only and I said, "oh, is this the life that I'm looking for? That I will have here?" And I had to pray. If this is what God wanted, then I have to go through it, it will be better. And that's what happened because it is better. I find it's good to live there because we are free, I don't get the phone calls anymore because I had to change my number and I also think that they don't even know where I am now. In short, I think that it's a life. Just the fact that I am in a camp near the city, they give us freedom, we can go where we want to and they also offer us to study languages. That has been a good thing for me, because for me, a language is like, I think of it as luggage, something I can take with me, something that will help me in the future. That's why I told myself this is good. I can even lead a better life, they give us food, they give us what we need to shower, like soap and all that. That's about everything we need.

The first time I came [to the camp], I didn't even know there were other Burundians. But they told me, I remember the day, it was the second day after they took us in at the camp, to give us rooms, they told me there are other Burundians, "you will live with them." And I said, "no, I don't know them." And they said, "okay." I was there with a guy from Guinea and we both asked, "can we go with my friend here, that I met here, and we can live together?" [Now], the guy from Guinea has already left to another country. Right now, I live with another Burundian that I met there, too. We didn't know each other from before. There are a lot of people who invite, who continue to invite others who are in Burundi and they bring them here. But for me, that wasn't the case. I was surprised, too, when I got here and learned that there are ways to come here through others. Some other people even spend a lot of money to come here. That's for people who are in the camp. For me, it wasn't like this.

I remember, a week after I arrived to the camp, I was with a group of Burundians that I met there. They told me there was a place we could go to, a place called ADRA, I think you know them, and there they can help you, they can help us all. And so we went there and there they told us how we can ask for asylum and how long it takes to ask for asylum. I wanted to start because I was there and because we were told when we arrived at the camp that you can have 15 days to ask for asylum, to ask for a lawyer. And I said, "yeah, I can do this, I want a lawyer." They took my phone number and they called the lawyers' center, I think. After three or four days, they scheduled a meeting, to go and talk to someone from BCHR, and I went there since I wanted to start the process. I had to go, I talked to him, he told me to give him a summary of what had happened. I only told him, like, a brief story of how I got here. And he said, "okay, go, we will call you," but up until now, no one called and I couldn't continue my asylum procedure.

Now I continue to live in the camp. I met some mister, but this mister left as well to go to another country. This mister helped me by giving me a contact of a certain mister who works in construction here in Belgrade. And this mister, he called me and said I could go work there. Work as a mason's assistant. I help masons with painting or putting tiles, and I help them by bringing them the materials so that the work would be quicker and better for them. [The only other Burundians there] are the two guys I brought with me. I can say it's better, now I have already some words of Serbian. I can talk with them and also there are some Serbs and our boss, our boss also, he speaks English. Yeah, we speak a little in English, yeah, and some people in Serbian. He treats us like friends, also I can say that.

I think that I lead an excellent life. I thought about it already and I asked myself, why did I spend almost 25 years in Burundi without ever visiting another country like this one? I think that Serbia is good, not only because I found friends here. People here are good, they like to help others. Even the mister who helped me, he gave me a piece of advice, a lot of it, the man who hired me, my boss. He gave me some advice and I think he is, like, maybe it's a gift from heaven, because he helped me by telling me you have to behave like this. He told me everything. He said there are certain people who are not good, but I already knew this. Even in Burundi, there are people who are good and those

who are not good. And he said to always look at the bright side. In short, I can say that people here are welcoming and they love other people. Sometimes, I think it looks like maybe they are racists, but I never witnessed anything like that. They truly love us. I made friends at the place I worked at. It was only two, but then I went to work at another place and I made four friends. We talk to each other often. And then another guy from Ghana who also works there that I met.

[In terms of] The Workshop, it helps me a lot. I think I can say it helps me a lot because I made friends here that I didn't know before, and then I learn Serbian and English. I already see progress because if I'm on the street, I can speak Serbian and I can chitchat with someone in Serbian, even if I speak poorly, a bit poorly, but they understand me anyway. Because if I'm at work, I use a lot, I use the language often. Even if they say something in English, if I know how to say it in Serbian, I focus on responding in Serbian. I can say that The Workshop is something good for us. Not just for us. For those who want to learn a language. I also found good teachers. Because you give us everything we want. For me, there are so many things to talk about, I don't know how I could describe it because for me it's so, so good. I have my own way of learning and that helps a lot. I make an effort to speak with others and I buy Serbian books so I can continue to read and understand better. And I can also say that I take all of your time so I can understand a language. [When I speak Serbian], people from here think this is really, really, really great because they get excited, they tell me, "wow, you speak Serbian!" And they congratulate me by telling me, "you speak well." Even if it's not that good, they still say it's very, very good and continue to talk to me. They can talk and I can understand what they are saying in Serbian and I answer a little bit because I'm afraid to talk because I'm a beginner.

It was in the camp that I met someone who told me, "I'm studying in the city, I'm learning a language." And I asked, "where are you learning?" And he only said, "in the city." He didn't want to tell me where. I said, "okay, I would like to learn, too." And then he said, "we are learning on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, if you can, you can come, too," and I said, "okay." One day I followed him here and I continue to come. But there were other people who came here with me, who wanted to learn as well. But today, they

are not here. I think they go to find another country, [not back] to Burundi. I think it's because, in the camp, there are rumors that you can't get asylum here, they don't give documents. That's why people continue to leave and look for another place where they can get documents.

I don't know, of course, because the future is in God's hands. But for me, what I want, it's first of all to help my brother and my little sister. So that what happened to me in life doesn't happen to them as well. In five years, I want to make up for the time I lost in Burundi. I have no idea [about bringing my siblings here]. Because we've been told if we get asylum, they can help our families, too. I don't know how this can happen, but it would be good to be with them, better than to be separated for good.

I spoke to Abdul again in August. By this point, The Workshop had connected Abdul with a lawyer and he'd been able to formally enter the asylum procedure. I asked Abdul about the process and what else was new in his life.

Alright, I don't know where to start, but I think I have to thank you first because [after our first interview] I thought so much about what I should do. I was waiting for a lawyer and I didn't know if they would come or not, but I had help after we spoke about my story. That's when I got a lawyer and I can say that she is really helping me because she helped me prepare my story, she asked me how I got here, she asks all the important questions, everything she will present to the police. And then she said that everything is going well and that my story got accepted by the police. She says, "you will wait for a few days then you'll get an ID card for asylum seekers. A card that will help you live here permanently while waiting to get asylum or until they invite you for an interview with the police." Currently, I am waiting to get news about this, to get a card, because I think if I don't have a card, I am here in Serbia without authorization. That's why I told myself that it's very important. You really helped me. I needed it. Everything is going well because of you. Thank you very much.

The job I had before, that's finished. Now I work with someone else. He calls me, "you can go to work today, tomorrow there is no work," just like he called me earlier. But

now it's better because before where I worked, I can say that it was a hard job, but anyway I finished that. Now I work as a painter because the man is a painter. He helps me learn, he teaches me how to paint or how to mix different colors. He helps me with all this, I think he pays me well and sometimes he invites me to have lunch together. They are nice people. Sometimes he asks me to be with them, we make jokes, we do everything. I think he also helps me with the language. We use Serbian a lot because he doesn't speak English well and he doesn't like English. Sometimes he repeats something multiple times. I tell him, "yeah, I understood everything," and he will try to say it in English but I tell him, "no, no, it's okay, I already got it!" I think it's better because with them, it's going well, I can get by with what you taught me here. It's also a pleasure because if I speak and they are happy, I am also happy. I tell myself The Workshop did a good job after all because it's thanks to them that I can even say this.

Thank you so much. I'm really grateful for you and Jana. Sometimes I don't have the words to explain it. Because for a while, I was thinking to stop everything, if I get money maybe I can go to another place, maybe I can do like the other Burundians who were here. But the day I found you guys and this help, I was thinking differently. Because I am a believer, it made me think, maybe it's something that God put on my path. I am very, very proud of you, that's why I tell myself, I can't do anything to thank you, but God will do it for me. That's why the day you told me that you were leaving The Workshop, it made me think a lot. But this is life. We meet someone, sometimes we say it's by chance but it's not, God did this for us. If I am here today, it's because God wanted me to meet the two of you and you to meet me, maybe. If you can help me today, maybe tomorrow I can help you, or tomorrow you can help me again or I can help someone else, that's how it goes. That's how I understand life.

Conclusion

Why Serbia? This is my research question at its core. Across the 11 direct testimonies, discussions of other stories, and the analysis sections, I have tried to draw out the overlapping reasons refugees have stayed in Serbia. To begin with, it bears repeating that for many staying in Serbia was not their decision. Some, like Jafar, Fazal, Karoh, and Zaki, found themselves 'stuck' in Serbia, physically and mentally exhausted by the EU border gambit, and thus applied for asylum. Others, like Safaa and Amran, applied for protection in Serbia as a stop-gap and, a decade later, find their options circumscribed by Serbia's policies on travel documentation and naturalization. For those of this category who now express satisfaction with their lives in Serbia, bright spots emerge not from any state-run integration regime, but from the assistance of NGOs, the personal relationships asylees have built in their new communities, and the perseverance of individual asylees themselves. Some arrived as children and have benefitted from education, social support, and the adaptability afforded by age. Others have found acceptance at work, in religious communities — or from *roštilj* restaurateurs/folk singers who support their dreams of opening a gym. For those who came to Serbia purposefully with an immediate intention to stay — Emil, Leila, Sina, Belquis, Yurdelis, and Abdul — the pre-eminent concern was escaping existential immobility and threats to life. Serbia is not in the EU, the global core — but they saw a chance to escape the periphery for the semi-periphery, to move through a small hole in the border regime that normally separates such realms. Their decisions to stay since have been informed primarily by interpersonal connections facilitating work, housing, education, and community. In Serbia, they've found lives safer than those in their origin countries and more relaxed, affordable, and culturally similar than those they might find in the EU.

From here, I have attempted to draw out a larger narrative regarding the contradicting influences on Serbia's asylum system and its migration management policies, as elucidated by the specific migration routes and obstacles described by participants. It may be obvious, but for someone to stay in Serbia, they first have to find themselves there. This prerequisite,

however, is not as simple as it might seem. As visible across testimonies, not just during the 'crisis' period but preceding and since, Serbia has been increasingly folded into a circular, multilateral, and structurally violent EU border regime founded on the deterrence paradigm. Territorially, this regime precedes Serbia, meaning that it is a challenge for many to even reach Serbia to begin with, facing obstacles in Bulgaria, Türkiye, and as far as the Iranian-Afghan border. Serbia has pursued this assimilation willingly in exchange for mobility concessions for its own citizens, and the result is an infrastructure that keeps some asylum-seekers permanently or semi-permanently in Serbia — but that otherwise has been largely ineffective in preventing the hundreds of thousands who've eventually found their way past. At the same time, Serbia's peripherality to the EU project, both historically and contemporarily, has led it to pursue a multipolar geopolitical agenda that has unintentionally created mobility paths not viable elsewhere on the European continent. In these mobilities, we see asylum-seekers who view Serbia as an intentional and permanent destination — not as a state of prolonged transit.

Affirming this destination potential and challenging the transit narrative is important for several reasons. First, it asserts the need for vast improvements to the Serbian asylum system, the deficiencies of which have long hidden behind the idea that 'no one wants to stay' in Serbia, anyhow. Second, it challenges the Orientalist narrative, prevalent in many areas of European political discourse, that Serbia and other post-Yugoslav states are both literally and rhetorically 'preceding' the EU — undeveloped and socially repressive states awaiting enlightenment vis-à-vis European accession and its agendas. Rather, the EU and Serbia share responsibility for the dismal state of human rights access for people-on-the-move in Serbia. Meanwhile, thousands of people-on-the-move continue to challenge the border infrastructure instituted by both parties, and the widespread discourse of the Balkan route's 'closure,' through their continued presence and mobility. Finally, the nature of the Iranian, Cuban, and Burundian paths — those opened by the Serbian government's conscious decision to liberalize visa regimes — makes evident the state's ability to create and respect safe pathways to asylum access. The 'irregularity' of other migrations is thus revealed as the

one opening for human rights mobilization amid a decades-long slide toward restrictions on the right to asylum across the world.

Regardless of how one came to find themselves in Serbia, the barriers to integration are many and visible across the first-person histories presented here: low wages, job insecurity, inaccessibility of housing, language difficulties, social discrimination, and, most importantly, no viable path toward passport possession or naturalization. The detrimental effects of this *de facto* policy (again, contradicting laws and precedents already in place) cannot be overstated. A refugee's inability to naturalize means they will never have a stable base for living, always dependent on renewal of status. Nor can refugees enjoy the political and social rights that reaffirm their belonging and equality in society, such as voting. The inability to travel, meanwhile, takes an immense psychological toll as it precludes family visitation, leisure, self-actualization, and self-discovery. It also subjects refugees to a level of immobilization largely equivalent to that of irregular migration: able to move within a territory, but not out of it, or else be instantly illegalized. The Serbian state's issuance of this documentation would be the single greatest way to facilitate refugees' wider and more sustainable integration.

No one I spoke to could parse why the state has been so reluctant to implement the relevant laws it's already passed. Perhaps they don't want asylees to stay in Serbia; perhaps, conversely, there is pressure to prevent the potential use of these documents to travel to and then overstay in the EU. But these testimonies contest that these documents might be the only thing to keep refugees in Serbia *and* create an equal relationship between refugees and host communities. Many of the featured participants have built rich and fulfilling lives in Serbia. They want to stay, but they want to see the world, too, to visit family, to have access to these things like a Serbian citizen, without having to give up the life they built. The current policy forces them to choose: stay forever, or leave and never come back. There is, of course, a third option. Discussing the passport issue during our interview, Safaa used the following metaphor:

> *If you come to me, you are tired, I open the door for you. I say, "you are really in a safe place." If [I] feel that, I must give you everything. I must give you food. I must*

give you where to sleep. I'm not saying to you, "okay, come in my home." And you just stand.

Asylum, as a legal obligation, does not end upon a state's granting of status. Protected individuals in host societies have internationally-recognized rights to work, housing, social inclusion, and, eventually, citizenship. Indeed, refugees in Serbia have been left standing for too long. Three years, five years, as many as 13. Their chair at the table is ready, built. It's time someone welcomes them to sit.

Acknowledgements

A very wide circle of people made this report possible. I first want to thank again those who offered feedback and edits. I especially want to acknowledge Jessica Collins-Bojović, who read multiple drafts and talked me through my many doubts and questions; Jana Canović, who was invaluable as an editor, interpreter, transcriber, and friend; and Stevan Tatalović, who has been a mentor and friend of mine for many years.

Every organization cited in this report generously gave their time, resources, and knowledge. In addition to those mentioned and cited in this report, I also want to thank by name Rhys Hartley and Nick Johns-Wickberg from RAS and Vuk Vučković from KlikAktiv.

Thanks to the Fulbright Program for supporting this project; to the other Fulbright grantees for making Belgrade feel like home; to Laura Hebert, Lan Chu, and Jennifer Locke of Occidental College for their feedback when this project was just an idea; to my friends and family for their support from the other side of the world.

Most of all, thank you to Abdul, Belquis, Emil, Fazal, Jafar, Karoh, Leila, Mihail, S, Safaa, Sina, Yurdelis, and Zaki. You welcomed me into your homes, your lives, and your memories. Your hope buoys me, and I intend to carry it forward.

Appendices

#1: Participant Interviews

#	Person	Relationship	1st Interview	Location	2nd Interview	Location	Total Length	Interviewee spoke	Interviewer spoke	Interpreter	Further contact	Draft in	Notes
1	S: Afghan, M, 19	Personal (Info Park/KlikAktiv)	14/12/2021	Info Park	17/07/2022	Info Park	0:39:15	ENG	ENG	N/A	ENG	ENG	I knew S for two months before interviewing him. We also interacted often through KlikAktiv and Info Park's activities and sometimes went to bars and cafes together.
2	Jafar: Iranian (Kurd), M, 32	Referred by CRPC	21/01/2022	CRPC	13/05/2022	(Virtual)	1:49:42	SRB	ENG	Nemanja Kovačević, CRPC	SRB/ENG	ENG	Jafar can understand ENG well but said he can't express his full range of experiences using it (similar to my level of SRB). Our interviews were in SRB with interpretation and our correspondence via WhatsApp was in SRB. However, Jafar reviewed the draft in ENG.
3	Fazal: Afghan, M, 20	Referred by CRPC	25/01/2022	CRPC	04/11/2022	(Virtual)	0:59:48	ENG/SRB	ENG	Nemanja Kovačević, CRPC	ENG	ENG	Nemanja Kovačević was present to assist in interpretation during my first interview with Fazal, but Fazal's ENG was advanced enough that we communicated mostly in ENG.
4	Karoh: Iraqi (Kurd), M, 21	Referred by CRPC	01/02/2022	CRPC	13/05/2022	(Virtual)	1:20:13	SRB	ENG	Nemanja Kovačević, CRPC	SRB/ENG	ENG	Karoh can understand ENG well but said he can't express his full range of experiences using it (similar to my level of

													SRB). Our interviews were in SRB with interpretation and our correspondence via WhatsApp was in SRB. However, Karoh reviewed the draft in ENG.
5	Emil: Iranian, M, 55	Referred by BCHR	21/03/2022	Cafe	26/07/2022	Family business	1:35:37	ENG	ENG	N/A	ENG	ENG	No further notes
6	Belquis: Cuban, F, 30	Referred by BCHR	22/03/2022	Private home	Written	(Virtual)	2:01:26	ESP	ESP	N/A	ESP	ESP	I hired Maria Luisa Valencia, a Colombian former colleague of mine, to transcribe this interview. I knew, as a native speaker, she could transcribe more quickly and accurately.
7	Yurdelis: Cuban, M, 37	Referred by BCHR	22/03/2022	Private home	Via Belquis	(Virtual)	(Above)	ESP	ESP	N/A	ESP	ESP	See above
8	Safaa: Iraqi, M, 65	Referred by PIN	29/03/2022	Private home	Declined	N/A	1:24:44	ENG	ENG	N/A	ENG	ENG	No further notes
9	Zaki: Afghan, M, 21	Referred by IDEAS	04/04/2022	Cafe	27/08/2022	Cafe	2:03:22	ENG	ENG	N/A	ENG	ENG	Zaki's ENG was the most advanced of all participants (along with Sina), and he took the most active role in editing and writing his testimony.
10	Mihail: Iranian, M, 41	Referred by IDEAS	22/04/2022	Cafe	19/07/2022	Restaurant	2:09:13	ENG	ENG	N/A	ENG	ENG	No further notes
11	Sina: Iranian, M, 22	Referred by Emil	29/04/2022	Cafe	09/08/2022	(Virtual)	1:27:58	ENG	ENG	N/A	ENG	ENG	No further notes
12	Leila: Iranian, F, 50	Referred by Emil	26/05/2022	Cafe	26/07/2022	Family business	1:02:40	ENG	ENG	N/A	ENG	ENG	No further notes

13	Abdul: Burundian, M, 26	Personal (RAS)	15/06/2022	The Workshop	22/08/2022	The Workshop	2:57:38	FRA	ENG	Jana Canović, RAS	FRA/SRB/ENG	ENG	I knew Abdul for four months before interviewing him. Jana Canović conducted FRA to ENG interpretation, transcription, and translation for our two interviews and assisted Abdul in reviewing the ENG draft. Abdul and I communicated in ENG and SRB.

#2: Service Provider Interviews

#	Organization	Date	Location	Description	Representative(s)	Notes
1	Save the Children (StC)	15/11/2021	Belgrade	Serbian branch of the child protection INGO	Bogdan Krasić (director), Nikolina Milić (research and data analysis coordinator)	StC staff also provided helpful feedback on my project focus and methodology across meetings. I also wrote a country-of-origin review for their 2021 annual report.
2	Institute for Youth Education (IYE)	26/11/2021	Niš	Safe house for UASC; working agreement with state social work agencies to house refugee UASC	Two child-care workers	Representatives interviewed on condition of anonymity.
3	Crisis Response and Policy Centre (CRPC)	19/01/2022	Banovo Brdo	Local NGO: research, human rights promotion, integration services	Maja Dragojević (information manager), Branislava Pokuševski-Kumalakanta (integration case manager)	Nemanja Kovačević, former CRPC project coordinator, provided crucial assistance in scheduling and interpreting interviews with Jafar, Fazal, and Karoh.
4	Save the Children (StC)	04/02/2022	Belgrade	Serbian branch of the child protection INGO	Nikolina Milić (research and data analysis coordinator), Tatjana Ristić (advocacy and campaigns specialist)	See note on #1
5	Jesuit Refugee Service	21/02/	Belgrade	Serbian branch of	Miodrag Živković (director)	N/A

	(JRS)	2022		faith-based INGO; runs a safe house for UASC in Belgrade		
6	Psychosocial Innovation Network (PIN)	23/02/2022	Belgrade	Local NGO: mental health services for vulnerable populations	Aleksandra Bobić (psychologist)	N/A
7	Belgrade Centre for Human Rights (BCHR)	25/02/2022	Belgrade	Local NGO: research, human rights promotion, and legal representation	Nina Miholjčić (asylum and migration program officer), Andrijana Miljković (integration officer)	N/A
8	KlikAktiv - Center for Development of Social Policies (KlikAktiv)	01/03/2022	Belgrade	Local NGO: NFI provision, border monitoring, and legal representation for asylum seekers and the unhoused	Milica Švabić, attorney	I accompanied KlikAktiv on several NFI deliveries to border squats and assisted Švabić in country-of-origin research for asylum client preparation meetings.
9	Info Park	29/03/2022	Belgrade	Local NGO: information hub, NFI provision, and empowerment programs for people-on-the-move	Irena Abdelmaksoud, co-director	Abdelmaksoud has left Info Park since our interview; I volunteered with Info Park's boys' day empowerment program.
10	IDEAS Centre for Research and Social Development (IDEAS)	06/04/2022	Belgrade	Local NGO: research and legal representation for asylum seekers	Nikola Kovačević, director and attorney	I assisted IDEAS in translation and interpretation to prepare case files for two Cuban asylum seekers.

#3: Original Informed Consent Form (English)

Author Note: *This is the original consent form provided in English to S and in Serbian to Jafar, Fazal, and Karoh (see page 167), before I had developed the idea of including full-length first-person testimonies. After deciding on that path, I discussed the changes with S, Jafar, Fazal, and Karoh, editing their testimonies with them, and explicitly asking for consent on the updated components, such as name inclusion.*

Informed Consent

Research Project: Decision-Making, Resettlement, and Integration of Asylum and Subsidiary Protection Grantees in Serbia

Researcher: Zach Goodwin, zach.c.goodwin@gmail.com
Organization: The Fulbright Association

Purpose of the Study:
You are being invited to participate in a research study. You will be one of between 10 and 20 asylum or subsidiary protection grantees in Serbia asked to describe your travel to Serbia, your experience with the Serbian asylum system, and your life in Serbia since you received protected status. The goal of the project is to identify why some grantees stay in Serbia while others leave Serbia, and to identify where the government and NGOs can expand programs to better support integration into Serbian society.

Form:
This research will take the form of an academic paper, an NGO report, and/or a long-form article(s) published in a news outlet. Your name will not be included, and you would be identified only by demographic information including nationality, age, and/or the year of your asylum decision in Serbia. Should I want to include your name in a publication, I will seek your further consent.

Your Rights:
Participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time. I will record the interview in order to most accurately capture your words and experiences. You have the right to review the transcripts of this recording. The interview will include questions about difficult subjects, including the reasons why you left your home country and your experiences during your migration to Europe. You have the right to decline to answer any question.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Consent:
I, _____, consent to participation in this study. I confirm that I am 18 years of age or older. I understand the content of the interview, that my name will not be included, and that the results of this study will be published for public reading. I understand that I can withdraw my participation at any point.

Interviewee (Name in Print)

_____

Interviewee (Signature)

_____

Interviewer (Name in Print)

_____

Interviewer (Signature)

_____

#4: Original Informed Consent Form (Serbian)

Author Note: *This is the Serbian translation of the original consent form on page 165, issued to Jafar, Fazal, and Karoh and translated by Jana Canović (RAS). See author note, page 165.*

Informisani pristanak

Istraživački projekat: Donošenje odluka, ponovno naseljavanje i integracija lica kojima je odobreno pravo na azil ili supsidijarna zaštita u Srbiji (Decision-Making, Resettlement, and Integration of Asylum and Subsidiary Protection Grantees in Serbia)

Istraživač: Zach Goodwin, zach.c.goodwin@gmail.com
Organizacija: Udruženje Fulbrajt (The Fulbright Association)

Cilj istraživanja:
Pozvani ste da učestvujete u istraživanju. Bićete jedan od između 10 i 20 osoba kojima je odobreno pravo na azil ili supsidijarna zaštita u Srbiji. Od Vas će biti zatraženo da opišete Vaše putovanje do Srbije, Vaše iskustvo sa srpskim sistemom azila, kao i Vaš život u Srbiji od kada Vam je odobreno pravo na azil ili supsidijarna zaštita. Cilj projekta je da se identifikuje zašto neke osobe kojima je odobreno pravo na azil ili supsidijarna zaštita ostaju u Srbiji, a drugi je napuštaju, kao i da se identifikuje gde vlada i nevladine organizacije mogu da prošire programe kako bi bolje podržali integraciju u srpsko društvo.

Forma:
Rezultati istraživanja biće objavljeni u formi akademskog rada, izveštaja nevladine organizacije i/ili jednog ili više članaka objavljenih u novinama. Vaše ime neće biti navedeno, bićete identifikovani samo po demografskim podacima uključujući nacionalnost, godine i/ili godinu Vaše odluke o azilu u Srbiji. Ako budem želeo da uvrstim Vaše ime u publikaciju, tražiću Vašu dalju saglasnost.

Vaša prava:
Učešće je dobrovoljno i može se povući u bilo kom trenutku. Snimaću intervju kako bih što tačnije zabeležio Vaše reči i iskustva. Imate pravo da pregledate transkripte ovog snimka. Intervju će uključivati pitanja o teškim temama, uključujući razloge zašto ste napustili svoju domovinu i Vaša iskustva tokom Vaše migracije u Evropu. Imate pravo da odbijete da odgovorite na bilo koje pitanje.
Dobićete kopiju ovog obrasca da sačuvate za svoju evidenciju.

Pristanak:
Ja, _____, dajem saglasnost za učešće u ovom istraživanju.
Potvrđujem da imam 18 ili više godina. Razumem sadržaj intervjua, da moje ime neće biti uključeno i da će rezultati ovog istraživanja biti objavljeni za javno čitanje. Razumem da mogu da povučem svoje učešće u bilo kom trenutku.

Ispitanik (Ime i prezime)

_____

Ispitanik (Potpis)

_____

Ispitivač (Ime i prezime)

_____

Ispitivač (Potpis)

_____

#5: Updated Informed Consent Form (English)

Author's Note: *This is the updated consent form provided to Emil, Safaa, Zaki, Mihail, Sina, Leila, and Abdul in English and to Belquis and Yurdelis in Spanish (see page 171). It includes the details of the first-person testimony format. In Abdul's case, Jana Canović (RAS) was present to provide English-to-French interpretation to ensure Abdul's full comprehension of the form.*

Informed Consent

Research Project: Decision-Making, Resettlement, and Integration of Asylum and Subsidiary Protection Grantees in Serbia

Researcher: Zach Goodwin, zach.c.goodwin@gmail.com
Organization: The Fulbright Association

Purpose of the Study:
You are being invited to participate in a research study. You will be one of between 10 and 20 asylum or subsidiary protection grantees in Serbia asked to describe your travel to Serbia, your experience with the Serbian asylum system, and your life in Serbia since you received protected status. The goal of the project is to identify why some grantees stay in Serbia while others leave Serbia, and to identify where the government and NGOs can expand programs to better support integration into Serbian society.

Form:
This research will take the form of an academic paper, an NGO report, and/or a long-form article(s) published in a news outlet.

I am also converting the transcript of each interview into a first-person narrative, which will be included in an oral history collection containing a selection of interviews from this project. After I assemble the narrative based on our interview, I will provide you with the opportunity to review the narrative. You will have the opportunity to add, correct, or

redact information from this narrative in order to ensure accuracy and/or protect your safety.

You also have the option of including or redacting your name. Please indicate below if it is okay for your name to be included. If you select 'no,' you will not be identified by name. Instead, you will be identified by your initials and the demographic information you provided in our interview.

I am okay with my name being included:

___ Yes. ___ No.

Your Rights:

Participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time. I will record the interview in order to most accurately capture your words and experiences. You have the right to review the transcripts of this recording. The interview will include questions about difficult subjects, including the reasons why you left your home country and your experiences during your migration to Europe. You have the right to decline to answer any question.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Consent:

I, _____, consent to participation in this study. I confirm that I am 18 years of age or older. I understand the content of the interview, that my name will not be included, and that the results of this study will be published for public reading. I understand that I can withdraw my participation at any point.

Participant (Name in Print)	Interviewer (Name in Print)
_____	_____
Participant (Signature)	Interviewer (Signature)
_____	_____

Date

_____

#6: Updated Informed Consent Form (Spanish)

Author's Note: *This is the Spanish translation of the updated informed consent form, provided to Belquis and Yurdelis and translated by the author. See author's note, page 169.*

Formulario de Consentimiento
Proyecto de Investigación: el Proceso Decisorio, el Reasentamiento, y la Integración de Recipientes de Asilo y/o Protección Subsidiaria en Serbia

Investigador: Zach Goodwin, zach.c.goodwin@gmail.com
Organizacíon: La Asociación Fulbright (The Fulbright Association)

El propósito del estudio:
Usted ha sido invitado a participar en un estudio de investigación. Usted será uno de los 10 a 20 recipientes de asilo o protección subsidiaria en Serbia a quienes les pediré que describen sus viajes a Serbia, sus experiencias con el sistema de asilo serbio, y sus vidas en Serbia después de que recibieron estatus protegido. La meta del proyecto es identificar por qué algunos refugiados se quedan en Serbia mientras otros deciden salir, e identificar donde el gobierno y las ONGs podrían expandir sus programas para apoyar mejor la integración de refugiados en Serbia.

Forma:
Los resultados de esta investigación serán publicados en forma de artículo(s) académico(s), reportaje(s) de ONG, y/o artículo(s) periodístico(s).

También, cada entrevista será convertida en forma de una narración de primera persona. Esta narración será parte de una colección de historias orales, la cual incluirá una selección de las entrevistas de este proyecto. Después de que preparo la narración basada en nuestra entrevista, Usted tendrá la oportunidad de revisar la narración. Ud.

tendrá la oportunidad de añadir, corregir, o redactar información de esta narración para que asegure la exactitud de la información y su propio/a seguridad.

Usted también tiene la opción de incluir o no su nombre. Por favor, indica debajo si puede ser incluido su nombre. Si Usted indique que 'no,' Usted no será identificado/a por nombre. En lugar de esto, Usted solo será identificado por sus iniciales y la información demográfica que dió en nuestra entrevista.

No hay problema que incluya mi nombre

__ Si. __ No.

Sus Derechos:

Usted puede rescindir su participación voluntaria en cualquier momento. Yo grabaré nuestra entrevista para que se capturen sus palabras y experiencias con exactitud. Usted tiene el derecho de revisar la transcripción de esta grabación. La entrevista incluirá cuestiones sobre sujetos difíciles: por ejemplo, por qué salió de su país de origen y cómo fue su viaje a Europa. Usted tiene el derecho de negar contestar cualquier pregunta.

Yo le daré una copia de esta forma para sus propios registros.

Consentimiento:

Yo, _____, doy mi consentimiento como participante en este estudio. Juro que tengo 18 años de edad o más. Entiendo el contenido de la entrevista, que mi nombre será incluido solo si diera mi consentimiento, y que los resultados del estudio se pondrán a disposición del público. Entiendo que puedo rescindir mi participación en cualquier momento.

Participante (Nombre) Entrevistador (Nombre)

_____ _____

Participante (Firma) Entrevistador (Firma)

_____ _____

Fecha

_____

#7: Base Questions for Asylum and Subsidiary Protection Grantees

Author's Note: *The below is a non-exhaustive list of questions the author prepared and used for semi-structured interviews with project participants.*

Origin Country

1. Tell me about life in your home country. What was your hometown like? What was your occupation? What was your family situation?
2. When and how did you decide to leave your home country?

Information: country of origin, city of origin, family situation, reason for emigration.

Migration

3. When you left your home country, where did you want to go and why?
4. Can you walk me through how you traveled from your home country to Serbia?

Information: original decision-making, migration route to Serbia.

Serbian Asylum Process

5. When did you arrive in Serbia and where were you first accommodated?
6. When and how did you decide to apply for asylum in Serbia?
7. Can you tell me about your experience with the Serbian asylum procedure? How long did it take, was it a difficult process, etc?

Information: time and point of arrival in Serbia, accommodation in Serbia, experience with the Serbian asylum procedure.

Post-Asylum: Details of Daily Life

8. What is your life like in Serbia today? Where do you work? Where do you live? Who do you live and socialize with?

9. What has been your experience searching for work and/or working in Serbia?
10. Have you gone to school in Serbia and/or attempted to learn the Serbian language? What has that experience been like?
11. Walk me through a day of your life in Serbia.
12. What do you do for fun or to relax?

Information: employment and education in Serbia, social life and social circles, language skills

Post-Asylum: Future

13. Where do you see yourself in five years? Do you want to stay in Serbia, or do you want to go elsewhere?
14. What would convince you to stay in Serbia? What would convince you to leave?
15. What do you like about life in Serbia?
16. What has been the hardest part of life in Serbia?
17. What do you consider your purpose in Serbia? What gives you fulfillment?
18. What would you tell someone from your home country who wants to come to Serbia?

Information: future decision-making, satisfaction, information networks, divergent experiences influencing length/permanence of stay

Works Cited

ACLED. “Impunity, the Imbonerakure, and Instability in Burundi.” *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project.* October 25, 2018, https://acleddata.com/2018/10/25/impunity-the-imbonerakure-and-instability-in-burundi/.

Andrews, Nicky. “Seeing the Iranian church grow...in Serbia.” *OM,* October 16, 2018. https://www.om.org/en/news/seeing-iranian-church-growin-serbia

Atkins, Matthieu. *The Naked Don’t Fear the Water: An Underground Journey with Afghan Refugees*. New York: Harper, 2022.

Barutciski, Michael. “EU States and the Refugee Crisis in the Former Yugoslavia.” *Refuge* 14, no. 3 (June-July 1994): 32-35.

Belgrade Centre for Human Rights. *Right to Asylum in the Republic of Serbia 2016.* Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2017. http://www.bgcentar.org.rs/bgcentar/eng-lat/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Right-to-Asylum-in-the-Republic-of-Serbia-2016-2.pdf.

Belgrade Centre for Human Rights. *Right to Asylum in the Republic of Serbia 2017.* Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2018. http://azil.rs/en/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Right-to-Asylum-in-the-Republic-of-Serbia-2017.pdf.

Belgrade Centre for Human Rights. *Right to Asylum in the Republic of Serbia 2018.* Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2019. http://azil.rs/en/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Right-to-Asylum-2018.pdf.

Belgrade Centre for Human Rights. *Right to Asylum in the Republic of Serbia 2021.* Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2022. http://azil.rs/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Right-to-Asylum-in-the-Republic-of-Serbia-2021.pdf.

Belgrade Centre for Human Rights. *Right to Asylum in the Republic of Serbia Periodic Report for January–June 2022*. Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2022.

http://azil.rs/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Right-to-Asylum-in-the-Republic-of-Serbia-Periodic-Report-for-January-June-2022.pdf

Beznec, Barbara, Marc Speer, and Marta Stojić Mitrović. *Governing the Balkan Route: North Macedonia, Serbia and the European Border Regime*. Belgrade: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Europe, 2016. https://bordermonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/5-Governing-the-Balkan-Route-web.pdf.

"Burundi povukao priznanje Kosova." *Radio-televizija Srbije,* February 17, 2018. https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3041793/dacic-burundi-povukao-priznanje-kosova.html

Carter, Dylan. "Eight times as many asylum seekers from Burundi to Belgium." *The Brussels Times*, August 10, 2022. https://www.brusselstimes.com/270074/number-of-asylum-seekers-from-burundi-increases-eightfold-in-belgium.

Conley, Heather A. and Dejana Sarić. "The Serbia-Kosovo Normalization Process: A Temporary U.S. Decoupling." *Center for Strategic and International Studies,* May 27, 2021. https://www.csis.org/analysis/serbia-kosovo-normalization-process-temporary-us-decoupling

De Stone, Roshan and David L. Suber. "What the expulsion of Cuban asylum seekers from Greece reveals about EU and US migration policies." *The New Humanitarian*, March 30, 2022. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2022/03/30/expulsion-cuban-asylum-seekers-greece-eu-us-migration-policies

Dragojlo, Saša. "'False Hope': Burundians Duped into Paying Big for Serbia Asylum." *Balkan Insight,* March 23, 2022. https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/23/false-hope-burundians-duped-into-paying-big-for-serbia-asylum/

Dragojlo, Saša. "Serbia Ends Visa Regimes with Tunisia and Burundi." *Balkan Insight,* October 25, 2022.

https://balkaninsight.com/2022/10/25/serbia-ends-visa-free-regimes-with-tunisia-and-burundi/

Društvo Putnika Srbije. “Srbija ukinula vize za državljane Republike Burundi.” *Društvo Putnika Srbije,* June 21, 2018. http://www.drustvoputnikasrbije.rs/srbija-ukinula-vize-za-drzavljane-republike-burundi/

Duranti, Giancarlo and Olvers di Prata. “Everything is about time: does it have the same meaning all over the world?” *Project Management Insitute*, May 20, 2009. https://www.pmi.org/learning/library/everything-time-monochronism-polychronism-orientation-6902

Ellis, Bethany. *Iranian Refugees in Serbia: Drivers of Migration.* Belgrade: Save the Children North West Balkans, 2018.

“Equality Commissioner Finds Banca Intesa Discriminated against Refugees and Asylum Seekers.” *Belgrade Centre for Human Rights*, July 12, 2021. http://www.bgcentar.org.rs/bgcentar/eng-lat/equality-commissioner-finds-banca-intesa-discriminated-against-refugees-and-asylum-seekers/

European Commission. *Serbia 2018 Report: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions*. Strasbourg: European Commission, 2018. https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2019-05/20180417-serbia-report.pdf#page4

Fontanari, Elena. *Lives in Transit: An Ethnographic Study of Refugees’ Subjectivity across European Borders*. New York: Routledge, 2019.

“Frontex expands presence in Western Balkans with operation in Serbia.” *Frontex*, June 16, 2016. https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-expands-presence-in-western-balkans-with-operation-in-serbia-9WRMiW

Gatarić, Ljubica. “U Iraku Je Radilo 100.000 Radnika Iz SFRJ.” *Večerniji*, March 22, 2022. https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/u-iraku-je-radilo-100000-radnika-iz-sfrj-732836.

Georgievski, Jovana. “Izbeglice, azil i Srbija: Zašto je mlada Afrikanka došla u Srbiju po bolji život.” *BBC Srbija*, August 10, 2021. https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-57861050

Georgievksi, Jovana. “»Niko i ništa« u Beogradu.” *Vreme*, December 19, 2019. https://www.vreme.com/vreme/niko-i-nista-u-beogradu/

Goodwin, Zachary. “Burundi, Serbia, and Fortress Europe.” *Medium*, November 15, 2022. https://medium.com/@zacharycgoodwin/burundi-serbia-and-fortress-europe-889a39a63a79.

Goodwin, Zachary. “How Accessible is the Asylum Procedure in Serbia?” *Medium*, April 5, 2022. https://medium.com/@zacharycgoodwin/how-accessible-is-the-asylum-procedure-in-serbia-ff5994af6b52

Goodwin, Zachary. “How Burundians Became Serbia’s Third-Largest Refugee Group.” *KlikAktiv*, February 28, 2022. https://klikaktiv.org/journal/how-burundians-became-serbias-third-largest-refugee-group

Goodwin, Zachary. “State Controls and Narrative Constructions of Migration, Smuggling, and Europe at the Serbian-Hungarian Border.” *The Yale Review of International Studies* 12, no. 2 (2022): http://yris.yira.org/essays/5649

Güler, Arzu. “Turkey's Geographical Limitation: The Legal Implications of an Eventual Lifting.” *International Migration* 58, no. 5 (2019): https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/imig.12683.

Hage, Ghassan. “Waiting out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality.” In *Waiting*, edited by Ghassan Hage, 97-106. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2009.

Hameršak, Marijana, Sabine Hess, Marc Speer, and Marta Stojić Mitrović. “The Forging of the Balkan Route: Contextualizing the Border Regime in the EU Periphery.” *Movements: Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies* 5, no. 1 (2020):

https://movements-journal.org/issues/08.balkanroute/01.hamersak,hess,stojic-mitrovic,speer--the-forging-of-the-balkan-route.html

Hess, Sabine. "De-naturalising transit migration. Theory and methods of an ethnographic regime analysis." *Population, Space, and Place* 18, no. 4 (July/August 2012): 428-440. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/psp.632

Ilareva, Valeria. *Advocacy Report on the "Red Line" Detention of Asylum Seekers upon Entry in Bulgaria*. Sofia: Foundation for Access to Rights, 2018. http://hear.farbg.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/final_Bulgaria-Red-Line-Advocacy-Report.pdf

Info Park. "Record numbers of new arrivals in Belgrade." *Info Park Bi-Weekly #113: 20 July - 2 August 2022*. https://mailchi.mp/04b09289435f/info-park-weekly-024-24-30-june-20236341?fbclid=IwAR09_sufZg4RpB-3lwP8Aa6IvA_aJks_zzPyymcDI90B22MxGoaUbGze8aA&fs=e&s=cl

"Iranian, Serbian Parliament Speakers Discuss Closer Ties." *Tasnim News Agency*, August 6, 2017. https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2017/08/06/1484874/iranian-serbian-parliament-speakers-discuss-closer-ties

Jovanović, Katarina. *Struggling to Survive: Unaccompanied and separated children travelling the Western Balkans Route*. Belgrade: Save the Children North West Balkans, 2020. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/struggling-survive-unaccompanied-and-separated-children-travelling-western-balkans-route/

Jovanović, Teodora. "Transformations of Humanitarian Aid and Response Modes to Migration Movements, A Case Study of the Miksalište Center in Belgrade." *Movements: Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies* 5, no. 1 (2020): http://movements-journal.org/issues/08.balkanroute/06.jovanovic-teodora--transformations-of-humanitarian-aid-and-response.html.

Kamali Dehghan, Saeed. "'Iran was like hell': the young refugees starting new lives in Serbia." *The Guardian*, September 28, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/28/iran-refugees-europe-eu-serbia-belgrade-asylum-seekers

KIRS. "Asylum and Reception Centers." *Commissariat for Refugees and Migration Republic of Serbia*. https://kirs.gov.rs/eng/asylum/asylum-and-reception-centers.

KlikAktiv. *Still on the Move to the EU: Situation of Refugees in Serbia Annual Report 2021*. Belgrade: KlikAktiv, 2022. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WXR0Ffzk6HC7ZXjORD6t-AqsmZJ2FC9n/view

KlikAktiv. "Tunisia - Serbia - EU?" *KlikAktiv*, May 20, 2022. https://klikaktiv.org/journal/tunisia-serbia-eu

Komarčević, Dušan. "Srbija i Iran u senci odnosa Vašingtona i Teherana." *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, August 2, 2017. https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-i-iran-odnos-vasingtona-i-teherana/28653040.html

Kovačević, Nikola. *Country Report: Serbia 2018*. Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2019. https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/report-download_aida_sr_2018update.pdf.

Kovačević, Nikola. *Country Report: Serbia 2019*. Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2020. https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/report-download_aida_sr_2019update.pdf

Kovačević, Nikola. *Country Report: Serbia. 2021 Update.* Belgrade: European Council on Refugees and Exiles / Asylum Information Database, 2022. https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/AIDA-SR_2021update.pdf

Kovačević, Nikola. "Novak Djokovic, X., and Y." *Peščanik*, January 15, 2022. https://pescanik.net/novak-djokovic-x-and-y/

Kovačević, Nikola. *Precondition for Integration: The right to work of refugees and asylum seekers in the Republic of Serbia*. Belgrade: A 11 - Initiative for Economic and Social Rights, 2020. https://www.a11initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/PRECONDITION-FOR-INTEGRATION-A-11-Initiative.pdf

Kovačević, Nikola. "Regular Procedure." *Asylum Information Database | European Council on Refugees and Exiles*. Updated, May 2, 2022. https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/serbia/asylum-procedure/procedures/regular-procedure/.

Kovačević, Nikola. "Travel Documents." *Asylum Information Database | European Council on Refugees and Exiles.* Updated May 2, 2022. https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/serbia/content-international-protection/movement-and-mobility/travel-documents/#_ftnref1

Krstić, Ivana. "The Efficiency of the Asylum System in Serbia: Main Problems and Challenges." In *The New Asylum and Transit Countries in Europe during and in the Aftermath of the 2015/2016 Crisis*, edited by Vladislava Stoyanova and Eleni Karageorgiou, 158-184. London: International Refugee Law Series, 2018.

"Latest Asylum Trends - Annual Overview 2021." *European Union Agency for Asylum*. https://euaa.europa.eu/latest-asylum-trends-annual-overview-2021#:~:text=considerably%20more%20decisions.-,Recognition%20rates,refugee%20status%20or%20subsidiary%20protection.

Magdy, Mohammed. "Egypt, Serbia launch new chapter in relations amid war in Ukraine." *Al-Monitor*, July 26, 2022. https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/07/egypt-serbia-launch-new-chapter-relations-amid-war-ukraine#ixzz7c8YlXoOr

Manby, Bronwen. *Citizenship Law in Africa: A Comparative Study.* Cape Town: African Minds/Open Society Foundations, 2016. https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/d5d1d086-1a0d-4088-b679-003e09e9c125/citizenship-law-africa-third-edition-20160129.pdf

Markham, Lauren. “A Cuban Doctor Fled Havana in Search of Asylum. He Ended Up Stranded in Istanbul Instead.” *Mother Jones*, December 16, 2021. https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2021/12/cuba-greece-asylum-refugee-turkey-pushback-biden-castro/

Milić, Nikolina and Zachary Goodwin. *Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub Data and Trend Analysis: Regional overview 2021.* Belgrade: Save the Children North West Balkans, 2022. https://resource-centre-uploads.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/refugees_migrants_balkans_overview_2022.pdf

Minca, Claudio and Jessica Collins. “The Game: Or, the ‘making of migration’ along the Balkan Route.” *Political Geography* 91 (2021). https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0962629821001505.

Obradovic-Wochnik, Jelena. “Urban Geographies of Refugee Journeys: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism and Contestation over Public Space in Belgrade.” *Political Geography 67* (November 1, 2018): 65–75. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.08.017.

Öztürk, Ebru. “Finding a new home through conversion: the ontological security of Iranians converting to Christianity in Sweden.” *Religion, State & Society* 50, no. 2 (2022): 224-239. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09637494.2022.2061828

Petković, Vesna. “UNHCR hands over asylum centre to Serbian government.” *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, December 24, 2008. https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2008/12/49521e644/unhcr-hands-asylum-centre-serbian-government.html

“PM: Serbia won’t be a parking lot for migrants.” *B92.net*, February 3, 2016. https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2016&mm=02&dd=03&nav_id=96915

“Policija otkrila krijumčare i 120 migranata kod Malog Horgoša.” *Radio Slobodna Evropa,* July 26, 2022. https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/31960307.html

Psaropoulos, John. "'This is a new wave': Hundreds of Cubans seek refuge in Greece." *Al Jazeera*, November 30, 2021. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/30/cubans-struggle-to-apply-for-asylum-in-greece

"Q1 illegal border crossings into EU highest since 2016." *Frontex*, April 14, 2022. https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/q1-illegal-border-crossings-into-eu-highest-since-2016-vvVOak

Radenković, M. "Kome ne trebaju vize za Srbiju, zašto i kako će se vizna politika menjati?" *Danas*, October 4, 2022. https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/kome-ne-trebaju-vize-za-srbiju-zasto-i-kako-ce-se-vizna-politika-menjati/.

Ranković, Rade. "Amran Kalifa: Borim se protiv diskriminacije moje porodice." *Glas Amerike,* January 17, 2020. https://www.glasamerike.net/a/amran-kalifa-borim-se-protiv-diskriminacije-moje-porodice/5250127.html

Republic of Serbia. *Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection*. Belgrade: Komesarijat za izbeglice i migracije, 2018. https://kirs.gov.rs/media/uploads/Law_on_asylum_and_temporary_prot.pdf

Robila, Mihaela. *Refugees and Social Integration in Europe.* New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) Division for Social Policy and Development, 2018. https://www.un.org/development/desa/family/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2018/05/Robila_EGM_2018.pdf

Rudić, Marko. "Godine idu, a nisam sa svojima." *Vreme*, April 17, 2014. https://www.vreme.com/vreme/godine-idu-a-nisam-sa-svojima/

Rujević, Nemanja. "A Libyan exchange student returns to Serbia as a refugee." *InfoMigrants*, December 6, 2017. https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/6395/a-libyan-exchange-student-returns-to-serbia-as-a-refugee

Rujević, Nemanja. “Asylum seeker Safaa refuses to leave Serbia.” *InfoMigrants*, November 29, 2017. https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/6316/asylum-seeker-safaa-refuses-to-leave-serbia

Schaverien, Anna.“Rejecting Asylum Claim, U.K. Quotes Bible to Say Christianity Is Not ‘Peaceful’.” *The New York Times*, March 21, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/21/world/europe/britain-asylum-seeker-christianity.html

Seferi, Idro and Rüdiger Rossig. “Russians are increasingly flocking to visa-free Serbia.” *Deutsche Welle*, August 13, 2022. https://www.dw.com/en/russians-are-increasingly-flocking-to-visa-free-serbia/a-62792799

“Serbia Ends Visa-Free Travel For Iranians, Citing 'Abuses' By Some.” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 12, 2018. https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-abolishes-visa-free-travel-iranians-citing-abuses-by-some-migrants-to-eu-/29539329.html

“Serbia expects more tourist arrivals from Iran.” *The Tehran Times*, August 27, 2017. https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/416258/Serbia-expects-more-tourist-arrivals-from-Iran

Serviere, Carole. “Caring for unaccompanied minors in transit in Serbia.” *Refugee Law Initiative Working Paper* 51. https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/9449/

Stojić Mitrović, Marta. “Serbian migration policy concerning irregular migration and asylum in the context of the EU integration process.” *Issues in Ethnology and Anthropology* 9, no. 4 (2014): 1105-1120. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308277135_Serbian_migration_policy_concerning_irregular_migration_and_asylum_in_the_context_of_the_EU_integration_process

Stojic Mitrović, Marta. “The Reception of Migrants in Serbia: Policies, Practices, and Concepts.” *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work* 4, no. 1 (March 2019). https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-018-0077-0.

Stojić Mitrović, Marta and Ana Vilenica. “Enforcing and disrupting circular movement in an EU Borderscape: housingscaping in Serbia.” *Citizenship Studies* 23, no. 6 (2019): 540-558. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2019.1634368.

Stojić Mitrović, Marta, Nidžara Ahmetašević, Barbara Beznec, and Andrej Kurnik. *The Dark Sides of Europeanisation. Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the European Border Regime*. Belgrade: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Europe, 2020. http://stage.rosalux.rs/en/dark-side-europeanisation

“Supporting Refugees — More Collaboration Needed, Including the Private Sector.” *UNHCR*. February 14, 2022. https://www.unhcr.org/rs/en/19755-supporting-refugees-more-collaboration-needed-including-the-private-sector.html

Tondo, Lorenzo. “Revealed: 2,000 refugee deaths linked to illegal EU pushbacks.” *The Guardian*, May 5, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/may/05/revealed-2000-refugee-deaths-linked-to-eu-pushbacks

UNHCR, “Refugees in Iran.” *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*. https://www.unhcr.org/ir/refugees-in-iran/.

UNHCR. “UNHCR Serbia Update, April/May 2022.” *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, July 1, 2022. https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/unhcr-serbia-update-aprilmay-2022

UNHCR. “UNHCR Serbia Update, September 2022.” *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, October 17, 2022. https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/unhcr-serbia-update-september-2022#:~:text=UNHCR%20profiling%20of%20new%20arrivals,August%20and%2013%2C425%20in%20July).

“UN and other multilateral funds.” Commissariat for Refugees and Migration Republic of Serbia. https://kirs.gov.rs/eng/projects/un-and-other-multilateral-funds

Vandvik, Bjarte. “The EU's dubious refugee deal.” *The Guardian*. October 20, 2010. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/oct/20/eu-refugee-libya-gaddafi

Why I Stayed

Asylum, Integration, and Futures in Serbia Through the Eyes of 13 Refugees

Zachary Goodwin, 2022

klikAktiv
center for development of social policies
RAS