

Migration: A Priority Issue in Serbia

Migration is an issue of great importance in Serbia. Recent armed conflict and the current economic insecurity have contributed to massive migration flows, both to and from Serbia. These flows mostly involve refugees, internally displaced persons, returnees and trafficked persons. The current economic turbulence fuelled by the global economic crisis may also spur a new wave of ‘brain drain’.

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Refugees, IDPs and returnees in Serbia

Refugees in Serbia include a large population of refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Croatia and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Kosovo, as well as Serb nationals who fled the conflict in the 1990s, only to return to Serbia now on the expiry of ‘temporary protection’. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has included Serbia among the five countries in the world with a protracted refugee situation (UNHCR, 2008a).

Refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina

In 1996, the number of refugees from Croatia and BiH reached nearly half a million; this number has been steadily decreasing as many have returned to their countries of origin, have been naturalised in Serbia or have resettled in third countries. In June 2008, there were 97,354 refugees, 75 per cent of them from Croatia (Commissariat for Refugees of Serbia, 2008).

The return of refugees to their country of origin still remains a delicate issue and is proceeding slowly. Refugees from Croatia have difficulties in returning to their country because of unresolved tenancy rights, ‘convalidation’ of years of service, employment discrimination and citizenship status, among other things.

Regarding the integration of refugees into society, the Serbian Government has to make more of an effort to solve issues of unemployment, lack of housing, education and obstacles to obtaining Serbian citizenship. The unemployment rate among refugees is 30.6 per cent compared to 20.8 per cent in the overall population (Group 484, 2007). The main obstacle to solving the problem of refugees is the difficult and unstable economic and political situation, as well as the lack of a developed legal and institutional system.

IDPs from Kosovo

According to UNHCR data, 206,071 IDPs from Kosovo are residing in Serbia (2008b). Due to security reasons, unresolved property issues and the poor economic situation, the prospects of return for these IDPs remain bleak; in the 10 years since the end of the conflict in Kosovo, only 18,724 displaced persons have returned, of which 8,027 were Serbs.

Many IDPs are facing undue hardship and experiencing problems in exercising basic human rights. The poverty rate among IDPs (14.5%) is more than twice as high as among the overall population (6.8%) (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2008). Roma IDPs are in the most difficult situation. Many of them do not have personal documents, which hinders their access to employment, health care and social welfare services (UNDP & UNHCR, 2008).

The Serbian Government insists that these IDPs be returned to Kosovo, so the activities of major international organisations and donors are limited to projects related to return. The situation did change slightly in 2009; IDPs are now eligible for accommodation projects as part of the integration process.

Readmission agreements for returnees

In the 1990s, during the armed conflict that followed the disintegration of former Yugoslavia, four million people left their homes. Several hundreds of thousands of them received temporary protection in the countries of Western Europe on the grounds of discrimination and war in their country of origin. After the democratic changes in October 2000, thousands of Serbian citizens sought asylum in Western Europe.

Since almost all of their applications for asylum have been rejected and temporary protection withdrawn, these people are now returning to Serbia on the basis of readmission agreements signed by the Government of Serbia. Apart from some modest attempts, there has been no systematic and organised approach to identify and record the problems of returnees, either in the former host countries or in Serbia.

Between 50,000 and 100,000 people have returned to Serbia from European Union countries, among which the majority are Roma people, mostly from Germany (50,000) (Council of Europe, 2003). Since 2003, the Ministry of Interior of Serbia has

received more than 27,000 requests from Western countries for the deportation of Serbian citizens. The requests, as well as the readmission agreements, primarily involve people who are forcefully deported, and usually do not encompass individuals who have returned ‘voluntarily’, i.e., those who have obeyed the decision of Western country authorities to leave the country. Some EU countries, through the International Organization for Migration (IOM), provide once-off assistance to returnees if they agree to return. Tickets and money (most often around 1,000 Euros per family) are given to returnees if they agree to return ‘voluntarily’. Since 2000, the IOM Office in Belgrade has registered 13,000 returnees who were beneficiaries of this assistance programme.

The readmission agreements obviously do not prevent Serbian citizens from seeking asylum in EU countries and other Western countries. By the number of filed asylum requests (6,200), Serbia was seventh in the world in the first half of 2008 (UNHCR, 2008c). In 2007, Serbia was fourth in the world with 15,400 asylum requests (UNHCR, 2008d)¹.

The overwhelming majority of Serbian people who apply for asylum are returned from Germany. In 2006, 3,282 citizens of Serbia applied for asylum in Germany. Most of them were Roma (43%), followed by Albanians (37%, mostly from Kosovo). Only 2.5 per cent were ethnic Serbs (Voice of America, 2007).

Assistance to returnees whose asylum claims have been rejected or whose temporary protection has been terminated is often provided on an individual basis, as it is not a part of an overall development process and cooperation between the host country and the country of origin. EU pre-accession funds do not encompass returnees. The lack of coordination and information exchange between Western countries and Serbia is a major obstacle to the provision of adequate assistance to returnees. Western countries do not always submit information about these persons to Serbian authorities (e.g., about their health situation and family status), which hampers adequate planning for their admission to Serbia.

Although a National Strategy for the Reintegration of Returnees has been adopted and the Inter-ministerial Council for Reintegration has been estab-

¹ Data for Serbia may include Montenegro in a few countries where no separate statistics are available for both countries.

lished, there are still questions regarding the allocation of the necessary resources for implementing a comprehensive reintegration policy.

Male victims of human trafficking

Economic hardship increases vulnerability to trafficking. Recent research² by the Victimology Society of Serbia has focused on male victims of trafficking. The survey of 407 male victims of human trafficking over the period 2003 to 2007 found that 342 (84%) were adults and 65 (16%) minors.

Foreign male victims primarily originated from China and Turkey, followed by Afghanistan, Albania, India, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Moldova, Macedonia and Romania. The main way of recruiting adult men is by offering or promising a job. The main push factors are poverty and unemployment, as well as myths about the West, which attract those looking for better jobs, incomes and a better future. Labour exploitation is the most frequent form of trafficking of men: male victims are exposed to longer working hours and lower pay than promised, and, in some cases, are not paid at all.

As for male victims who are minors, the survey suggests an increase in the number of boys identified as victims of human trafficking, particularly those between 14 and 17. Some of these minors are from Albania, Turkey, Bulgaria and Georgia. Among Serbian child victims, Roma boys are more exposed to human trafficking. Internal trafficking is most prevalent; in terms of transnational trafficking, Serbia appears to be a country of origin and transit (but primarily to neighbouring countries such as Croatia, Montenegro and Macedonia). The main forms of exploitation of boys include begging, labour exploitation, pressure to commit crime and, to a lesser extent, sexual exploitation. Child victims, similarly to adults, are placed under the control of the trafficker through coercion and all forms of violence (physical, sexual and psychological). Survey results also suggest that particular risk groups are children from poor families, Roma children, deficient families, as well as abandoned children, i.e., street children and disabled children.

Trafficked victims are transported or transferred by different means (car, plain, train, boat), but also on foot (particularly in the case of illegal border crossings). In the case of transnational trafficking, victims are transported both legally and illegally – outside official border crossing points, or through official border crossing points, but either with forged

documents or hidden in cars, trains, buses or other means of transportation.

In relation to the trafficking of men, Serbia is primarily a country of transit, particularly for men coming from Albania, Turkey, the Far East and Middle East, primarily going to Italy, but also to Germany, France, Greece and Scandinavian countries, as well as other EU countries. Some of the destination countries for Serbian men are Russia, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Malta, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska) and Macedonia.

The main trafficking route in Serbia is from the South to the North or West, i.e., from Turkey, to Western Europe, passing through Kosovo, Central Serbia, Hungary or Croatia. This route is primarily used for trafficking and smuggling of people from Albania, Asia, and those coming from or via Turkey. It is also used for other forms of illegal trafficking, such as in narcotics, arms, cattle and so forth. This part of the Balkans and the South Eastern Europe (SEE) region will probably remain problematic, at least in the near future, due to the weakness of both the legal and political system in Kosovo, non-existence of a visa regime, provisions for free entry and stay in Kosovo territory, weak border controls and weak controls over migration flows in general, among other things.

The enlargement of the EU, and the entering of Romania and Bulgaria in particular, contributed to changes in trafficking routes crossing Serbia, especially in terms of entry points, which moved to the South, mainly to Kosovo. Moreover, police interventions that resulted in routes being cut off that previously went from or via Albania to Italy by sea also contributed to trafficking routes being changed. At the same time Serbia became more appealing for those transiting to Hungary, particularly after Hungary entered the EU, because if a person reaches Hungary, their way to other EU countries is much easier.

Brain drain

Armed conflict, hardship due to economic transition and decreased opportunities for employment contributed, not only to the mass exodus of people from their homes, but also to the brain drain, particularly of young and educated people. About 500,000 young people left Serbia between 1991 and 2001 in search of better livelihoods. A survey done in Serbia in 2007 found that 75 per cent of students want to live and work abroad, compared to 50 per cent in 2002 (Youth Coalition of Serbia, 2007, p.13).

IOM, UNDP, ILO, UNICEF and other partners of the Serbian Government have made an effort to improve access to decent work for young people through better policies and programmes addressing youth employment and migration. With USD 6.1 million from the Spanish Government's Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund and USD 1.9 million from the Serbian Government, IOM is heading a programme over a two-and-a-half-year period targeting disadvantaged young men and women,

especially Roma, and those most at risk of social exclusion and prime candidates for emigration (IOM, 2009).

However, limited employment opportunities, a low level of investment, low wages and the current global economic crisis will not help to stem the emigration flow. ■

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2 This survey, conducted by the Victimology Society and financed by the US Department of State, constitutes a central part of the currently running research project on male victims of human trafficking in Serbia. The aim of the survey, conducted in 2008 and the beginning of 2009, was to gain knowledge about the scope, structure and characteristics of trafficking in human beings in Serbia, with particular emphasis on male trafficking, as well as about the response of state agencies and NGO sector to this phenomenon.