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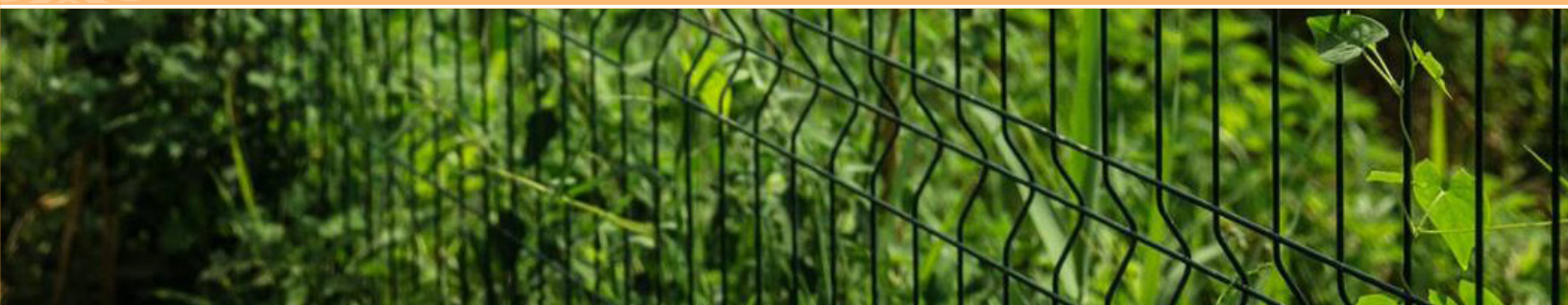
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United Nations Development Programme

**RESILIENT DEVELOPMENT**

**IMPACTS OF THE MIGRATION CRISIS ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND  
COMMUNITIES IN SERBIA AND POSSIBILITIES FOR INTEGRATION**  
**An Assessment from Focus Groups**





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## I. INTRODUCTION

### 1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this research study is to examine the possibility of integrating migrants from the Middle East and North Africa, in the event that the Government of Serbia (the “Government”) decides to accept them and provide them with long-term accommodation in Serbia.\*

In order to achieve the main objective we started examining the general views of Serbian citizens on migrants and analysed the factors which could influence these views among people in the country. This report analyses issues of integration by observing different dimensions of the integration process. Within each dimension we looked for possible obstacles to integration, as well as the likelihood of achieving successful integration. A particular issue we tried to address in this research study is the question of whether citizens see any possibility of migrants changing or improving the economic outlook of the Serbian economy.

Finally, as an addition to this research we focused on examining whether there was a connection between migrant integration and the reintegration of those persons who were returned to the country in the readmission process.

### 2. METHODOLOGICAL NOTES AND DATA SAMPLES

Utilising the method of in-depth group interviews (or, targeted focus groups) proved to be the most appropriate method for achieving these objectives. We conducted our research using four primary focus groups. Two groups consisted of respondents from four municipalities in the south of Serbia (Vranje, Bujanovac, Preševo and Dimitrovgrad), while the other two groups consisted of respondents from three municipalities in the north of Serbia (Kanjiža, Subotica and Šid), which were the municipalities through which the largest number of migrants passed. One focus group with respondents from municipalities in southern Serbia included representatives of citizens and civil society, while the other one included representatives of local self-governments. Both two groups with representatives from municipalities in northern Serbia were formed in the same manner. The socio-demographic structure of each of the four focus groups is detailed in the Annex of this report.

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\* In this report, the term “migrants” is used for both migrants from war-affected areas and migrants from areas which are not affected by war. Although there is a significant difference between these types of migrants ( see <http://www.unhcr.rs/opste/razno/stav-unhcr-izbeglica-ili-migrant-sta-je-ispravno.html> for more information on the differences), these differences have not been emphasized in this report, both in an attempt to streamline the analysis of the subject and due to the fact that the differences are less apparent in Serbia given the makeup of the population entering Serbia. A clear distinction between migrant and refugee groups was emphasized only in the explicit section about the differences between migrants and refugees.



Serbia-Hungary border  
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While the focus groups certainly do not represent the full spectrum of the population of each of the targeted municipalities, they do consist of the sectors of the population which significantly influence the creation of public attitudes towards migration in local communities. Due to the functions that the focus group participants perform as leaders in their communities, as well as the general requirements for participation in the focus groups, these individuals have a high proficiency in communication and a level of eloquence and education that is above the population's average. This is why their attitudes do not represent well the opinion of the population overall (both because of the participants providing socially desirable answers, as well as due to their higher education level), but they do show directions of thought and main arguments which are used at the level of the local population.



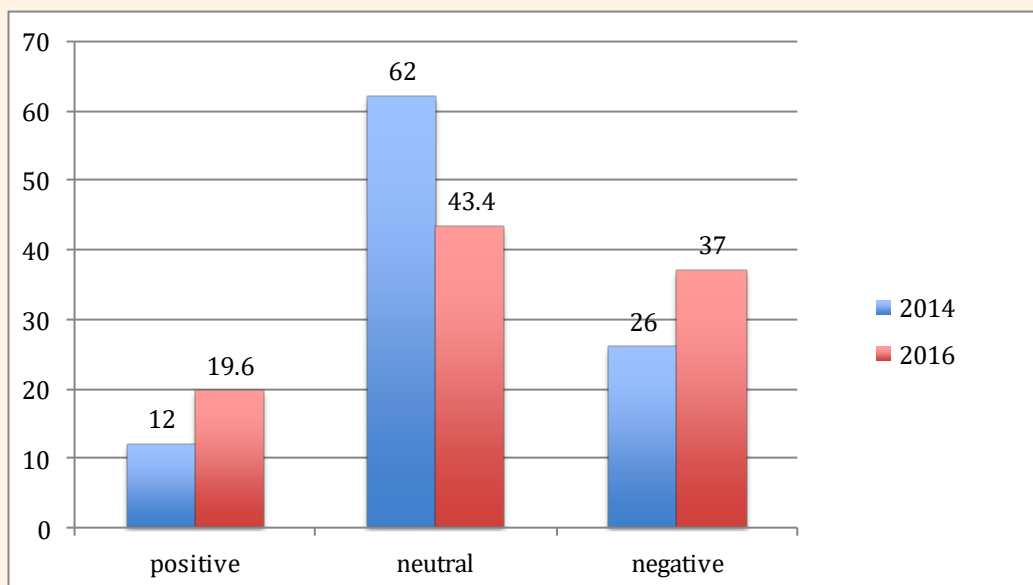
We received plenty of valuable material from the focus groups. All material was provided verbally in feedback sessions, but the material we relied on also includes observations regarding non-verbal communication from the group. Actually, some important conclusions were based on things that were never said, but instead observations, according to the evaluators, which remained “in the air” during the work with focus groups. This is exactly why we made both video and audio recordings of focus groups, both of which were immensely and equally useful during the analysis of responses.

The structure of the report follows the objectives that were set. In each part of the report we tried to point out the similarities and differences between the various parts of the country that were analysed. The research also shows that regional differences were much higher than the differences observed among focus groups from the same region.

## II. GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS MIGRANTS

When previous quantitative research studies of the general population (conducted in two years intervals) are compared, we see that attitudes towards migrants in Serbia has been mostly neutral, but that the increased influx of migrants in recent years has led to a clearer and more pronounced differentiation between those with mostly positive attitudes towards migrants and those with mostly negative attitudes (see Table 1)

*Table 1: A Comparative View of a UNDP Study from 2016 (Gallup) and a UNHCR Study from 2014 (CeSID) Assessing Attitudes towards Migrants*



Source: CeSID, 2014 and Gallup, 2016.





# GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS MIGRANTS

At first glance, this differentiation shows an increased number of people with negative attitudes towards migrants. Therefore the results of the latest UNDP/Gallup study from 2016 suggest that in spite of the majority neutral opinion on migrants, the picture of citizens' impressions of migrants is a negative one.

However, if you look more closely and from a different perspective, this data also shows that over the last two years the number of those who have a positive opinion on migrants has grown more than the number of those who have a negative opinion on migrants. Actually, the number of those with a positive opinion on migrants has increased by 63.3% and the number of those with a negative opinion has increased by 42.3%. This can only partially be explained by the lower initial starting point of people with positive attitudes on migrants – some of the growth in positive attitudes is the result of the growth of positive attitude overall.

Previous analyses of social attitudes on migrants show different factors that can influence people's attitudes on migrants. Here are some of the conclusions from previous studies on social attitudes about migrants.

- 1) An indifference towards migrants is the result of the lack of personal contact with asylum seekers and the fact that respondents are mostly focused on their own problems, without much sympathy for vulnerable groups in Serbia (CeSID, 2014).
- 2) The more direct personal contact an individual has with migrants, the more positive their opinion on migrants is (Gallup, 2016).

**“Mostly neutral attitude towards migrants can be seen as the result of citizens being preoccupied with personal problems, primarily economic deprivation, which is the main reason why concern for or empathy with migrants has a very low priority in minds of citizens.”**

3) Citizens who live in municipalities through which the largest number of migrants pass (i.e. municipalities with reception centres) have a more negative opinion on migrants (CeSID, 2014).

4) Municipalities with a majority Muslim population have a more positive attitude towards migrants (CeSID, 2014 and Gallup, 2016).

Judging by the above results from past surveys, a mostly neutral attitude towards migrants can be seen as the result of citizens being preoccupied with personal problems, primarily economic deprivation\*, which is the main reason why concern for or empathy with migrants

\* A preoccupation with economic deprivation was found based on the UNDP/Gallup research study, which showed that 60% of citizens in Serbia rate their standard of living as “mostly or very bad,” which indicates that economic concerns are prioritized over migrant concerns in this sense



Kelebija border crossing  
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has a very low priority in minds of citizens. A significant migrant influx increases a person's sense of threat, especially in situations where an image about migrants is formed by the media and by opinion leaders and not by direct, personal experience.

In-depth research with focus groups shows that these findings around the link between people's attitudes and exposure to migrants are grounded. For example, a person from Šid municipality who was in charge of the reception and care of refugees testified that citizens of the municipality still had very little contact with refugees, despite the large number of migrants passing through the municipality after Hungary decided to close its borders on September 19, 2015 and redirected refugees to Croatia, bordering the municipality. Furthermore, the UNDP/Gallup research study showed that among all the municipalities surveyed, citizens in Šid had the most negative attitudes towards migrants than any other municipality. More than 3/4ths of citizens from this municipality (82.3%) have a negative or very negative attitude toward migrants, and at the same time this municipality, according to the same research, has an above average level of economic deprivation and no Muslim population which could strengthen a positive attitude toward the migrant populations.



## 1. SOCIETAL ASSOCIATIONS WITH MIGRANTS

Basic attitudes towards migrants are probably best shown by people's first associations to the word "migrant." We found that citizens from northern and southern Serbia have significantly different thoughts about the word, and there are also differences between how regular citizens and representatives of local self-governments view the word.

The most dominant association to the word "migrant" among citizens from southern Serbia is related to an emotional perception, with associations between the word "migrant" and other words such as "suffer," "sadness," and "war," while respondents from northern Serbia associate the "migrant" with predominantly rational and value-neutral terms, such as "relocation" and "adventurer." However, people from northern Serbia who had experiences with being a refugee mostly showed a high degree of empathy. When asked to give her association to the word "migrant," one respondent said: "I see myself, because I am a refugee from [redacted]" (citizen from northern Serbia).

Here, it is important to note that citizens from southern Serbia also gave associations such as "colonialism," "loss of identity," "eradication," "being removed from the place you live," and "paperwork." These associations are interesting because they can be seen as a specific form of empathy which includes putting oneself into the position of others by adding one's own fear that someone could be relocated due to migrant colonization, which would lead to a loss of a citizen respondent's identity. This issue will be further discussed in the section below, Migrant Integration.

Representatives of local self-governments have entirely different associations with the word "migrant," both from northern and southern Serbia. It is especially interesting that their associations often include the word "problem," which shows the perspective of a person like a local civic leader, who are tasked with remediating social ills and undertaking certain tasks and measures.

**"Representatives of local self-governments have entirely different associations with the word 'migrant', both from northern and southern Serbia. It is especially interesting that their associations often include the word 'problem'."**

The most important finding from the analysis of people's associations is that there is a significant difference in the way migrants are perceived across regions in Serbia. Those in southern Serbia perceive the situation more emotionally, which at the same time means they are more prone to manipulation and to irrational representa-

tions and fears. The approach among citizens in the north of Serbia tends to be much more rational, and therefore colder when it comes to attitude towards migrants.

Any project activity to be implemented and communication undertaken with people in northern and southern Serbia must be conducted while taking into account the above-mentioned dimension of regional cleavages in the perception of migrants. This means that



Respondent: “There’s no way we’ll accept that you only give money, and we have to accept them [migrants]. No one down here [in the south of Serbia] would accept that” (respondent from local government).

## 2. VIEWS ON THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES AMONG MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

We already discussed in the previous section that direct refugee experience had significant influence on a person’s basic attitude towards migrants. The next question is if there are any other differences among people which could influence their attitudes towards migrants.

## 3. MIGRANTS VS. REFUGEES

When reporting on migrants, especially in the period prior to the closing of so-called Balkan route, the media insisted on emphasizing the differences between so-called economic migrants and refugees. The main idea was that putting an emphasis on this difference would justify a prohibition against economic migrants entering the European Union, and therefore reduce the number of persons overall that enter EU countries.

This distinction caused a strong reaction, primarily from non-governmental organizations, which claimed there are no substantial differences between economic migrants fleeing hunger and refugees fleeing war, since both groups are existentially threatened at their core, with their livelihoods and lives in jeopardy.

Research shows that Serbian citizens, firstly, are aware of this difference and, secondly, lend additional and specific local characteristics to this difference. For this reason, there are three different views among people which can be observed.

1) First, the least common view is that there is no difference between migrants and refugees because, as one respondent put it, “people are people.”

2) Contrary to that view is the most commonly held view, both in the north and in the south of Serbia, which is that refugees are forced to leave their homes, while migrants do that willingly in search of a better life. One respondent from northern Serbia described this difference in the following way “A refugee is a person who is fleeing, and migrant is someone who is migrating, but not fleeing” (anonymous respondent, 23 years old). Respondents from southern Serbia share similar thoughts: “a refugee flees to escape some torment, while a migrant seeks a better life” and “migrants seeks a better life, one he cannot have in his home country; refugees seek safety.”



# GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS MIGRANTS

3) Finally, the last view is held by citizens who make a distinction between migrants as persons from the Middle East and Africa, who are simply passing through Serbia on their way to the EU, and those refugees who moved to Serbia from ex-Yugoslav countries with the intention of permanent settlement in Serbia. The focus group participants gave the following arguments for their views in this category:

“There is a huge difference [between refugees and migrants]. A refugee is our countryman, who is considering whether to return to his home or stay here, and a migrant is just transiting to some other country” (a citizen from southern Serbia).

“Refugees... are our own people – Serbs. We all know the circumstances under which they came here. We felt obliged and were humane, we were aware that they would have to stay for long time because they had nowhere else to go. As for the others [migrants] we know they are only transiting” (a representative from local government, southern Serbia).

These findings show that respondents make a distinction between refugees and migrants. The term “migrant” causes less emotion in them. This term refers both to persons who are moving in pursuit of a better life or people who are temporarily transiting through Serbia. In both cases there is an obvious emotional remoteness from migrants. This word is often related to people who migrate from the countryside to a local village on a daily basis, which adds to the lack of a humanitarian crisis perspective in citizens’ perceptions of migrants.

As for refugees, on the other hand, there is obviously a higher level of emotional identification, both at a human level (for example, “we are all people”) and at a national level (for example, “our fellow Serbs”).

“There is a huge difference [between refugees and migrants]. A refugee is our countryman, who is considering whether to return to his home or stay here, and a migrant is just transiting to some other country” (a citizen from southern Serbia)

In other words, people’s perceptions and references to migrants as refugees increases the chances of citizens accepting them with more sympathy.

This conclusion applies both to respondents in the south and north of Serbia, except that we found that using the term “refugee” to refer to persons expelled from ex-

Yugoslav countries is more frequent among municipality officials in the south and among citizens in the north.

## a. Refugees from the Former Yugoslavia vs. Refugees from the Middle East

As for the relationship between current refugees, who come primarily from countries in the Middle East, and refugees that came to Serbia in the 1990s from ex-Yugoslav countries, two distinct approaches to how they are perceived can be immediately observed.



1) The first approach is characteristic of people who were refugees themselves. They easily identify themselves with current refugees and the gravity and destitution of refugees' situations causes them to immediately forget any other differences.

2) Contrary to the first group above, most citizens observe differences which relate to the fact that current refugees are just passing through Serbia en route to EU countries while former refugees came with an intention to stay in Serbia. In that sense, some respondents talked about internal and external migrations. For example, "our law makes a distinction between internal and external migrants, if you are referring to these asylum seekers [currently], they are external" (respondent from local government in southern Serbia).

On the other hand, citizens point out the physical and cultural differences between current refugees and the resident population of the reach, which was not the case twenty years ago when communities discussed refugees at the end of the 1990s. Here is an illustrative example:

"Any of our citizens can recognize external migrants by their external characteristics" (a citizen from southern Serbia).

"There is a difference in faith. Former refugees were Christians, and these [current refugees] have different religions, cultures" (respondent from local government in southern Serbia).

The main conclusion to draw from these examples is that most respondents make a significant distinction between current migrants and people who came to Serbia in the 1990s from former Yugoslav countries. In fact, only two persons in our focus groups did not insist on this differentiation between former and current refugees, and claimed that all refugees were the same: one woman, who herself had the experience of being a refugee in the 1990s, and one man who expressed his view (which was not supported by the majority of the group) that we perceive current migrants "as people who are similar to us, who suffered the same tragedy as we did."

This testifies to the clear distance most people have towards current migrants, and the experiences from the 1990s can only partially help people identify with current refugees. Therefore, it remains questionable whether past experience with refugees can provide a solid ground for a sustainable integration approach nationwide. However, there is no doubt that the common personal and collective refugee experiences strengthen the population's solidarity with migrants, but there are many other factors which question the strength and pervasiveness of this solidarity.



# GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS MIGRANTS

## b. Syrians vs. Afghans

At the end of this section we would like to point out a few important factors which affect citizens' attitudes towards refugees, which include: migrants' country of origin, the financial situation of the migrants in question, and whether the migrants are travelling with family, alone, or if they are children without parental care.

Respondents reserve special status for refugees from Syria. They are perceived as educated, polite and liberal, some even mention that Syrian women are beautiful, and they are in a way perceived as an advanced civilization in comparison to domestic population. Furthermore, many respondents emphasized the fact that there are many Syrians who lived in Belgrade during their studies at Belgrade University, which is another reason to feel close to them through identification of a long-standing affinity or cultural ties between the countries. On the other hand, Afghans are perceived with a much worse image. They are perceived as backward, illiterate and uncivilized by many of the respondents. These differences which have been perceived by citizens have been reinforced by the fact that these two groups do not socialize with each other.

Here are some illustrative statements highlighting peoples' different perceptions of both Syrian and Afghan refugees.

"We must make difference between them. Syrians are great, and Afghans, have never heard of electricity" (local government official, southern Serbia).

"These Syrian folk are much more liberal!"

"Syrians are very polite."

"But there are these people from Afghanistan who are coming from rural areas, from an unorganized country, far away from civilization."

These national differences are then connected to other differences, so next respondents usually emphasize how Syrians and Iraqis usually travel with their families, while Afghans travel on their own.

"Iraqis also travel with families. People passing through [Serbia] were mostly families and these are ordinary people. And these folk from Afghanistan are mostly young and illiterate."

These differences perceived between Syrian and Afghan refugees significantly affect people's overall perceptions and hinder possible migrant integration. Syrians, being perceived as a "family people," are more desirable groups for possible integration. Afghans are considered by respondents as less desirable, especially if they are young and without family. But on the other hand, there is also a concern that exactly the ones that are more desirable do not want to stay in Serbia, and would prefer to settle elsewhere in the EU.



#### 4. HUMANITARIAN VS. SECURITY ASPECTS OF THE MIGRANT CRISIS

Media headlines about migrants have significantly influenced citizens' perception of migrants. The manner in which this subject has been approached by the media has ranged from support and compassion for these unfortunate people, to an underlining fear of the security threats they may bring, which are perceived as a danger to local population.

We were interested in observing how citizens and people engaged in providing care to migrants at the municipal level perceive security, or the humanitarian aspect of the crisis.

In short, there are mixed feelings among this group of people. Civil society activists predominantly emphasise the humanitarian aspect of refugee crisis, while citizens are usually aware of both aspects (the humanitarian issues and security issues), which they see as interconnected. This can best be seen in the following statement:

"We cannot close our eyes to the fact that some of them have some agenda. But most of them really fled from problems. The feelings are mixed."

Respondents say that there were various stories being shared about migrants. A very popular story at the beginning of the crisis was that refugees allegedly spread diseases, which then affected citizens' attitudes towards them. Here is a statement from a female respondent from Kanjiža:

"They [refugees] haven't had the greatest reception from citizens. Stories about diseases, terrorists, all kinds of things ... and people wished it had never happened, but since it did, it was necessary to find the most favourable solution."

Responses from northern Serbian particularly highlighted the security aspects of refugees and migrants. In southern Serbia, the security issues did not show in any form. A typical response from citizens in southern Serbia was: "they know their destination, they're just passing through here; most of them are fleeing war." Representatives from local self-governments in southern Serbia had similar thoughts:

"They, first of all, deserve protection, and if they seek asylum then they deserve everything else, education, etc." However, what is perceived as the security issue in the south goes beyond fear of terrorism or disease. The real fear is from the possibility of the permanent, uncontrolled settlement of migrants of Muslim faith, who, in the opinion of a significant number of Serbian respondents, could lead to a change of ethnic structure socio-demographic makeup in their region. It is for this reason that the settlement of migrants and refugees in the south of Serbia has the potential to become a flashpoint political issue.

With the exception of the fear of permanent settlement which is present among Serbian citizens in the south, it can be said generally that respondents mostly have a humanitarian perspective on the migrant crisis.





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The reason for this is a belief that migrants are just passing through Serbia, en route to a permanent settlement in other countries. This is why security risks (primarily a fear of terrorism) are not significant concerns in the minds of most of the population, as the threat of terrorism becomes more removed in their minds when migrants are not settling long-term in the country.

In the north of Serbia, the security risks in people's minds can be reduced to hygiene issues. In that sense, there is a clear difference between municipalities in which contact with refugees has been direct (such as Kanjiža and Subotica) and those in which municipal populations have been isolated from contact with refugees (such as in Šid). In Subotica and Kanjiži there was a predominant view among respondents that hygienic conditions worsened in the cities after the arrival of migrants, while this matter did not even come up as a concern in Šid.

Related to people's perceptions of refugees in terms of security aspects, we observed differences among respondents depending on the size of the settlement of refugees and migrants: in Subotica, migrants were visible but their numbers were relatively small compared to the local population. In Kanjiži at one time there was more migrants than the local population as a whole, so there was evident fear of the city being flooded with migrants. The size of the migrant population relative to local population has thus also had an impact on the degree of fear or concern by people of security threats.

However, a specific aspect of the migrant perceptions that was unanticipated, especially in southern Serbia (although there were rare examples in the north as well) was neither security nor humanitarian related: citizens who came into contact with migrants saw migrant crisis primarily as an opportunity for them to increase their income (or make quick profits from the influx of people). This is best seen in the statement of a respondent from the south:

*"Syrians are very polite."*

*"But there are these people from Afghanistan who are coming from rural areas, from an unorganized country, far away from civilization."*

*"I saw a man selling a bottle of water for 70 euro. We used this situation."*

increase their income (or make quick profits from the influx of people). This is best seen in the statement of a respondent from the south:

*"99.99% of them [migrants] do not want to stay here. But no one is worried about security because they immediately leave Serbia. We had people here who made more money off of these migrants than they helped them."*

because they immediately leave Serbia. We had people here who made more money off of these migrants than they helped them."

*"I saw a man selling a bottle of water for 70 euro. We used this situation. Wealthy groups of migrants passed by and everyone was rolling in money, and there was one girl complaining that no one had called her to let her know. A woman charged for the use of her internet at the price of one euro per minute, and in a few hours she made enough money to pay for her internet connection for an entire year."*



### III. MIGRANT INTEGRATION

#### 1. DIFFERENT VIEWS ON INTEGRATION

The question of the possibility of integration of the migrant population was a central point to this research study. The meaning and understanding of the term “integration,” then, immediately became crucial to this work. It is a complex term which has many dimensions, but generally speaking integration of an element to a system means its functional incorporation, i.e. connection with other elements, in such a way that they jointly contribute to the harmonious functioning of an entire system.

In a certain sense, social integration can be seen as a type of solidarity, as it is understood by Emile Durkheim (renowned French sociologist and social psychologist). He made a distinction between, on one hand, mechanical solidarity (the integration of individuals based on mutual resemblance and a high level of similarity in an integrated community, which is typified in traditional societies) and on the other hand, so-called organic solidarity (where high level integration is achieved if elements functionally complement each other, which is more a facet of modern societies).

Respondents’ understanding of integration in southern Serbia is closer to the first model of integration, mechanical solidarity. For most of the respondents in the south, integration means – more or less – complete integration of an individual in the community, to the level of a complete loss of the differences between native populations and newcomers.

Therefore, they think of integration as failed even in cases where there is full functional integration of newcomers if there is still an awareness that this person came here at some point from somewhere else, which makes such a person “different.”

One of the reasons why this type of perception is so widespread in the south is due to this region’s experience with the settlement of a large number of so-called internally displaced persons from Kosovo in the 1990s and also those who left Kosovo in the early 1980s at the time of early ethnic tensions. It’s interesting that this difference between “local” people and those who came from Kosovo is usually marked with a nickname given to a person, which usually relates to something about the geographical origin of the individual.



A female respondent who came from Kosovo to Vranje two decades ago and integrated very successfully (meaning she gained a high status position) complains that she is still not fully integrated into the society because she is still being called “Šiptarka” by those in the community\*. This nickname, which represents her geographic origin, is a sign for here that the native population still hasn’t fully accepted her. A similar example was mentioned by a respondent who was born in Vranje, and whose parents came from another region in Serbia. His experience of being a native himself, but with ancestral ties to another region, makes him think that it takes several generations for an individual to be considered fully integrated and fully accepted by the local population.

This concept of integration in southern Serbia suggests two things. First is the closed nature of communities in the south, which have retained many elements of exclusivity and which can be understood as inherently traditional communities. This indicates a difficulty in accepting new members who, even when functionally integrated, remain at a certain distance due to their otherness and perceived differences. Second is that these findings have implications for the policy question of whether migrants should be placed in larger or smaller communities in cases of long-term accommodation and settlement of migrants, which will be discussed further below.

In contrast to the concept of integration in the south, in the north of Serbia integration is seen through a functional integration lens. This means that gaining certain elements of being integrated into different social subsystems (such as a working environment, school system, or welfare system) on its own implies certain cultural closeness with the local population, such as speaking a similar language, having knowledge of basic customs, and well as

**The sensitivity of these communities to the potential exclusivity of migrant newcomers’ societies could be an obstacle to the possible integration of migrants, which was the most commonly-expressed issue among respondents.**

complying with the rules and laws applicable to local populations. Even when individuals in the north use the term “assimilation” they actually think about it in terms of accepting both formal and informal customs, which is much more similar to the concept of full integration into a society. This difference is relatively easy to understand considering that in the north there

are more than twenty different ethnicities coexisting in the same space, and the people have developed a high awareness and practice of mutual tolerance. However, the sensitivity of these communities to the potential exclusivity of migrant newcomers’ societies could be an obstacle to the possible integration of migrants, which was the most commonly-expressed issue among respondents.

\* The term is a derogatory term for an Albanian woman from Kosovo.



Kelebija border crossing  
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## 2. RESISTANCE TO INTEGRATION

The predominant view in the south is that refugees would not be well accepted and that the vast majority of people do not want them to settle in their communities. Some respondents think that this general perception is significantly influenced by the media, which spread fear and panic related to the dangers of terrorism. However, most of respondents from the south think that this resistance to settlement is caused by a fear that newcomers would not accept the customs and culture of the local communities and instead, over time, they would impose their customs onto the local population.



This fear is based on the experience that Serbs now living in southern Serbia had when they were pushed out from Kosovo by Kosovar Albanians. In that sense a special emphasis was put on religious differences and a fear of change to demographic structure of the region due to the possibility of a higher population growth rate for Muslim newcomers.

“People are afraid. Afraid of being pushed out from our land. [Afraid of] losing our country, the same way we lost Kosovo.”

“We make one baby, and they make six, and in twenty years there are more of them than us. We have to think about the future.”

Tolerance, readiness to help, and acceptance of refugees from ex-Yugoslav countries and from Kosovo is lost in the case of this wave of refugees. According to testimonies from respondents, most people primarily looked at refugees from the Middle East as source of additional income, because they saw that they have money and then charged them for elementary needs, such as charging mobile phones or transport, at a much more expensive price than usual.

Even when in general people advocate for a multiethnic coexistence, respondents emphasize that migrant integration is possible only if migrants don't try to change the way of life of the local population. The high level of support for multiethnic society was followed at the same time by resistance to accepting migrants for a longer period of time, and can be partially explained by the fact that representatives of the local Albanian population also participated in the focus groups. In this sense, it is completely understandable to have some respondents provide their thoughts by using politically correct speech (to be considerate of the feelings of the local Albanian population representatives who were present at the focus group meetings), but at the same time follow this politically correct speech with fears of acceptance, leaving no doubt that Muslim migrants are nevertheless not welcome. This is why ethnic Serbian respondents pointed out the difference between the culture and religion of the local ethnically Muslim and Albanian Serbs and the newer wave of Muslim migrants.

“I think it would be a step back [to accept certain migrants]. Islam in Afghanistan and [Islam] in Bujanovac are practiced very differently. Islam in Bujanovac is liberal, and in Afghanistan it's conservative. Their women can't dress like women we see on TV.”

“Muslims are also afraid that these Wahhabis will ruin our community. Their way of life is very different [even from the local Muslim population].”

It is interesting that representative of the local Muslim community reacted to the opinion that migrants wouldn't be accepted even by the local Albanian Serb population because of the fear that these new Muslim migrants could bring Wahhabism; this concern was relayed by Muslim and Albanian Serbs as a much more radical version of Islam than they are used to. Muslim imams who responded actually thought that migrants would be very well accepted by the Muslim and Albanian Serb communities and that, in fact, they are very welcome there.



As for the representatives of local self-governments from southern Serbia, migrant integration was also seen as a questionable process. However in addition to the cultural differences and a fear of a change to the demographic makeup of the community, representatives from local self-governments also emphasized two other socio-economic aspects front and centre. The first one is the poverty and high unemployment rate in the south generally, which would impede, or even make impossible, migrant employment, and migrant employment would be a precondition for any kind of integration.

The second one is similar and concerns the presumed “positive discrimination” which would result from any integration program, and a fear that policies would favour migrants for state provided services such as receiving welfare, jobs, and resources for work (such as land or cash incentives for small businesses). Besides these issues, people believe that only migrants with the lowest level of education and the poorest backgrounds would stay in Serbia, which would further complicate their integration. It is interesting that respondents stated that this would happen even if migrants were given certain resources which the local population didn’t use (such as unused land or low paid and unattractive jobs), but respondents didn’t give any further explanation as to why such unused resources should not be provided to migrants.

Respondents from ethnic Serbian populations in the south, regardless whether they are ordinary citizens or representatives of local self-governments, see many obstacles to migrant integration and think it would not work because any integration program would face strong resistance from the local population.

As we’ll see, this image has somewhat changed with the introduction of new assumptions about migrants. In general, their opinion and, to a significant extent, their experience with the integration of refugees is a negative one, with the exception of Muslim Albanian Serbs who would gladly accept refugees. On the other hand, ethnically Serbian representatives think that any attempt to disturb the existing demographic structure would lead to a strong reaction by the other ethnic groups in the region, and would disrupt the hard-won stability that has now emerged in the region.

This is illustrated by the failed attempts at integration and readmittnce of Romani who returned to Bujanovac after leaving.

“We worked on readmission of the Romani people. We wanted to make a project in Bujanovac. And it immediately caused a violent reaction that we were trying to change the structure [of the population] ...”

“We are still counting to see who has the numbers. If we accept Serbian refugees from Bosnia - Albanians would be upset, if we accept Muslim refugees - Serbs would be upset. When Romani people returned, both Serbian and Albanians protested.”



Serbia-Hungary border  
© UNCT Serbia/ Andjela Grozdanic

In northern Serbia there is less resistance to the potential of integration of Muslim refugees. One female respondent conveniently described it:

“There wouldn’t be any protests, but people would grumble, and eventually get used to it.” In the north the concern is rather how migrants would adapt to the local population and local customs, instead of how the local population would adapt to migrant peoples of different cultures.

When asked if citizens would react to women who kept their heads covered for religious reasons, respondents said “this can already be seen in Subotica, and no one has any problem with it.” They added that they are used to this because they live on the border, where “Turks pass, every day.”



However, respondents also show concern about the possibility of settlers would not adapt to local customs:

“The larger problem is how they will react when they see girls wearing mini-skirts. That is the question.”

These respondents have their doubts about the perceived closed nature of migrant populations: “They close ranks, and it becomes their centre, and they refuse to learn about our culture.” This question and this kind of dilemma contains a certain fear of the impossibility of cultural integration and also of the security risks which, in the opinion of many respondents, could be overcome only by gradual integration during which migrants would get to know local customs in reception centres and then gradually integration into the local community. One respondent gives an example of Sweden, which seems to him as the ideal model considering the circumstances in his community:

“This is why getting to know local customs and taking language lessons is important. There’s no leaving [the reception centres] until they learn something about our habits ...”

The openness of northern Serbia to other communities is attested by the statement of one local self-government representative that migrants from the Middle East would probably “be given a national council” as other minorities already have. Although it was a joke, his answer was spontaneous, and followed with further explanation – “we already have 21 cultures here.” Other respondents also did not have any general objections to other ethnic groups showing up in their community, provided that the equal rights principle is not violated. A respondent from that group summarized it in the following way:

“If we have a common objective and tendency, the same rights and rules, then there is no problem.”

In that sense, respondents in the north see possible injustices in resource distribution, and not cultural integration, as the biggest potential problem for integration. “It is important that locals don’t feel like migrants are getting something locals don’t have. It is important that they are equal.”

When compared, the findings from the north and the south show that the main differences in perceptions of migrant integration arise from a different understanding of the term “integration.” In the north there is less resistance, since integration is seen in the functional sense; there is no imperative of being the same, but instead there is a question of new members can be integrated in the community and learn the shared customs. In the south, the imperative of sameness aggravates ideas around the acceptance of outsiders. Perceived problems related to migrants finding jobs are common for both communities. Another similarity among respondents from both regions is the fear that the integration process could favour migrants, which in their opinion would be perceived as an injustice by the native population and would generate additional resistance by locals.





### 3. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AS AN OBSTACLE TO INTEGRATION

Contrary to what we expected, cultural differences did not appear to be the biggest obstacle to possible migrant integration. People living near the border, both in the north and south of Serbia, are used to living in coexistence with people of different cultures, ethnicities, and religions. This is why the “threat” of the construction of new mosques by Muslim immigrants is only partially seen by respondents to be a potential problem of migrant integration. Though respondents were hesitant to identify this as a problem that they perceived, many noted that they thought most of the native Serbian population could see this as a problem. In this sense, we recorded statements which reflect a wide gap in how local ethnic Serbian populations perceive Islam in relation to migration:

“I have no problem with new mosques, but it would be a problem for a majority of people.”

“We didn’t help as much as we could. People were even afraid. They are afraid of that religion.”

“When Serbs from Bujanovac see beards and short pants and headscarfs, they see Wahhabism and radical Islamism. Going to a mosque should not be a problem, but we see it as a problem.”

In short, respondents we talked to were aware that cultural differences should not be a problem for integration of newcomers. However, at the same time they were aware of the fact that the majority of the local population sees these differences as symbols, and these differences relate to religious movements which are represented in the media as aggressive or potentially dangerous. Furthermore, the negative experiences people have indicated having with Albanians in southern Serbia seeking secession, and the closed nature of the local Serbian communities (which became even more closed after young people fled to more urban areas and only older people remained in the communities), represent sources of resistance to the idea that Muslim migrants could settle and become successfully integrated at the local level.

Those respondents from northern municipalities who were interviewed did not have such varied and extreme comments with regards to Islam and migration. This can be explained, as in the previous section, by the large number of cultures already living and coexisting in the same space in this region and the lack of radicalism and radical national and religious movements in the north of Serbia.



#### 4. ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES AS AN OBSTACLE TO INTEGRATION

To put it succinctly, if it were up to the Serbs from southern Serbia, no migrants would be allowed or encouraged to settle in their areas. In local communities in the north, the possibility of migrant settlement and integration is not completely unacceptable, but could cause implicit negative reactions. In both cases, however, if the state would take upon itself the obligation of receiving a certain amount of migrants (a pre-set number), the local authorities in each region would undertake their best efforts to implement such a decision.

One of the opinion leaders from southern Serbia thinks that citizens would accept such a re-settlement decision by state authorities, but that they would not accept migrant integration to society.

“First of all, citizens won’t accept them because of their religion, schools, and mosques. Citizens wouldn’t accept them for the money and aid available, [but would accept them] only if there is a direct order arising from signed treaty or something... But, if there is an order they will settle them, maybe even near us, but people will not accept them... they don’t like them going to schools with our children, because they don’t want them.”

People from the south also think there would be strong resistance to the integration of migrants. Representatives of civil society believe that such resistance would mostly be spurred by the media. Such susceptibility to media manipulation, which could at the time be a negative factor to migrant integration process, could also be a mechanism which could potentially play a positive role if the media re-characterized the narrative around migrants. At any rate, representatives of civil society in the south believe that citizens would come to terms with this and would finally accept the situation and, in time, eventually adjust to it.

“The media has been a bad influence. People think differently when they read certain headlines.”

“We are all people, things aren’t easy for anyone, but we would have to get used to adjusting.”

**Such susceptibility to media manipulation, which could at the time be a negative factor to migrant integration process, could also be a mechanism which could potentially play a positive role if the media re-characterized the narrative around migrants.**

The majority opinion is that the biggest problem for migrant integration in the south is the overall regional economic situation. The lack of jobs and the level of endemic poverty are the biggest obstacles to integration, since newcomers would have no jobs – a prerequisite for quality integration. Furthermore, even if foreign aid programs would provide migrants with apartments or jobs, it would cause envy and resistance among the local population, and the possibility of successful integration would become even more difficult for the migrants settled in that area.



“Serbia can provide them with humanitarian aid with help from donors, but the country is too poor to provide them with jobs. So ... no jobs for them.”

“There is no integration [of the migrants] because of the poverty. If anyone gave them apartments that would cause resistance among the local population, the people who do not have apartments or jobs.”

“We have problems of our own caused by the high unemployment rate. Becoming a part of the wage system is a problem here. And in such a situation, giving land to Syrians, while our people are struggling to survive, would cause problems for the state.”

There are additionally some specific issues identified about migrant integration into the health and welfare systems. Providing health insurance to the migrants would similarly cause a problem. There are many people in southern Serbia who do not have jobs or health insurance, and who wouldn't look kindly at migrant integration if migrants were provided with free access to the healthcare system while they were marginalized from it. People would perceive this as an injustice, which would raise their emotions and lead to negative attitudes and a perception that refugees had caused them become foreigners in their own country. Basically, people have no problem with the fact that migrants are of a different religion, but are more concerned with the threat that they, as local citizens, may have fewer rights than people of a different cultural background and religion.

“There are thousands of people without health insurance, and suddenly they bring people who they provide with health insurance and give them free healthcare, of course our people are going to protest.”

The above responses highlight the fact that local level resistance to migrant integration isn't just based on culture or religion as much as it is based on a perceived feeling of deprivation among local citizens. This de-emphasizing of religion can also be noticed in the statements made by some respondents that people would gladly be treated by a doctor of another religion if that doctor was good at his or her job.

“If he is a good doctor, the word spreads around fast and I'm sure no one would have a problem being treated by him.”

Although some respondents emphasized this as a potentially positive aspect of migrations, that highly educated people may also migrant, most respondents were concerned that such highly-educated Syrians would not be interested in staying in such an economically deprived community as exist in some parts of Serbia. They think that it is much more likely that a low educated and unqualified migrant population would stay in Serbia, also seeking jobs, despite the fact that there already aren't enough jobs for the local population.



Respondents' answers to questions about the integration of migrants and their children in the educational system are also dominated by similar economical, rather than cultural, arguments. Although most would not generally oppose the idea of children attending schools in Serbia and in their communities, there is a resistance to the idea that classes might be taught in these migrants' mother tongue; such concerns are explained by a cost and cost-inefficiency approach.

"We are closing inefficient schools in the countryside, and opening schools for a few migrants, who will pay for that. So, we are closing our own schools, and now we are looking to employ teachers for each [migrant] course, and pay them."

Other arguments against migrants receiving education in their mother tongue refer to the reciprocity principle in the way migrant populations are treated in other western countries.

"For example, our kids didn't learn Serbian in Germany, so why would they [migrant children] learn in Arabic here?"

The way that migrants would possibly be allocated across southern Serbia is also a subject of discussion. There are citizens who think migrants could help revive depopulated regions, but such views are in the minority, and mostly heard from those representatives of civil society organizations familiar with or working on resettlement issues. An argument for placing migrants in depopulated communities that is often cited is that integration is easier in smaller communities where most people know each other, an argument that differs from the prevailing attitude that integration should be conducted in large cities.

However, such an allocation plan focused on depopulated areas is not a realistic approach for the majority of respondents. Instead, they propose that an allocation plan should be adopted for the entirety of Serbia and to include mostly those larger cities which are considered regional centres.

"That has to be solved strategically on the level of entire country. Everyone is mentioning southern parts of Serbia – let's put all poor people in the South."

"It would go much easier if several cities were to take 500 people each. If one region were to take them all, it wouldn't be easy, nor nice."

"People are less noticeable in larger cities and it is much easier for them to integrate than in the smaller communities. For example, no one would protest if 500 people were sent to Niš; there is no reason to create ghettos."

"It would be better to place them in Belgrade. Belgrade has to make a large block [style of apartment building] and make a Libyan and Syrian block [style of apartment building] and then they would integrate much easier into the larger community."



It is interesting that these arguments are mostly used by representatives from local self-governments. Although their discourse appears rational, it is based on a fear of the reactions of the local population. However, the most important finding is that both local citizens and representatives from local self-governments in southern Serbia see a change of demographic structure as the most important source of potential resistance. Such demographic change could potentially jeopardize their regional geopolitical position, as has already occurred in the aftermath of the Kosovo conflict.

In municipalities from northern Serbia, one of the strongest impressions shares focused on the large social differences internally among migrants. Respondents noticed that some migrants stayed in hotels while other slept on the floor or on the street. Judging by their clothes, many of them had a lot of money, but on the other hand many of them hardly made enough money in the current state to survive. These observations created many prejudices among citizens. These prejudices were intensified due to the aggressive behaviour that some migrants exhibited when Hungary decided to close its border. However, despite all of this, most of the citizens still perceive such aggressive reactions as a situational reaction caused by uncertainty and the troubles the migrants had to face on the road.

“How would you react if you crossed three seas? They were in a specific state of being, and that has nothing to do with their culture. It’s human to react in such way after three months. These are abnormal states of being. They only wanted to continue their journey to Germany.”

Although it is not that pronounced, people in the north also see poverty as the major obstacle to integration. A person who had been a refugee in the 1990s showed the least resistance to the idea of migrant integration. She stated that it is necessary to educate the local population and prepare them to receive refugees just as much as it is important to educate the refugees about local customs and integration. Most of the resistance to integration came from respondents from small municipalities near the border with Hungary and from those areas which have a majority Hungarian population. A younger respondent, who was also a refugee from Croatia, had a very specific view on integration. In his view integration is the same thing as assimilation, which would mean that migrants have to completely accept the culture of the local community (and for the most part reject their cultural norms and traditions) in order to be considered integrated.

Most respondents, however, especially representatives from local self-governments, do not share such radical attitudes. They think that migrant integration has to be based on migrant employment. It would be an immense problem if people saw that migrants were not actively contributing to society or the economy, or that they were doing nothing yet still receiving benefits and aid from the state.

“Idle people, sitting in front of local markets and drinking beer. As long as we have such people, it is normal there will be resistance against those who do not work and receive aid. But if these people, provided they wish to stay, want to work, then there’s no problem, since we are used to a mixed population.”



Other respondents who share this opinion are still cautious and note that there would certainly be resistance at the beginning, regardless of the work ethic or productivity exhibited by migrants.

“If they are working, people grumble about why they have jobs and we don’t, if they don’t work, people grumble about why they are living off of our work. It’s always like that in the beginning. So, a negative reaction in the beginning [towards migrants] is inevitable, and later people get used to it.”

Getting accustomed to migrant integration happens much faster if citizens see some economic benefit from migrants. A respondent shared an experience from his municipality from the time period of the migrant crisis:

“The first ten or fifteen days, people were strongly opposed to migrants, until they noticed that the large number of the refugees raised [business] turnovers, and that’s when animosity dropped.”

In the north of Serbia, similarly to the south, the predominant opinion is that migrants could be evenly distributed across the territory of Serbia and that this would be a more desirable result than resettling migrants only in certain targeted areas. As for the idea of populating abandoned villages, people are generally supportive of it if needed, but there are some crucial practical obstacles to implementation, which were previously pointed out.

The general opinion in the south is that although villages are depopulated, people would not like them to be populated by migrants: “In the east of the country the villages are completely empty. In 15 local communities there are less than two inhabitants. It’s better to place them [migrants] in Belgrade. Belgrade is a state within a state. Belgrade has to make a large block [style of apartment building] and make a Libyan and Syrian block [style of apartment building] and they [migrants] would integrate much more easily in a large community.”

People in the north of Serbia think that the repopulation of villages is not simple, for two reasons. The first is that arable land is bought and leased by “tycoons” in such areas, leading to a result of there being no land available. The second is that mostly old people live in the villages, and they are largely afraid of foreigners. There are already some cases of older people selling their houses in the outskirts of villages and moving into the village centres because they are afraid of migrants.

Both cases, however, are dominated by the underlying idea that migrants might be subject to positive discrimination if they are given land, which would lead to resistance among the local population.

The only right way to integrate refugees, and this opinion is especially strong in the north of Serbia, is for the local population to see some benefits from refugees’ integration. If money intended for refugee integration in the employment sector actually ends up helping the local



## IV. MIGRANT CONTRIBUTIONS TO LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

An especially interesting question in the area of migrants' contribution to local development is whether (and the extent to which) the reception of migrants would stimulate economic activity in municipalities where migrants are settled, and therefore support the overall welfare of local communities. Representatives of civil society think that migrants could contribute to development, but most of the other respondents, including representatives of local self-governments, think that is only a small chance that such contribution to local development would actually happen. Some respondents even openly oppose the idea of making any kind of effort in that direction, because they are afraid that in the long run such integration efforts would lead to what they see as the most dominant threat, which is the potential change to the demographic structure in southern Serbia in a way which would favour the Muslim population.

Arguments given by those who think migrants could be economically beneficial can be reduced to the idea that migrants could work on jobs that the local population is not interested in.

"It would be beneficial for the people if they [migrants] were to take less desirable jobs. They [migrants] would be very well received, as long as they were taking bad jobs. Down here in the south people look down on country folk. Ethnic Serbs are used to playing the role of the dominant group in the community, and they always had the upper hand and gave Albanian Serbs worse jobs than the jobs held by ethnic Serbs. It is deeply rooted. It is thought of in school as such. Everyone is instilled with a sense of belonging to a heavenly nation, with others having to work peasant jobs. I am from the countryside, and people used to rub it in to me. People would find it convenient and would accept them [migrants] if they were of lesser rank."

However, most citizens find the idea of any economic development spurred on by migrant integration to be unrealistic. People witness factories being closed and their neighbours moving away, so they are convinced that even migrants wouldn't want to stay in such regions or get any kind of job which would encourage them to stay and build the local economies.

As for private businesses, people think that it is hard enough for local citizens to start their own business, so it would be even harder for migrants to do so. Respondents blame the difficulty of starting businesses on administration and paperwork. They think that increased incentives from abroad would not be of much use, since the state keeps most of the funds from foreign aid, or as they say the funds "stay in Belgrade" and by the time funds get to those in more rural and regional areas, only the crumbs are left.

Finally, regarding agriculture, people believe that agriculture is an unprofitable activity with no chance of success. Here is how a respondent explains it:

"Even if I cultivate the land, to whom could I sell what I produce? It is much easier to find a second job."



“People don’t want to work in animal husbandry and agriculture. All villages on Stara Planina are empty. In places that used to have as much as 30,000 sheep there are less than 30 sheep today. No one wants to live and work in the countryside. Factories were closed by the process of democracy and privatization.”

However, it is especially interesting that respondents believe that although people do not cultivate the land, they would still oppose to the idea of the state giving uncultivated land to migrants.

“We are weird people; people would ask why no one gave them [the local populations] the land, although they [the local populations] wouldn’t work on the land anyways.”

“People would be angry if refugees were to receive any resources at all, and they didn’t in their own country.”

In short, very few respondents see any development potential in the south as being instigated by migrant resettlement. Only one respondent stated that there was a potential for tourism development based on migrant settlement. Representatives from civil society stated that, more generally speaking, there is a possibility that migrants would bring new skills, but this opinion was opposed by the equally held views that all the migrants that had any skills already left to settle Germany and didn’t want to stay in Serbia. The majority of people’s opinion on this topic is seen in the following statement from a local self-government representative from Dimitrograd, who jokingly added:

“We don’t need their [migrants’] help, we should send them to America, which caused all of this, and we will continue living as we used to.”

However, the evaluators hold the impression that some specific activities which would involve both migrants and local people could cause some positive movement in changing mindsets and behaviours. However people at the local level do not tend to believe that such beneficial activities are possible, and if they were possible, they would nevertheless be short-lived.

In a certain sense, similar opinions are present in northern Serbia as well. It is interesting that people living in small communities with a majority of Hungarian population are more skeptical about the possibility of migrants getting involved in the economy. Here is a statement from one such person:

“It is not a solution for our country’s problems to let some people have 20 children, let our youth go to Germany, and don’t do anything to persuade them to stay. Our youth are raising children in Germany, and now we’re thinking about importing some other people to increase our population growth rate, which is simply a perverse way of thinking.”

“I don’t know what kind of future they [the migrants] will see here, when our children see no future here.”

On the other hand, ethnic Serb respondents are much more open to the possibility of migrants contributing to economic growth than Hungarian respondents are. The only condition that has





Migrants playing at Kelebija border crossing  
© UNCT Serbia/ Andjela Grozdanic

to be met in their minds is that the local population receive some benefits from the integration initiatives.

“We should create a meeting place for both groups. It is important to let local people feel they get something [with migrants] that we otherwise don’t have [without migrants]. It is important for them [migrants] to be equal.”

“It is bad if they [migrants] get something and the local population doesn’t get anything. They [the local population] would be disgruntled.”

“It would be much easier if the local domestic population benefited from that.”

“It’s not reasonable to protect these areas if they are already empty. If someone willingly comes to live there, he or she should be let to live there, the same way we [the local population] often goes to live in other places in the country.”

However, representatives from local self-governments are much more skeptical about possibility of the more active participation of migrants in agricultural activities. In their opinion there is no land in the Srem region which is not otherwise already cultivated, with ownership of such agricultural land being highly concentrated there is also little possibility of migrants acquiring it.

As for the smaller pieces of land and farms, the question would be whether migrants would even be interested in undertaking such activities (which remains an open question). Most of our respondents think that everyone in this category of migrants would just wait for the opportunity to leave Serbia and go to Germany.



## V. READMISSION\*

The question of reintegration of persons who are being readmitted to the country is a specific question for the southern parts of Serbia. The municipalities in the north don't have this problem, so respondents had nothing to say about this, except to note that readmitted persons: "Are hard to communicate with since they don't speak Serbian, and as a matter of fact they don't speak any language well at all. There will be a lot of people readmitted, and if we add these refugees to the number, it could be a problem."

Readmission is a much more popular and debated topic in the municipalities in southern Serbia. In estimates from our respondents there are more Albanian citizens than Romani people currently undergoing the readmission process in the southern region. These Albanians think that the process of readmission is normal and, contrary to their view on migrants, that persons being readmitted are returning to their homes and that there will not be significant problems with the integration of readmitted people. This brings a focus back on two issues still at play for readmission – differences in cultures, and issues around housing.

"There's no problem with them [Albanians being readmitted], they have their own houses, kids can go to school, they know the language, and have social security."

"Those are our people who are returning to their homes, to places they were born. They don't lack anything, because they are Serbian citizens. They left for economic reasons, so they will blend in like those who didn't leave."

"Last year they returned 50 people to Bujanovac [for the readmission process]. I waited 9 hours as a director of the centre for social work... I placed them in the reception centre in Vranje, and they said: no, thank you, we have our own homes."

A problem with the reintegration of readmitted persons is, again, their employment. Representatives of local self-governments think that a large part of the problem comes from the fact that readmitted persons, especially Romani from other countries being readmitted to Serbia, do not want to work in the jobs that are being offered to them:

"We had to readjust our plans for the integration of that target group. We are all applying for any kind of help that we can for that target group. But our survey showed that rural households want to move to cities, that they don't want to be economically strengthened, that they say 'what would I even do with that machine, I don't want to work,' and that when it comes to construction materials we couldn't do anything because of unresolved ownership issues and the difficulty in securing the necessary permits from agencies, so, these are our problems."

"We tried to hire them [Romani migrants being readmitted] to clean the Jumko factory."

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\* Readmission is the process by which citizens who left their countries (during times of crises or other reasons) are allowed to return to their country.



They had two meals a day and the possibility of getting new clothes. But over the course of 5 days, there was no one left out of 15 people who began on the project even though they received a stipend and weren't deprived the right to social assistance. So, we also have to think about them with regards to this sort of experience."

There is also a problem with the unregulated receipt of social welfare, and since this practice is common, it is often the subject of dispute.

"Those 'welfare users' use it for generations and see it as something hereditary which they have a right to acquire and abuse. There's an example of displaced persons who used to live below the Gazela bridge, and they all used to receive some help and yet stayed there below the bridge for the entire time that they received benefits."

"Firstly, they [Romani migrants being readmitted] need social assistance, but the law on social welfare clearly defines who is entitled to social assistance."

An even bigger obstacle to integration of this group is lack of education and lack of knowledge of the language.

"Romani people have huge problems integrating. They have already complained. The problem is with the bureaucracy. There is an issue with the recognition of schools and diplomas. They lose their education through paperwork. They cannot return to the educational system because they don't speak Serbian, but only German and Romani."

"Serbs were similarly returned back to Serbia from their temporary homes as migrants in Sweden after 8 years. They said they would never return if they weren't forced to. The education is much better there [in Sweden]."

But, besides all of the problems there are still examples of good practices. The most prominent example is the fact that the current mayor of Preševo returned to Serbia himself through the process of readmission. Respondents also considered that there are lots of programs to assist persons being readmitted.

"The state is doing things, there are many programs. There are many foreign funds who invested into the readmission process. But it is an entirely different question whether such programs were successful."

There is also resistance among the local population to the readmission process, which speaks to certain underlying animosities that people may have towards those participating in the readmission process. In short, this animosity is at the level of a gripe and judgment towards those participating:

"There is a word, why did you return, why did you flee from here."

Such a statement shows that there is an obvious lack of knowledge among people about the policies which force certain citizens of Serbia to return and undertake the readmission process, as most usually do not want to return.



## VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are significant similarities and differences in attitudes towards migrants and the possibilities of their integration between citizens in both southern and northern municipalities of Serbia.

1. The attitude towards migrants in the north is mostly defined from a humanitarian and security perspective. It could mainly be described as a relatively cold and rational attitude toward migrants. The focus in the north is on elements which jeopardize everyday life and comfort of the local people, such as concerns around hygiene, diseases, dirt, and migrants assembling in public areas and disturbing the public order.

There is a higher degree of empathy in the south for people who have lost their homes, but at same time in the south there is also a much clearer emphasis on the cultural differences that these migrants exhibit, primarily related to the religious characteristics of the predominantly Muslim migrant population.

2. As for the possibility of integration in local communities, there is resistance among people both in the south and in the north. The only difference in the regions is the motivation behind the resistance. In the north there is more resistance among the Hungarian population, while local Serbs emphasize the multiethnic character of Vojvodina and express both opposition to integration and fears that due to poverty, migrants who attempt to integrate will not be able to find jobs (a prerequisite for integration).

In the south the resistance to integration is mostly motivated by a fear of changing the delicate demographic structure that currently exists in a way that would favour Muslims, which in the opinion of ethnic Serbs, could call into question local Serbs' ability to survive and thrive in these areas. Albanians, especially local Islamic imams, express the idea that migrants would nevertheless be well received in their communities.

Poverty and underdevelopment are seen in both the north and the south as the primary issues impeding migrant integration, and which would make quality integration of migrant populations more difficult, or even impossible.

3. In this regard, neither respondents from the north nor the south have a clear idea of how migrants could contribute to development of local communities. The only thing seen as a potential, short-term benefit to local communities is the aid that would likely accompany migrant integration programs, in the form of international donations. Both northern and southern Serbia communities state that this kind of aid could help migrants in being more well-received by locals and integrated, but only if the local population received some immediate benefit from it. For example, if someone invested in a production facility or factory as part of a migrant integration and settlement strategy, then locals should also be able to get jobs in the factory, not only migrants. However, respondents from both the north and the south expressed their concerns about any such shared benefit program, since international aid is usually short-lived and does not serve well as a long-term solution.



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4. Readmission is not relevant in the north, and in the south it is seen as normal process during which people return to their homes. In this sense, the stigma around readmission is much less, and the perception around those being readmitted is much different than the perception of migrants coming from other countries, such as the Middle East and North Africa.

In addition to these general conclusions, there are also several specific conclusions that can be drawn from the responses of those interviewed in the focus groups.

1. The decision to receive migrants will certainly face resistance at the beginning anywhere and in any manner that it occurs. If migrants get jobs, locals will protest and ask why they don't have jobs as well. If migrants remain unemployed, locals will protest because the migrants are not working and yet the state still gives them aid.

2. There is a different understanding of what integration means and how it can be achieved in the north versus the south. In the south of Serbia respondents associate integration with blending in entirely with the local community, to the point that migrants no longer practice their own customs or maintain their traditions in ways that are antithetical to the local culture. In the north, integration is understood more as a coexistence which would naturally include cultural differences, with the principle of tolerance and the possibility of participating in different systems all being equally important.

3. In southern Serbia the Muslim population is supportive of the allocation of migrants specifically to their communities (although they are aware that such allocation could cause local political problems as it would increase the number of Muslim residents), while ethnic Serbs in southern Serbia are against such an allocation of migrants to southern Serbia for fear that migrant settlement there would inextricably change the ethnic structure of the region, which has remained in a delicate balance.

4. Cultural differences are important in the south, but less important in the north, where the economic and social aspects of integration (i.e. the consequences of settling migrants without jobs) are seen as bigger problems. Hungarians in the north are different in this regard however, and they emphasize the possible issues that could arise from the settlement of migrants by noting fears that migrant populations would jeopardize the order in their communities by failing to comply with local laws and norms.

5. Both in the north and in the south of Serbia people don't see any economic benefit from migrant settlement. The predominant view is that migrants with the highest human capital have already left Serbia for Germany, so it would be expected that anyone willing to stay in Serbia are those with the lowest human capital and with the lowest skill sets and ability to work. In that sense, there is a view that Serbia already has an abundance of an under-qualified or unqualified work force, which would only get worse with a new influx of migrants.

6. One-time financial aid to migrants wouldn't reduce opposition to settlement, since opinion leaders all think it such aid would be spent, and migrants (and their settlement issues) would stay.



7. In spite of the immediate economic benefit gained by exploiting migrants' needs in the grey market economy, citizens did not hold positive attitude towards migrants. The majority of citizens will tolerate migrants only for so long as they have money to spend, and will otherwise leave migrants on their own after having earned that money.
8. Representatives of local self-governments are loyal to the national government and will act in accordance with any request from the government to resettle migrants to the extent that local resources allow them to.
9. The long-term settlement of migrants would be accepted by local self-governments if the government reached such a decision; local self-governments would be reluctant to undertake such a burden, but would show no resistance.
10. In the case that a decision on the long-term settlement of migrants is reached, people with families would be better received in Serbia than single migrants travelling and resettling alone.
11. Respondents think that a decision on the long-term settlement of migrants should be openly announced to the public, and disfavour any attempt at trying to pass a resettlement decision or legislation through as temporary settlement measure, which few would believe.
12. Everyone agrees that migrants should be allocated in such a dispersed way that a few families are placed into several municipalities all around Serbia.
13. Respondents from the south of Serbia had explicit views that the acceptance of migrants for a longer period of time would be easier if people were openly told that the migrants were going to stay for a longer time. Though this finding can be generalized for respondents from southern Serbia, it should not necessarily be expanded or taken as the view of respondents nationally.
14. In northern Serbia as well as in southern Serbia, families with children would be better received than single men without families.
15. There is no clear agreement, but the majority of respondents think that it is better to place migrants in larger cities, instead of smaller communities.
16. Everyone observed was convinced that migrants do not want to settle in Serbia, and that it is not a desirable place for them given the proximity of other western European countries.
17. There would be less resistance to migrant integration only if there was some direct benefit to local populations, such as other non-migrant local people getting jobs or apartments from the aid received and intended for migrant integration.
18. If aid intended for migrants didn't find a direct way to the local population, it would lead to an even larger resistance to migrants.



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a few typical negative stereotypes regarding the possible settlement of migrants, which can be extrapolated from the focus group sessions and which policy makers should keep in mind when designing migrant resettlement and integration programs, as these will be issues that will need to be addressed:

- 1) “Our people are leaving and we’re moving foreigners in.”
- 2) “Migrants are mostly Muslim, and Muslims have ten kids each, and our people tend to have one child each, so in a few generations these migrants will expel local Serbs, as they did in Kosovo.”
- 3) “Syrians are educated and on a more sophisticated and civilized level, while Afghans are backward and on a less civilized level than Serbs.”

Given the above conclusions, the following recommendations should be integrated into a plan for addressing the migrant crisis in Serbia:

1. Persons being readmitted can more easily be settled in southern Serbia, and migrants from the Middle East can be likely be more easily settled in the northern parts of the country.
2. The local population would show less resistance to migrant integration if they knew that migrants were evenly distributed throughout the country of Serbia, and not targeted for resettlement only in certain cities, regions, or municipalities.
3. Any aid to migrants (including the provision of apartments or jobs) must be distributed in such a way that the local population benefits from this assistance.
4. Programs dealing with resettlement of migrants should educate and inform the local population in due time about the intentions of local self-government regarding allocation of migrants in their region.
5. Resettlement programs should emphasize preparing refugees for “culture shock” by educating and informing migrants about the habits and cultures of the local population before they are settled. Similarly, it is also necessary to educate the local population about cultural characteristics of migrants in a way that emphasizes similarities and prospects for integration.
6. When allocating migrants, program administrators should prepare comprehensive profiles on the migrant population and characteristics of the local communities where they would be resettled (including religious and cultural specificities and labour market specificities).
7. Resettlement and integration programs should perform timely and extensive preparation for a new waves of migrants and should provide better technical resources (including accommodation and transport) but primarily human resources (including interpreters, psychologists, and sociologists) for work with refugees and the local population alike.



8. Instead of direct financial aid to migrants it would be better from an integration perspective to direct international aid to the construction of commercial facilities and infrastructure projects which are required for migrant integration, as these have the potential to have spillover effects benefiting the local population as well, and can be used as an example for the local population of the benefits that they also receive from the resettlement of migrants in their communities.



## ANNEX A

### THE SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS GROUPS 1 - 4

Group 1: Citizens and Representatives from the Civil Sector from Southern Serbia (the Municipalities of Vranje, Bujanovac, Preševo, and Dimitrovgrad)

<b>Total Number of Participants</b>		<b>11</b>
<b>Gender Breakdown</b>	Male	4
	Female	7
<b>Age Breakdown</b>	20-29 years old	3
	30-39 years old	3
	40-49 years old	5
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Albanian	4
	Serbian	7
<b>Education Level</b>	Up to and Including Secondary Education	3
	Secondary Education and Above	8
<b>Community Position</b>	Local NGO Representatives	4
	Citizens	6
	Religious Community Representatives	1
<b>Municipality</b>	Vranje	3
	Preševo	4
	Bujanovac	1
	Dimitrovgrad	3

Group 2: Representatives from Government and the Local State Administration from Southern Serbia (the Municipalities of Vranje, Bujanovac, Preševo, and Dimitrovgrad)

<b>Total Number of Participants</b>		<b>11</b>
<b>Gender Breakdown</b>	Male	6
	Female	5
<b>Age Breakdown</b>	30-39 years old	2
	40-49 years old	5
	50-59 years old	4
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Albanian	2
	Serbian	9
<b>Education Level</b>	Up to and Including Secondary Education	1
	Secondary Education and Above	10
<b>Community Position</b>	Representatives from Local Community Bodies	4
	Red Cross Local Representatives	2
	Representatives from Local Social Work Offices	3
	Representatives from the Commissariat for Refugees	1
	Local Union Representatives	1
	Vranje	3
	Preševo	2
<b>Municipality</b>	Bujanovac	2
	Dimitrovgrad	4



Group 3: Citizens and Representatives from the Civil Sector from Northern Serbia (the Municipalities of Kanjiža, Šid, and Subotica)

<b>Total Number of Participants</b>		<b>9</b>
<b>Gender Breakdown</b>	Male	4
	Female	5
<b>Age Breakdown</b>	20-29 years old	3
	30-39 years old	2
	40-49 years old	1
	50-59 years old	3
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Hungarian	4
	Serbian	5
<b>Education Level</b>	Up to and Including Secondary Education	3
	Secondary Education and Above	6
	Secopndary Education and Above	
<b>Community Position</b>	Local NGO Representatives	2
	Citizens	7
<b>Municipality</b>	Kanjiža	4
	Subotica	3
	Šid	2

Group 4: Representatives from Government and the Local State Administration from Northern Serbia (the Municipalities of Kanjiža, Šid, and Subotica)

<b>Total Number of Participants</b>		<b>9</b>
<b>Gender Breakdown</b>	Male	5
	Female	4
<b>Age Breakdown</b>	40-49 years old	4
	50-59 years old	5
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Hungarian	1
	Serbian	8
<b>Education Level</b>	Up to and Including Secondary Education	1
	Secondary Education and Above	8
<b>Community Position</b>	Representatives from Local Community Bodies	2
	Red Cross Local Representatives	4
	Local Police Office Representatives	1
	Representatives from the Commissariat for Refugees	1
<b>Municipality</b>	Local Union Representatives	1
	Kanjiža	2
	Subotica	2
	Šid	5