



CHALLENGES OF THE MIGRANT-REFUGEE CRISIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CSOS



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When we started to build an informal network of civil society organizations five years ago, the basic idea was to improve the knowledge of organizations that work directly in the area of migration and asylum, and to connect them with organizations that follow the topics related to these areas, with the ultimate goal of strengthening their position in the dialogue with the competent authorities on practical solutions and legislation to be adopted. Today, we especially emphasize the fact that, in addition to our joint work on monitoring and analysis of policies and practices, the accumulated knowledge acquired its practical dimension through operation of individual organizations during the migrant-refugee crisis.

Due to all aforementioned, the fifth edition of the “Challenges of Forced Migrations” will be considerably different in form and content from those we published in previous years. Observations and recommendations that we offer are based on the knowledge we have gained through continuous presence at key points where a considerable number of refugees and migrants stayed, and which we verified through joint monitoring visits, information gathered and interviews with decision-makers. Also, due to the number of documents that were published during the crisis, we opted for a significantly shorter form of the report, in which our key observations and recommendations will be presented in a concise manner. Traditionally, special attention is given to particularly vulnerable categories among refugees and migrants.

In addition, we focused our work on another important dimension - the reform processes, and hence compiled comments on the Draft Law on Asylum through joint efforts and with expert support, developed a study that provides an overview of the current state and represents the starting point by which we will measure progress in the implemented reforms, as well as indicators by which we will monitor the fulfillment of the planned activities under the Action plan for Chapter 24.

The list of those to whom we owe our gratitude is a very long one. First and foremost, we are grateful to the Royal Norwegian Embassy which has supported our several years long work through the project Networking and Capacity Building for a More Effective Migration Policy in Serbia. We also express our gratitude to everyone with whom we spoke, and who have given us valuable information. We thank local institutions and government agencies that responded to our inquiries and that enabled the realization of a large number of important visits.

Group 484, as the carrier of activities, owes special gratitude to the partner organizations, the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) and Belgrade Centre for Human Rights (BCHR), as well as all colleagues from other organizations – Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (ASTRA), Autonomous Women’s Center (AŽC), Balkan Centre for Migration and Humanitarian Activities (BCM), the Initiative for Development and Cooperation (IDC), International Aid Network (IAN), Novi Sad Humanitarian Centre (NSHC), PRAXIS and Humanitarian Centre for Integration and Tolerance (HCIT), which were committed to participating in the implementation of numerous project activities.

Introduction

According to announcements by officials and adopted strategic documents, 2015 was perceived as one of the crucial reform years in which the implementation of activities aimed at fulfilling the criteria set out in Chapter 24 - Justice, freedom and security was supposed to start, a Chapter within which policies on asylum and migration occupy a prominent place. Due to the (un)expected influx of a large number of migrants and refugees, reform activities gave place to activities that were aimed at mitigating the effects of newly emerged circumstances - the provision of basic emergency needs of people in migration and safe passage to the desired destination countries.

During 2015 almost 600,000 persons were registered by the competent authorities of the Republic of Serbia. Several factors had a decisive influence on the situation in the Republic of Serbia: the dynamics of the inflow of migrants into Greece from Turkey, the situation in Macedonia with intermittent closure of borders, the Hungarian policy towards migrants, as well as the views of the European Union and the Member States on the acceptable modalities for resolving the refugee crisis. The large number of factors also caused frequent changes in the situation, both in terms of the number of persons, the routes of movement and the permeability of the borders, and technical and personnel equipment. Thus, besides short-term measures that were aimed at humanitarian and emergency care and supporting the transit of these persons, planning and implementation of "medium and long-term activities" became very difficult. The announced reform processes in the field of asylum and migration have slowed significantly, and the established practice, to some extent, modified and adapted to the needs of the situation in which the Republic of Serbia has found itself.

Based on a number of factors that conditioned reception and/or transit, where on some of them Serbia had no influence, the overall response of institutional and non-institutional actors can be assessed positively, although space for some improvement was also identified.

Given that the greatest number of published analyses aims at assessment of the acting of institutional actors and international organizations, we observe the established system of reception and transit by outlining the work of civil society organizations (hereinafter CSOs). The aim of the document is primarily to point out some of the perceived positive and negative aspects of the established system of reception and transit. In addition, we briefly discussed the impact of the migrant crisis on the functioning of the asylum system in the Republic of Serbia.

1. Basic characteristics of the migration flow

Mid-2015 is taken as the turning point at which the Republic of Serbia started to record increased activities at its borders, crossing of as much as several hundreds of migrants and refugees a day, as witnessed by the UNHCR monthly statistics for 2015 (January - 2,425, February - 2,537, March - 3,761, April - 4,425, May - 9,034, June - 15,209, July - 29,037, August - 37,463,

September - 51,048, October - 180,307, November - 149,923, and December - 92,826).¹ Due to changes in the policy of registering migrants who enter Serbia, the tendency of decrease in the number of issued certificates of intent, which was recorded as of November, continued in the first months of 2016.

Among the migrants, most were people who came from the war-affected areas, that is, from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, but a significant number of people from Iran, Pakistan, Lebanon, Bangladesh, Morocco, etc. was also recorded.² The most numerous were citizens of Syria, 301,533, then citizens of Afghanistan, 160,831, and Iraqi citizens, 76,003, the influx of whom actually increased significantly in the last months of 2015.³

The Balkan route, through the territory of the Republic of Serbia, has changed its trajectory. The only constant was the main entry point - the border with Macedonia, while entries from the direction of Bulgaria began to be recorded during the summer months. Also, there have been significant changes in terms of exit points - in the first months migrant flow was exclusively recorded in the direction of Hungary, while in recent months the border to the Republic of Croatia was dominantly used.

As an urgent response to the growing problem of influx of migrants and refugees, the Government of the Republic of Serbia, and international organizations and NGOs have organized humanitarian aid at entry and exit points on the border. In addition, as one of the first measures, a procedure for registration at entry points and for issuing documents to move freely through the territory of the Republic of Serbia was established. Due to the lack of a more adequate mechanism grounded in the regulations, the procedure of registration of persons was carried out according to the provisions of the Law on Asylum.⁴

In addition to the existing asylum centers, with the increasing number of migrants, new facilities were opened with the function of accommodation and reception of migrants and refugees, the so-called reception-transit centers in Preševo, including a point for urgent reception in Miratovac, Kanjiža (active until September 15), Subotica, Šid (next to the railway station, the so-called "Gray house", Adaševci and Principovac) and in Dimitrovgrad. Potential locations for opening additional centers were determined⁵ in case of an increase in the number of migrants and refugees that exceeds the available accommodation facilities. It should also be noted that for a long time Belgrade has been an important point on the map of the movement, though never formally established as a reception center, despite the fact that until September 2015 the presence of 100 to 1,000 migrants and refugees who have stayed outdoors was recorded on a daily basis.

¹ UNHCR Serbia: <http://www.unhcr.rs/en/resources/statistics/asylum.html>.

² UNHCR Serbia: <http://www.unhcr.rs/en/resources/statistics/asylum.html>.

³ In 2015 the total number of issued certificates of intent was 577,995, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/documents.php?page=4&view=grid>

⁴ Law on Asylum, "Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia", no. 109/2007

⁵ Additional locations identified: Sombor, Bosilegrad, Bujanovac, Pirot, Zaječar, Negotin. <http://www.kirs.gov.rs/docs/aktuelno/20160314%20bilten%20februar%20srp.pdf>

2. CSO activities

The planning and implementation of CSO activities was the result of several factors - movement route, places where migrants stayed, the reaction of competent authorities and the capacities they had available. They focused their activities mainly on providing humanitarian aid, support in the form of sustenance of the system of medical assistance, psycho-social and legal and information support, on minors and other vulnerable groups, but in the last months of 2015, more and more towards activities of advocacy and protection of rights of migrants and refugees.

2.2. Humanitarian aid

A small number of organizations was active and provided direct assistance to migrants and refugees before the onset of the crisis. Objectively speaking, the real need for such type of activity was small, because most of the people went to one of the existing asylum centers. At the beginning of 2015, only the "Old Brickyard", near Subotica was a location where refugees and migrants stayed apart from the existing asylum centers. In early June, the situation changed significantly, and a large number of organizations started to provide humanitarian aid, such as food, water, clothing and footwear, blankets and so on. On several occasions, competent authorities and international stakeholders pointed out the importance of such activities. However, CSOs emphasized that from their perspective the implementation of the activities on providing humanitarian aid has been largely hampered by insufficient coordination of all actors involved, despite numerous mechanisms in place. Systems of coordination established at the level of reception centers and UNHCR coordination meetings were cited as positive examples, noting, however, that even these mechanisms failed to establish a fully coherent and comprehensive system. There were often situations where a surplus of certain items existed at some places, while at others their deficit was recorded. Also, the conditions under which the organizations were able to carry out their activities varied from center to center. A certain degree of ad hoc operation is unavoidable in mass influx situations, but taking into account that we are talking about a period of several months, it was necessary to establish a mechanism that would comprehensively coordinate the humanitarian work of CSOs, especially in order to use the limited resources that the Republic of Serbia had available more efficiently.

2.2. Medical assistance

During the first months, medical assistance was provided through alleviating the consequences of injuries and other minor health problems, dispensing of medication and further referral to appropriate institutions of secondary and tertiary health care. Starting from October, civil society organizations carried out all the activities of medical assistance in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, based on the received Letter of support that referred only to primary health care.⁶

⁶ Information obtained from the Initiative for Development and Cooperation, as well as the Danish Refugee Council.

Some organizations carried out these activities by directly involving competent health centers, and the activities of medical assistance were thus coordinated by the director of the competent Health Centre/medical institution in the place where the activities were carried out.

From September, all organizations providing medical assistance to migrants are required to keep accurate data on persons who have received medical assistance, type of illness diagnosed, as well as service(s) rendered. The data collected within a given period are forwarded directly to the competent Health Centre, which then submits them to the Ministry of Health.⁷

Communication and cooperation with representatives of the health centers on a daily basis considerably alleviates the work of competent health services, as well as the organizations present in the field, and allows for the provision of more adequate and more comprehensive assistance to refugees.⁸ Additionally, it is commendable that the system of referring patients for further treatment or additional medical care is established and that it works very well. Organizations that operate on the territory of Šid pointed out that the involvement of the Ministry of Health, that is, the local health center, and the taking over of the coordination of all medical teams in the field, resulted in a rise of the quality of services to a higher level.

2.3. Psycho-social assistance

Although in the opinion of some representatives of the competent state bodies there is no need for providing psycho-social assistance,⁹ civil society organizations, which have years of experience in providing this type of services, share the standpoint that the need for psychological support is greatly present in the current migration flow as well. Experiences from the work of the International Aid Network with migrants and refugees during mass influx,¹⁰ testify that migrants and refugees have the need to talk about the experiences they lived through both in the country of origin and in the countries of transit. Providing basic psychological support in the form of understanding, listening and providing basic information proved to be very useful and extremely positively accepted by migrants and refugees. Traumatic experiences they refer to, and which they want to discuss, are related to the experiences of war, torture, and violence, both in the country of origin and in the countries of transit. Experiences of violence and violations of basic human rights by the very people who should protect them are frequent.

The most often highlighted objective obstacles in providing adequate psychological assistance are the following: relatively short period of stay, difficulties in communication, insufficient capacities (human resources and infrastructure for the implementation of appropriate support programs), etc. In the attempt to overcome the objective obstacles and to adapt to the dynamics of migration flows, and with the aim of ensuring a minimum of psycho-social support to those

⁷ Information received at the meeting with the Danish Refugee Council on January 28, 2016

⁸ Conclusion of International Aid Network on the basis of activities carried out in the area of Šid on December 28, 2015.

⁹ Information obtained during a visit to reception centers in Šid.

¹⁰ Activities on providing medical and psycho-social assistance in reception-transit center in Šid.

who need such support and who want it, organizations had their work organized through the creation of mobile teams composed of a doctor, medical nurse, psychologist and interpreter.

In the situation where migrants stay on the territory of the Republic of Serbia over a longer period, psycho-social support could be significantly improved. In this sense, sustained cooperation and communication with competent institutions is very important in order to establish the most effective programs of psycho-social support under the circumstances. Bearing in mind that a certain period had passed and that the organizations active in the field enhanced their years of experience in providing psycho-social assistance to refugees and displaced persons with specific and highly-specialized knowledge, they can significantly contribute to creating the most effective programs of psycho-social assistance. Support at an early stage is also beneficial to the country from which a person is seeking protection, because the provision of medical-psychological assistance can prevent further deterioration of their mental and physical health, and additionally enable a more complete application for asylum on the basis of medical documentation and a realistic assessment of the mental state and circumstances they lived through.

2.4. Communications and legal and informational assistance

Despite a considerably increased presence of interpreters when compared with the situation before the increased influx, there is still a need for improvement, primarily by engaging an additional number of interpreters, but also by finding interpreters for certain languages and dialects, which are rare in this region. Field experiences of organizations testify to the crucial role of interpreters. If the interpreter is at the same time a person of the same nationality, that is, a person of the same cultural origin as the person being interviewed, a relationship of trust is established much faster and thus the quality of the information obtained becomes far better. This experience should be taken into account in the preparation of various programs of integration for persons who enjoy or will enjoy the protection of the Republic of Serbia. These programs should by all means also provide for measures aimed at expert training of these persons to perform the tasks of interpreters and cultural mediators.

Experiences of CSOs in providing interpreters are also interesting, and some of the models applied can certainly be used in the future. CSOs have been establishing cooperation with academic institutions both in the country and in the region. Thus, for example, the Balkan Centre for Migration and Humanitarian Activities resolved the problem of providing interpreters for Persian (Farsi), who are almost impossible to find and engage in Belgrade, by establishing cooperation with the Faculty of Philosophy in Sarajevo, which has a study program for Persian language and literature within its Department of Oriental Philology.

A significant aspect of the protection of migrants is providing information on their rights and obligations, protection mechanisms, as well as service information on the route, available storage capacities, types of assistance, assistance in family reunification and the like. It is very important to inform migrants about the rights and obligations arising from their status, as well as treatment procedures to which they will further be subjected each time contact with

them takes place. The importance of providing adequate and timely information is reflected not only in compliance with international obligations, but also in maintenance of public order and peace. Frequent changes in the policies on treatment of migrants in the European Union and the countries of the Western Balkans greatly contribute to creating/increasing the state of uncertainty and tension among migrants, which can further escalate into serious conflicts, protests and disruption of public order and peace.

Crucial information was doubtless made available to migrants and refugees, with competent authorities and CSOs alike involved in this kind of activity. However, the impression is that inconsistent information has often been offered, and that the distribution of a large number of informative materials of various content had a negative effect on the selection of important priority information. It has also been noted that a stable channel of communication failed to be established between providers of assistance on the Balkan route, that is, in the region, which would provide timely information on the needs of migrants and refugees, as well as the types of available assistance in all countries on the route.

A positive example is by all means the Info center for asylum opened in Belgrade, whose main purpose is to provide information to persons in need of international protection, who dwell at the informal gathering places close to bus and railway stations in Belgrade. The Info center may be also cited as an example of good cooperation established between institutional and non-institutional actors, since it was created in cooperation between the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, the UNHCR office in Belgrade, the Adventist Development and Humanitarian Agency (ADRA) in Serbia, the Municipality of Savski venac and the Klikaktiv organization.

3. Unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable categories

There is a noticeable presence of multi-member (and multigenerational) families among migrants. Cases of mothers traveling with children, unaccompanied by other family members were registered, as well as of women and minors traveling unaccompanied. CSOs that conducted their activities in places of informal gatherings of migrants and refugees in the city of Belgrade and around the "Old Brickyard" pointed out, in specific, to the presence of vulnerable groups among the migrant population.

Organizations primarily testified about the presence of a large number of unaccompanied minors. During 2015, 10,645 unaccompanied minors were registered as asylum seekers.¹¹ Given the difficulties faced by the competent authorities during the registration of asylum seekers, the lack of a developed procedure for the identification of minors, and the fact that many refugees and migrants do not have identification documents, the actual number of unaccompanied minors is probably much higher.¹²

¹¹ Annual report of the Ombudsman for the year 2015, 2016, p. 53

¹² Human Rights in Serbia 2015, Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2016, p. 253

According to observations, there was a lack of an active response of competent centers for social work in assisting unaccompanied minor migrants, especially during the first months, which is not surprising, taking into account that the need to improve the human and technical capacities of these centers has been continually emphasized even before the migrant wave. In order to compensate for the observed deficiencies, at least to some extent, UNICEF, in collaboration with the Association of Social Protection Professionals of the Republic of Serbia, hired a number of social workers from the competent centers for social work in Šid and Preševo, in order to ensure their continued presence in reception-transit centers, and thus support the social protection system in responding adequately to the challenges of increased influx of migrants and refugees.¹³ As of December, the social workers of the Center for Social Work in Šid are present in Adaševci 7/24, while in the Center opposite the railway station in Šid social workers cover only the day shifts.¹⁴

Since the procedure of determining the age has not yet been established, UNHCR and SCOs have spoken on several occasions about cases of unaccompanied minors registered as adults. However, in some cases it was established that the minors themselves declared that they have reached the age of 18, in the hope that they will not be stopped, and thus will reach the country of destination in a short period of time.

It is positive that the issue of safety and care of unaccompanied minors has been placed high on the scale of priorities in 2015. Besides the Instruction¹⁵ of the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, which was adopted in July 2015 and which provides for an unambiguous obligation to accommodate unaccompanied minors in one of the institutions of social protection, this is also witnessed by a number of initiatives and activities upheld mainly by international and UN agencies, and implemented in cooperation with the SCOs. A significant number of educational events was organized and numerous documents were produced with the aim of providing guidelines for proceedings. However, it seems that some of the guidelines for proceedings and interpretations of international standards should have been harmonized in an early stage of the crisis.

A particular challenge was the care of minors from the territory of Morocco, Algeria, Pakistan and other countries, for whom free passage was restricted as of November according to the current policy of EU states regulating migratory flows. Minors originating from these countries in most cases do not express intention to seek asylum, and they stay in the Republic of Serbia in an irregular status, usually after voluntarily leaving one of the facilities intended for the accommodation of unaccompanied minors.

Despite the known risks faced by people in migration, according to official data of the Center for Human Trafficking Victims Protection for 2015, only one human trafficking victim was identified within the refugee population. Also, organizations that operate within the working group did not gain any direct knowledge of reported cases of gender-based violence.

¹³ Interview with a UNICEF volunteer, December 22, 2015

¹⁴ Data obtained from the Initiative for Development and Cooperation

¹⁵ Instruction on the proceedings of centers for social work and institutions of social protection for accommodation of beneficiaries in ensuring the protection and accommodation of unaccompanied migrant minors, no. 110-00-00469/2015-14 of July 10, 2015

The problem with identifying potential victims of human trafficking in this population is reflected among other things in the fact that most of them stay in Serbia for a very short time, usually no longer than 72 hours. It is clear that in such circumstances it is almost impossible to make a proper assessment of the circumstances under which people travel and thus make a positive identification of possible victims. An additional problem is the fact that within the brief contact realized during registration, there are no visible indicators that would indicate human trafficking, nor does prior information exist on persons suspected, or the ability to check their future movements, except for cases when a person is forced to stay longer in Serbia, due to an injury or some other reason. On the other hand, there is a lack of motivation among refugees to "self identify" themselves and report possible abuse/exploitation, which is understandable, given that their aim is to depart for EU countries, not an additional delay in Serbia.

When it comes to the protection of children, ASTRA has received, via the European line for missing children 116 000 in Serbia, eight notifications (2 girls and 6 boys) related to children who went missing on the way from the Middle East to Western Europe during the period in question. This information was forwarded to the cooperating organizations working in the field and state authorities in the country and abroad, and as a result two children were found, while the search for the others is still ongoing.

4. Registration system and the impact on the asylum system

Implementation of registration and recording of migrants and refugees by issuing certificates of intent to seek asylum is one of the measures the Republic of Serbia undertook from the onset of the refugee crisis.¹⁶ This decision has had its positive and negative implications.

The efforts of the authorities to collect precise data on persons entering or staying on its territory are, in the first place, encouraging and responsible. In addition to that, such practice established the right to freedom of movement of migrants and refugees within 72 hours, while allowing some of them to exercise and access other rights and services. On the other hand, it created a false image of a large number of persons who intend to seek asylum in the Republic of Serbia, which, judging by the experience of CSOs, was the exact opposite of the real state of affairs - the majority of migrants perceived the Republic of Serbia only as a transit country. Although the "input document" was the same, a parallel system of acceptance and referral was de facto created. The large discrepancy between the stated intentions and submitted applications for asylum can be explained by a correct interpretation, but the decision to bind the system of registration of persons who are in transit to the asylum system carried a high risk in case of a change of attitude of other countries on free transit.

¹⁶ In some of the centers registration of persons also takes place, as for example in the reception center in Preševo or a makeshift reception center, which is actually located in the police station in Dimitrograd.

In the circumstances of complete closure of the border by Hungary and the proclamation of the Republic of Serbia for a safe third country, and UNHCR's position on Macedonia as an insecure third country, the Republic of Serbia could have faced the challenge of deciding on asylum claims and/or the provision of international protection to a number of people that exceeds its objective capacities, as well as of accepting a large number of third country nationals through the application of readmission agreements.

The decision adopted by the Government of the Republic of Serbia¹⁷ in September 2015 on issuing certificates of entry into the territory of the Republic of Serbia for migrants who come from countries where their lives are in danger (hereinafter: the transit certificate), which began to be issued in early 2016, represented a great turning point.¹⁸

Although the decision does not explicitly define the objective of its implementation, nor its relationship with the certificates of intent to seek asylum in Serbia (except in Art. 4(2), which states that the certificate holders do not have the status of "asylum seekers" in terms of regulations on asylum), practice has shown that this is a document that should be issued to persons for whom it can be assumed that they are under real risk of gross human rights violations, but who do not want to seek asylum in Serbia, and rather intend to continue their journey to the European Union countries they perceive as countries of refuge. In that sense, the transit certificate is in principle a step towards more adequate regulation of the legal status of these persons, as it also allows them access to banking services, housing and necessary medical assistance. However, the majority of actors agree in the assessment that this kind of practice based on regulations should have been established at an earlier stage.

Practical contribution of the transit certificate was reflected in the fact that, on the one hand, it allowed for a clear separation of people who are not interested to stay in Serbia from those who are. However, although the issuing of transit certificates lasted for a relatively short time, certain problems in practice have also been identified. Issuing of transit certificates should have consistently followed the policy of countries along the Western Balkans route, according to which the continuation of the journey was enabled only for persons coming from specific countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria) or even from certain areas within these countries. Given that the basic criterion for issuing transit certificates was still the expressed intent to seek asylum in the Republic of Serbia, these certificates were issued to persons who *ipso facto* could not leave Serbia in a "legit" way, which essentially impairs the *raison d'être* itself of the certificate. There were also situations in practice, in which, as a result of inadequate communication between the police officials and migrants, in the absence of interpreters, transit certificates were issued to persons who have expressed their intention to seek asylum in Serbia.

After the signing of the Joint Declaration of the Chiefs of Police in Zagreb on February 18, 2016 (hereinafter: the Joint Declaration), on February 19, 2016, the competent authorities of the Republic of Serbia ended the practice of issuing transit certificates.

¹⁷ Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no 81/2015.

¹⁸ Belgrade Center for Human Rights, however, does not have data on the number of issued certificates.



The Joint Declaration envisages cooperation of border police of Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria in the area of border protection and regulation of migration flow along the Western Balkans route. The Joint Declaration provided for a unique registration form for refugees, to be issued in Macedonia, and stamped during transit by all Declaration signatory countries. The same agreement stipulates that the persons in need of international protection will be granted entry into the countries along the Western Balkan route if they possess valid documents which can prove their nationality, or if they can prove in some other way that they come from a country affected by war. Transit along the Western Balkan route will not be enabled for people who stayed in “safe third countries” for a longer period.

From the moment the police in the states on the Balkan route harmonized criteria for free passage by an agreement, the number of persons who were denied entry into the Republic of Croatia and continuation of the journey started to increase. Competent authorities allowed them to either seek asylum, or to be returned via Preševo to Macedonia in order to obtain the necessary documents for entry into EU countries, or to be returned to Bulgaria, if they entered the territory of Serbia directly from that direction.

Due to this practice, the presence of persons who are staying in the Republic of Serbia with an unregulated status has been noted. On the territory of Belgrade, groups of men originating from Morocco were mostly identified, who were not in possession of documents required for a legal stay. The problem of accommodation and providing assistance to this category of migrants arose, given that they did not show a willingness to enter the asylum procedure and thereby exercise their right to accommodation in one of the existing asylum centers.

It is expected that, in time, the number of persons staying in the Republic of Serbia in an illegal status will grow, which will represent a new challenge for the institutions of the system and all other actors active in the field of migration.

Since the beginning of 2016 until the end of February, 94,605 foreigners entered into Serbia, while in the same period 1,187 of them expressed their intention to seek asylum.¹⁹

¹⁹ Data obtained from the Office of the UNHCR in Belgrade.

Concluding remarks

If it is to some extent possible to talk about the positive aspects of the refugee-migrant crisis, then what should certainly be emphasized in the first place is the willingness and commitment of all key actors to establish a reception system that has the needs of the individual at its core. A great encouragement is the fact that the Republic of Serbia opted for a policy of open borders, and that the reform process was not completely stopped. Also, there has been a significant shift in the way the media reported on a daily basis, which ultimately resulted in an empathetic attitude of some citizens of the Republic of Serbia, who became directly engaged and helped migrants and refugees. The number of actors who, on an equal basis, participate in debates with the aim of finding the most appropriate solutions is far higher, and the quality of the debates has been significantly improved. The basics that have been set up could be a factor that can make the announced reforms in the process of meeting the criteria more effective and efficient. Unfortunately, the migrant-refugee crisis has also revealed the fact that the issue of migration is a political issue *par excellence*, which resulted in numerous agreements and unilateral decisions of the states that have “shaken up” some of the basic principles underlying the system of protection of human rights and refugee rights, the scale of which remains to be debated in the future.

As lessons learned the following can be considered: the need for a more comprehensive coordination of CSOs and national and international actors in providing and delivering humanitarian aid in crisis situations; CSOs have distinguished themselves as a reliable partner of the state in providing medical assistance and support to the health care system in the Republic of Serbia; a more intensive and continuous cooperation and communication of CSOs with competent authorities is needed in order to establish and implement programs of psycho-social support, both in the conditions of transit and longer stay of migrants and refugees; when creating programs of integration, it is necessary to take into account the positive experience from this crisis, related to the role of interpreters of the same ethnic or cultural origin; inflation of various information and instructions for refugees and migrants, as well as the way they were released, often had the effect of confusing the users, and thus it is necessary to establish in the future a simpler and more efficient system of information by CSOs and institutions that have experience in working with migrants and refugees; it is necessary to continue the communication and coordination between the actors involved in the care of unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable groups; individual measures and activities must be analyzed in the context of a broader migration and asylum policy in Serbia and harmonized with set goals.



