

Why I Stayed

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



PROJECT NOTE



klikAktiv
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Report

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

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Summary

Why I Stayed: Asylum, Integration, and Futures in Serbia Through the Eyes of 13 Refugees presents a collection of first-person narratives constructed through a collaborative interviewing and editing process with 13 refugees who have received asylum or are applying for asylum in Serbia. These testimonies respond to the research question: **What personal and sociopolitical factors contribute to an individual's decision to declare asylum in a traditional transit country?** Primarily, participants said they applied for asylum in Serbia because border militarization prohibited their passage into the European Union (EU). (A number of participants also disputed the language of 'decision,' expressing they'd been forced to stay in Serbia.) However, more intrinsic reasons also recurred, including family relationships, the desire to continue education, feelings of cultural acceptance, and protection needs. Participants' primary reason for potentially leaving Serbia was the state's policy of withholding passport issuance and naturalization for refugees. To date, no refugee in Serbia has naturalized on the basis of their refugee status.

Through these testimonies, an overarching narrative also emerges that connects why and how refugees stay in Serbia to the country's contradictory position before the EU's expanding border apparatus. On the one hand, EU accession and its required harmonizations and externalizations have compelled Serbia to adopt certain border and security policies. On the other hand, nationally unique legacies – Yugoslav dissolution, third-way socialism, and the ethnonationalist agenda of the contemporary Serbian state – produce political priorities and policies that often contradict EU directives. These currents intersect and shape how refugees arrive in and move through the Balkan states. Crucially, this larger narrative also exposes the irregularity of migration as a direct consequence of state (in)action. In this way, I contrast 'crisis'-era migration with emerging mobility paths to demonstrate how the state can produce safe pathways to asylum access, leaving behind the securitization paradigm.



Methodology

The project methodology is an experimental form mixing elements of oral history, journalism, and discourse analysis. I conducted in-depth interviews with 13 individuals, who I describe as this project's 'participants.' In the case of 12 participants, I built an oral history testimony out of the transcript of that interview, sent them the draft for review, and then collaborated through secondary interviews, phone calls, and/or written correspondence to ensure accuracy and their satisfaction with their narrative. All narratives are thus told from the first-person perspective, the bulk of the text primarily transcribed from a main interview, but with information overlaid from secondary interviews and edited by both myself and the participants, who were thus invited to take more active roles than in traditional qualitative research methods. The result is the inclusion of 11 direct, at-length testimonies in this report. (Two interviewees were a couple who I interviewed together, and their stories are presented through a singular, dual-speaker testimony.) I believed this method would lead to greater trust, sensitivity, and accuracy, while also providing additional insight into how individuals reconstruct the memory of their migration and imbue it with meaning. The method also allows the testimonies to reflect participants' personalities, positionalities, and politics, which I believed important for refuting discourses that homogenize and depoliticize refugees and their stories.

In the report's first section, I also analyze quotes from my interview with a thirteenth participant. Additionally, I discuss the stories of two other refugees whose stories I gathered from open press sources. Despite the lack of personal interviews, I believed the inclusion of these stories would help highlight common patterns and revealing injustices in the Serbian asylum system. The methodological reasons for approaching these three individuals' stories differently are discussed at further length in the report.

Structure & Findings

Testimonies are grouped and discussed across four thematic and chronological sections. In each section, readers can find answers to the primary research question (Why do refugees stay in Serbia?) and threads of the larger narrative of regional migration.

I. Beginnings

The formation and early years of the Serbian asylum system, 2008-2014

Why Serbia? Refugees granted status in the early years of the Serbian asylum system were primarily *sur place* refugees or those with pre-existing family and labor connections – ultimately a very small number. This section does not feature any direct testimonies but discusses the stories of three refugees who arrived and/or received status during this period. Decisions to apply for asylum in Serbia during this period should primarily be understood as stop-gap solutions to immediate threats to life, facilitated by mobility pathways opened by geopolitical relationships, that have become unintentionally permanent due to Serbia’s draconian laws around travel document issuance and naturalization.

Larger narrative: Here, we can see the first signs of conflict between the integration of ex-Yugoslav states into the EU mobility regime and the geopolitical legacies of the Yugoslav era. From its inception, the Serbian asylum system was tied to EU promises around visa liberalization for Serbian citizens. Meanwhile, many Syrians, Libyans, Iraqis, and Somalis (who comprise a large percentage of early asylum grantees in Serbia) first traveled to the former Yugoslavia under work and study programs facilitated by the Non-Aligned Movement. They retraced these familiar mobility paths when they later needed international protection. In these early years, we can see how EU border externalization begins to intersect with the mobilities facilitated by Serbia’s unique, non-EU, post-Yugoslav positionality.



II. Crisis

The 'long summer of migration' and increasing border militarization, 2015-present

Why Serbia? Refugees who arrived during the 'crisis' period and have since stayed in Serbia primarily expressed that they got 'stuck,' unable to successfully reach the EU because of increasing border securitization and the externalization of these controls into the Balkans. Six direct testimonies are presented in this section, all speaking to the experience of irregular Balkan migration, border violence, and integration in Serbia. Other reasons for staying included: education, physical safety, cultural familiarity, and social support (particularly for unaccompanied and separated children). Participants similarly discussed Serbia's withholding of travel documentation and naturalization as a logistically and psychologically distressing barrier that might convince them to leave Serbia.

Larger narrative: The EU border regime is fully apparent across all six testimonies, operating in a circular and suffocating nature with the intent aim of eroding the confidence, resources, and physical and mental health of people-on-the-move. Through stories of border violence, deportation, and prolonged detention and incarceration, we begin to see the exact operating mechanisms of Fortress Europe, how it affects the decision-making of refugees in the Balkans, and how Serbia has become a willing external partner in the regime's implementation.

III. Another Way

The Iranian visa-free regime, 2017-2018

Why Serbia? This section presents three testimonies from members of an Iranian family who arrived during a visa-free period for Iranian nationals in Serbia, from 2017 to 2018. In contrast to ‘crisis’-era participants, this family had the opportunity to consider, evaluate, and test potential migration to Serbia, enabled by the visa-free regime. These testimonies, as well as research into Iranian migration to Serbia from that time, establish protection needs related to religious and minority status as primary migration motivators. I also argue that escape from existential immobility features prominently in Iranian testimonies. Further, the nature of the visa regime allowed for timely and considered evaluation of options, meaning that many Iranians who stayed in Serbia did so with more intent and choice than those restricted by extreme border militarization. Despite their generally successful integration, participants still expressed a disposition toward potential future mobility due to the Serbian state’s refusal to issue passports or citizenship.

Larger narrative: The Iranian free-visa regime exposes the ‘irregularity’ of crisis-era migration as a direct consequence of state (in)action. Though it was not the intended consequence, the Serbian state’s decision to liberalize visas for Iranians created, momentarily, a safe pathway to asylum and a mobility path not viable elsewhere on the European continent. Serbia’s decision to pursue this visa agenda was part of a larger economic rapprochement with Iran, in defiance of EU norms. Indeed, it was EU pressure that eventually closed this pathway, demonstrating the continued tension between Serbia’s third-way positionality and the demands of EU accession and border externalization.



IV. New Migrations

Emerging mobilities from Cuba, Francophone Africa, and elsewhere

Why Serbia? This section presents the testimonies of a Cuban couple and a Burundian asylum-seeker, demonstrative of two emerging Balkan refugee trends that clash with ‘crisis’ border infrastructure and its imaginary in multiple ways. Participants in this section traveled to Serbia purposefully with the expressed intention of staying, having found a visa-free loophole in the European border regime to escape political persecution and existential immobility in their origin countries. Participants mentioned freedom, work, and Serbian hospitality culture as reasons to stay in Serbia. Their original reason for coming to Serbia, however, was the ability to territorially access asylum against a wider global context of austere territorial securitization. Like in all sections, participants expressed the most frustration with Serbian bureaucratic processes and the lack of equal and easy-use documents.

Larger narrative: Once again, the Cuban and Burundian mobility paths to Serbia emerge from visa-free regimes opened by the legacy of Yugoslavia – the former an inheritance of the Non-Aligned Movement, and the latter a consequence of Serbia’s Kosovo derecognition campaign. These mobilities are regionally unique and challenge the spatialities and logics of the ‘crisis’ era. Meanwhile, the intentionality of the participants’ decisions to remain in Serbia counters the ‘transit country’ narrative, which has largely served to both excuse the deficiencies of the Serbian asylum system and maintain the subservient position of Serbia relative to the EU border regime. Like in the Iranian case, EU pressure threatens to close the Cuban path and has successfully closed the Burundian one (visas were reimposed on November 20, 2022). The EU’s fixation on closing these paths squanders the potential embedded within them: new approaches to migration management wherein state-created mobility pathways can ensure safe access to the international right of asylum.

Summary of Participant Testimonies & Featured Stories

Readers can find below the methodology and main points of each testimony or featured story, grouped by report section.

I. Beginnings



Safaa: Iraqi, M, 65.

Method: one in-depth interview, quoted and analyzed in parts.

Summary: Safaa arrived in 2007, following a mobility path opened by Iraq's relationship with Yugoslavia, and was consequently the first person granted protected status in the Republic of Serbia. For 12 years, Safaa lived on the grounds of the Asylum Centre Banja Koviljača, working contract-to-contract interpretation jobs for a wide array of NGOs. Safaa describes the

violence of post-occupation Iraq that caused him to flee, his time living at Banja Koviljača, the fall-out with camp management that led him to leave after 12 years, and his consequent struggles to find housing and employment (having never before properly integrated into Serbian society). Safaa emphasizes his frustration with Serbia's non-issuance of passports, a theme that reverberates across testimonies.

Musa: Somali, M, N/P.

Method: discussion of Musa's comments to Serbian press (no personal interview).

Summary: Musa arrived under Yugoslavia on a student scholarship – and simply never left. He bounced between odd jobs and two detention stints, emerging on the other side broke and with few recourses. Musa



Musa: Somali, M, N/P. (Continued.)

eventually declared *sur place* asylum and received subsidiary protection in 2010. Like Safaa, from 2007 onward he lived on the grounds of the Asylum Centre Banja Koviljača and worked as an interpreter. Without a personal interview, I can't speak to Musa's current housing and work status. His story, however, is characteristic of *sur place* asylum trends in Serbia, follows a Yugoslav-era mobility path, and further shows how many refugees in Serbia become economically tied to the aid industry that has become ubiquitous since the mid-2010s 'crisis.'



Amran: Libyan, M, N/P.

Method: one brief discussion, participation declined. Most details are gathered from Amran's previous comments to press.

Summary: Amran completed a master's degree in Serbia, a common path for many Libyans under the Non-Aligned Movement, and spent the following years balancing a doctorate in Canada and archaeological preservation work in Libya. Amran returned to Serbia to finish his doctorate around the onset of civil war in Libya, upon

which Amran's return became untenable due to threats from fundamentalists. With no other options, Amran and his family applied for asylum in Serbia as a stop-gap solution. Amran has struggled to find commensurate employment and has said his family experiences economic and social discrimination in Serbia. Additionally, Amran's family has been deprived of freedom of movement by an intersection of discriminatory passport policies. Amran's Libyan passport has expired. Serbia, his country of asylum, will not grant him a passport. Canada, the country of two of his children, will not grant him a visa on account of his not having a passport. The UNHCR, meanwhile, rejected a relocation request from the family in 2017 because they have asylum in Serbia. This catch-22 renders Amran, his wife, and his eldest son completely immobile.

II. Crisis

S: Afghan, M, 19.

Method: one in-depth interview, one follow-up interview, common contact through work affiliations.

Summary: S arrived in Serbia as a minor in 2017, fleeing Afghanistan due to Taliban threats against his father. S eventually decided to stay because he received social support from NGOs and safe houses, and because he could continue his education. S discussed the decision with his father, who approved,

highlighting the influence of family in destination decision-making. S currently interprets for two NGOs and is finishing his high school education. He presented Serbia's non-issuance of passports and the prospect of family reunification as two potential reasons to leave.

Jafar: Iranian (Kurd), M, 32.

Method: one in-depth interview, one follow-up interview.

Summary: Jafar fled his home city of Kermanshah, Iran, in 2016, and, like thousands of others at that time, joined the irregular smuggler's road to Europe. For nearly a year, Jafar moved multilaterally through the Balkan 'circuit' – detained in Bulgaria, smuggled through North Macedonia, left homeless in Serbia, pushed back from Italy, Romania, Hungary, Croatia.



Jafar: Iranian (Kurd), M, 32. (Continued.)

Eventually, after 50 attempted *games*, Jafar found himself stuck in Serbia and declared asylum – his “will for another attempt ... it wasn’t there.” Today, Jafar interprets for the Crisis Response and Policy Centre (CRPC) and expressed that he feels comfortable with Serbian people and Serbian culture. Like others, he said he is frustrated by legal recognition issues – but he has reasons to stay. At the time of our second interview, Jafar was eight days away from marrying an American girl he met through a church community in Novi Sad, where they now live together.



Fazal: Afghan, M, 21.

Method: one in-depth interview, one follow-up interview.

Summary: Fazal fled Afghanistan due to an unspecified family problem, so young – maybe 14, maybe 15 – that he can’t quite remember how old he was. A smuggler took him to Pakistan, then Türkiye, where he worked in a textile factory for two years until he could pay the smuggler to take him to Europe. Upon crossing into Bulgaria, he was detained in deplorable conditions for three months. The experience scarred him,

but eventually, he reached Switzerland and began the asylum procedure. He thought his life was starting again. However, under the Dublin III Regulation, Fazal soon found himself on a deportation flight back to Bulgaria. He crossed as soon as possible into Serbia and decided to stay, terrified of another potential deportation to Bulgaria should he try more *games* into Europe. At the time of our first interview, Fazal interpreted for CRPC, but now interprets for Doctors without Borders (MSF). He said he’s managed to find welcoming friends through work, school, and his original safe house accommodation. However, Fazal expressed worries over job insecurity and frustration that his lack of passport precludes him from traveling the region with friends.

Karoh: Iraqi (Kurd), M, 21.

Method: one in-depth interview, one follow-up interview.

Summary: As a 15-year-old, Karoh fled forced recruitment to armed conflict in Erbil, Iraq. Like Jafar and Fazal, he found himself first in Türkiye, then, after six crossing attempts, detained at a closed camp in Bulgaria. Beaten by police, denied access to asylum, Karoh crossed into Romania, applied for asylum and was rejected seven times over the course of seven months, and then continued to Hungary and Austria. On a train ten minutes from Vienna, police awoke Karoh and detained him, initiating a chain push-back that resulted in Karoh being left, alone, as a minor, in a forest near Sombor, Serbia – a country through which he had never transited. Like Jafar, Karoh felt he'd reached his wit's end and applied for asylum in Serbia, receiving it one day before his 18th birthday. Now, Karoh works as an interpreter at CRPC. A strong social network built through work, school, and his former safe house accommodation has led to Karoh's overall life satisfaction and decision to remain in Serbia. Karoh also mentioned lack of travel documents as his biggest challenge in Serbia, as well as affordability.



Mihail: Iranian, M, 41.

Method: one in-depth interview, one follow-up interview.

Summary: Mihail has been on the move since 2010, fleeing Iran after his involvement in the political opposition earned him four stints in regime torture prisons. He spent a handful of years in Türkiye, another handful in Greece, heeding promises from national athletic associations that should he bring his championship-level martial arts skills to the

Mihail: Iranian, M, 41. (Continued.)

national team, he would be naturalized. These promises never materialized. Mihail, who is also a converted Christian, made his way to Serbia three years ago and applied for asylum. When asked why he wanted to stay in Serbia, his answer was one word: freedom. Mihail said he finds Serbian people genuine and that he can go about his life as he pleases. Working two security jobs and the occasional professional MMA fight, Mihail struggles to make ends meet financially. But, at the time of our second interview, Mihail was in the process of opening his own gym, thanks to the help of his lawyer and the support of several friends in his neighborhood.

Zaki: Afghan, M, 21.

Method: one in-depth interview, one follow-up interview. (Zaki also took a particularly active role and wrote and rewrote certain parts of the text.)

Summary: Zaki fled Taliban recruitment and extreme poverty in rural Afghanistan at the age of 15, part of a generational cycle of forced migration – as a child, Zaki and his family lived as refugees in Pakistan before they were deported. On the journey to Europe, Zaki and his sister endured detention and forced labor in Iran, physical violence at the hands of Bulgarian

police, and two years living in Belgrade's Krnjača camp, selling canned sardines to make money. When they'd saved up enough, Zaki's sister went on a *guaranteed game* to France – but Zaki remains in Serbia. Zaki received subsidiary protection and now interprets for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), but expressed extreme frustration with a life in Serbia marked by social discrimination, unequal legal status, and exploitative treatment by NGOs and state migration agencies. Zaki expressed that he wants to leave Serbia within the next year and continue his education in a different European country where he can obtain citizenship and full legal status.



III. Another Way

Emil: Iranian, M, 55.

Method: one in-depth interview, one follow-up interview, occasional short visits to the family's business.

Summary: A successful businessman in Tehran, Emil nonetheless began to feel increasingly restricted by the repressive political and religious nature of Iranian society, with little opportunity for upward mobility or personal expression. This became particularly frustrating, and dangerous, as Emil took an interest in Christianity. He arranged for his son Sina to study in

Budapest, and for he and his wife, Leila, to move to Istanbul. However, Emil found Türkiye just as stifling. With no visas required for entry into Serbia, Emil and Leila first visited and then moved to Belgrade, where they became involved with the Serbian Orthodox Church, received asylum on religious grounds, and opened a donut shop in the popular Vračar neighborhood. Emil expressed that he enjoys the freedom afforded to him in Serbia and feels welcomed by Serbian people, particularly by the church, which through community and information-sharing has assisted his integration. However, Emil also expressed great frustration with Serbia's intransigence on the passport and citizenship issue, which he presented as a possible reason for leaving Serbia after Sina graduates university.



Leila: Iranian, F, 45.

Method: one in-depth interview, one follow-up interview, occasional short visits to the family's business.

Summary: Leila, like her husband, had a high-status life in Iran, completing a master's in theology and working as an academic. However, the political instability of Iranian society similarly began to weigh on her, especially when she thought about Sina's future. Leila traveled with Sina to Budapest to settle him there, then with her husband to Istanbul, and finally to Belgrade. Leila's first impressions were poor, but she has since warmed to what she described as the

friendliness and peacefulness of Serbia and its people. She also emphasized the support and networks of the family's church community. However, Leila expressed great concern over the social safety net and quality of life for retirees in Serbia, especially compared to Canada, where her brother lives. She also said she dislikes working a job not commensurate with her education, while she's continually frustrated by the immobility and discriminatory treatment resulting from her refugee status. For the time being, however, Leila said she believes it is better to stay in Serbia and try to solve these problems, rather than start over again.

Sina: Iranian, M, 22.

Method: one in-depth interview, one follow-up interview.

Summary: Growing up, Sina had the chance to travel as a kid to other parts of Asia, where he witnessed something he found lacking in Iran's religiously dogmatic and sexually-separated schools: freedom. When Emil told Sina he might be able to leave Iran if he scored high enough on English exams, Sina taught himself



Sina: Iranian, M, 22. (Continued.)

English to fluency, and in 2017 received a Schengen visa to study at a college preparatory school in Budapest. However, Sina found it difficult to adjust to life in Hungary, unsure what to do with his freedom now that he had it, and often homesick. When his studies finished and his parents moved to Belgrade in September 2018, Sina joined them, and has been encompassed under their asylum decision. Now, Sina attends university, has a long-term Serbian girlfriend, and runs an online business venture with his friends. Sina said that, presently, he's satisfied with his life in Serbia and would like to remain. However, he acknowledged that Serbia's passport policy is increasingly constricting his family's life.

IV. New Migrations



Belquis & Yurdelis Cuban, F, 30. M, 37.

Method: one in-depth interview (both participants together), written correspondence (with Belquis)

Summary: Belquis and Yurdelis arrived in Serbia in 2017 with their daughter, Iلسena, fleeing threats related to Yurdelis' political activity in Havana, Cuba. They chose Serbia because they did not need a visa. With their daughter in tow, they didn't dare try the journey undertaken by most of their compatriots: a dangerous boat escapade or border crossing to the United States. They immediately expressed intention to apply for asylum in Serbia, against the predominant modalities of mid-2010s regional transit migration. In turn, it took 20 months for the processing and approval of their asylum request, as disbelieving authorities first sent the family to a transit camp before properly receiving their application. Upon receiving

Belquis & Yurdelis

(Continued.)

asylum, the family found support from the UNHCR and Serbian NGOs to settle in the small town of Lajkovac, where they have lived since. Belquis and Yurdelis said the town has received them hospitably, that they enjoy the safety and tranquility, and that they have rarely faced any racism or discrimination. However, they did express frustration with Serbian bureaucracy and logistical difficulties deriving from their refugee status and unequal documents.

Abdul: Burundian, M, 26.

Method: one in-depth interview, one follow-up interview, common contact through Refugee Aid Serbia.

Summary: "If you cherish your life, you will leave this country." This is what a masked number told Abdul over the phone after he photographed a government event without permission in his native Burundi. Abdul went to a work contact for advice, and she found him a potential way out: Serbia, the only country on the European continent with visa-free access for Burundians. His contact bought him a plane ticket and he arrived in Belgrade in early 2022, part of an unprecedented, unfolding Burundian exodus to Serbia. Abdul is now applying for asylum in the country, even as most of his compatriots have continued along the Balkan Route. Having found an escape from the threats and endemic unemployment of his life in Burundi, Abdul said he is so far satisfied in Serbia. He studies the language at the NGO Refugee Aid Serbia and works as a handyman with a local contractor. Across the next years in Serbia, Abdul wants to "make up for the time [he] lost in Burundi" and potentially reunite with his brother and sister.



Consolidation of Primary Findings

To synthesize findings to the primary research question, participants presented the following reasons for staying in Serbia. (1) The impact of the EU's militarized borders, which exhausted many refugees and led them to declare asylum as a form of reprieve. (2) The opportunity to continue education and the quality of social support received in certain cases, particularly among children. (3) A more welcoming citizenry compared to other countries of transit and cultural similarities between Serbia and origin countries. (4) A cheaper cost of living compared to the EU. (5) The severity of poverty, threats to life, and persecution in one's country of origin, which made the exact destination country less important.

Participants presented the following reasons for potentially leaving Serbia, despite having received asylum or expressing a previous intention to stay. (1) Above all, the immobilization and level of social difference imposed by Serbia's non-issuance of passports and citizenship. (2) Low wages and lack of job security. (3) Social discrimination. (4) Family reunification.

Conclusion

The report concludes with a summary of main findings and a brief consideration of the future of migration in Serbia. This latter discussion highlights the high likelihood of the continued entanglement between EU border externalization and Serbia's third-way geopolitical agenda. 'Irregular' EU border crossings are at their highest since 2016, while, simultaneously, Serbia continues to pursue its own geopolitics and diplomacy campaigns, such as Kosovo derecognition, which could create new mobility paths. I also briefly highlight some trends not discussed at length in the report, namely the Ukrainian refugee 'crisis' and the position of women refugees, particularly sexual and gender-based violence survivors (SGBV), before the Serbian Asylum Office.

Conclusion

(Continued.)

The report ends with an emphasis on Serbia's passport and naturalization policies, discussion of which reoccurs across nearly all participant testimonies. I cast this de-facto policy – contradicting laws and precedents already in place – as illogical, inhumane, illegal, and the greatest barrier to refugee integration in Serbia. I argue that immediate changes to this policy are necessary to respect the human rights of refugees, facilitate their integration, and counter social discrimination and the peripheral consequences of status inequality.

The full report can be found on the websites of [Refugee Aid Serbia: The Workshop](#), [KlikAktiv - Center for Development of Social Policies](#), and the [Belgrade Centre for Human Rights \(Azil RS\)](#), among others.

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