

MIGRANTS AND ASYLUM SEEKERS



Mitrovica
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INTRODUCTION

The following report has been made as a summary of the research study aimed at assessing, profiling, and reporting on the situation of migratory individuals or groups, originating predominantly from the Middle East and North Africa, moving through the territory of Kosovo* and its northern region of Mitrovica on their way to the European Union. The report also covers issues migrants face during their stay in Kosovo, institutional management practice, roles and responsibilities of local authorities, law enforcement agencies, and non-governmental organizations.

The European Union has been dealing with the migrant crisis for the past decade, but the most severe event took place in 2015, when a sudden flow of more than a million people from the South globe moved freely across a number of borders making their way into the European Union. Initially, this event was regarded as a minor scale concern; still, it suddenly veered attention of the EU countries from its humanitarian nature into serious security concerns and all underlying issues associated with it.

Around 700.000 individuals from the Middle East and North Africa regions used the so-called Balkan route into central Europe. The solution to this crisis was eventually reached in March 2016 by an agreement between Turkey and the EU, when Turkey agreed to stop the flow of migrants not in need of international protection. Ever since, the situation, migration-wise, in the Western Balkans remained relatively calm with reduced migration flows and with some corridors still existing despite restrictive movement situations.

The body and focus of the research study have been on rebooted and again vibrant human migration occurrence of individuals or groups in 2020/2021, passing through Kosovo and its northern region of Mitrovica.

Poor economic conditions, natural disasters or armed conflicts, complex political and social circumstances of individuals or groups, and other miscellaneous common push factors have been the underlying cause for the transitory nature of the movement of the migrant population through Kosovo and into the EU. The research staff reviewed the process of Kosovo's response in the provision of support to foreign migrants and asylum seekers in the Mitrovica region by analyzing Kosovo institutional readiness and interventions of established support mechanisms in the form of shelter, nurture, medical assistance, and necessary social services along with the dynamics of the Kosovo route and migrants' demographic profile.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

METHODOLOGY

Research needs have been met through primary and secondary research activities, with essential information collected solely for the purpose of this research. The research staff collected data transparently and objectively, paying particular attention to the human rights of migrant individuals and focusing on the complex nature of the contemporary movement of migrants in the region, respecting the human dignity and right to privacy of individuals, rendering data anonymous in a way that identities of individuals collected during primary data activities are no longer identifiable or such data not deemed any longer a personal data.

Semi-structured interviews with the migrants and different stakeholders and representatives of the NGO sector in the Mitrovica region took place between 01 October - 15 November 2021 and have served as the empirical basis of the research study.

The following local and international actors have been consulted in gaining a solid understanding of the situation in the Western Balkans and Kosovo involving migrants: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Office in Kosovo, International Organization for Migration (IOM), Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Office in Kosovo, and Ministry of Internal Affairs Kosovo (MIA Kosovo). Their input and time shared are greatly valued as they provided a thorough analysis of the migration phenomenon and corresponding push-pull determinants. The main issues research staff encountered during their operational research activities have been related to the dynamic nature of the movement of the migrant population to be interviewed, meaning difficulties in obtaining detailed interviews, inability to maintain contact, and follow-up on their actions due to their constant movement actions.

Primary research data have been collected at departure points and main roads used by individuals directly involved in the movement (migrants) or those witnessing such trends (observers), having first-hand interaction, or even communication with migrants. A qualitative approach (semi-structured interviewing) has been adopted as a way to support the appropriate data collection, analysis, and reporting, with the research staff being able to identify challenges migrants face by posing topic-based questions, listening to respondents and picking up on cues, letting them discuss the topic without interruption or guidance. Interviews conducted in such a manner proved to have provided insightful information, covering a wide array of interesting topics, with respondents raising the points of importance to him/her, revealing granular (detailed and often sensitive) data to the interviewer.

Secondary research data have been collected from the data sources available at the national level through identifiable sources of knowledge such as relevant official governmental and non-governmental records (including official

migration and asylum figures), social media, and newspapers coverage. Based on its findings, the research study provided remedial solutions in addressing issues migrants face in Kosovo and its northern region of Mitrovica, a set of recommendations and corrective actions for institutions to act upon.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Western Balkans countries have always been just a way station for migrants, rather than their final destination, bringing difficulties and challenges in dealing with "unexpected guests", transiting through their territories in terms of institutional support and provision of fundamental human rights. Western Balkan countries have been calmly dealing with international migration, mainly serving as a corridor for migrants into European countries. An insignificant number of migrants decide to claim asylum in the Western Balkans, but only to prolong their journey for a couple of weeks/months, consolidating their efforts to pursue their ultimate goal of claiming Asylum in Europe.

Kosovo has three (3) receiving centers for asylum seekers and started dealing with this issue reasonably recently because, until 2009, it was dealing mainly with its returnees that left the country before and during the war in 1999. There has been little research supporting Kosovo's operational support to migrants, its migration strategy, institutional approach as in infrastructural facilities at disposal, policy regulation included. This report aims to provide a view of the country's readiness to cope with migrants manifested in the governmental and non-governmental institutional support in meeting international standards to protect migrants and asylum seekers.

With this in mind, the problem statement focuses on identifying the socio-economic support and challenges that asylum seekers face/receive while in the Kosovo/Mitrovica region and how the authorities address the issue of migration.

The research questions focus on the current situation with migrants in Kosovo, the spatial distribution and migratory situation in the Mitrovica region, and the main institutional and other actors involved in providing services and/or assistance to foreign migrants and asylum seekers in the Mitrovica region?

The migratory situation in the Western Balkans/ Kosovo/Mitrovica region?

There are two important routes used by refugees and migrants traveling to Europe, **Western Balkans** and the trans-**Mediterranean** route(s). The **Western Balkans** route is the most frequently used by migrants traveling from Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The three trans-**Mediterranean** routes (Eastern, Central, and Western) are primarily used by migrants from Africa countries. Still, the **Western Balkans** route remains the most dominant because of traveling by land and, therefore, a safer route with fewer fatalities. In contrast, the Mediterranean routes bear the increased likelihood of dying because of traveling by sea, usually on overloaded vessels made of polyurethane or weak-structured wood fishing boats. According to IOM[1], fatalities and missing persons on the Mediterranean route between 2014 – 2018 amounted to an estimated 18000 persons. Data for 2021 (January – September) show 1369 casualties on the Mediterranean route, as of this writing.

The Republic of Turkey is a Middle East migration hub and a common destination for migrants traveling to Europe and the initial migration country of choice for numerous migrants from the Middle East due to its geopolitical setting and agenda, bordering with open conflict countries, such as Syria and Iraq. Migrants initially enter Turkey and then try to get a hold of Europe by making their way to Greece via the Aegean sea or to Bulgaria. Still, since the majority of them don't intend to stay either in South or Eastern Europe, they move towards Western European countries via Western Balkans. The reason why migrants decide not to stay in the South/East EU countries such as Bulgaria or Greece and claim asylum there lies in the Dublin Regulation (1990), an agreement signed by the EU countries, Switzerland, Lichtenstein, Norway, and Iceland, which stipulates that the asylum seekers have to remain in the first European country they enter and that this country would be responsible for their asylum request review, preventing them from traveling to a country of their preference (in the majority of cases some of the Western European countries). Another reason why migrants prefer not to stay in South/East European countries and claim asylum is poor welfare conditions and the animosity towards them, which is exceptionally high in Eastern Europe.

Western Balkans is an important route for migrants on their way to Europe because of its proximity to the Schengen area and a safer transit route to the wealthy EU countries with better welfare, living conditions, and prospects for family reunification asylum is granted.

The majority of migrants begin their journey in Turkey and then continue to Bulgaria, Romania, or Greece, then over to Hungary or Croatia through the Western Balkans. The mobility trends of migrants show that most of them transiting through the Western Balkans region are moving towards Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, and onwards over to Croatia, Romania, and Hungary. Transit corridors from North Macedonia, Greece, and Albania overlap in Kosovo.

Table 1: Asylum-seekers and other mixed movements in the Western Balkans, 2015–2020;
Source: UNHCR reports on refugees

| COUNTRY | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |
|---------------------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Albania | 2047 | 915 | 1049 | 5730 | 10561 | 11971 |
| Bosnia | 133 | 766 | 4489 | 23902 | 29196 | 16211 |
| Kosovo | N/A | 16 | 147 | 590 | 2081 | 1910 |
| Montenegro | N/A | 167 | 807 | 4753 | 8695 | 2898 |
| N. Macedonia | 428597 | 127358 | 4129 | 16895 | 40887 | 41257 |
| Serbia | 579518 | 60000 | 69900 | 45400 | 30419 | 39648 |

Kosovo

Kosovo is yet another attractive hotspot for international migrants in the WB route, using it mainly as a transit area to Europe due to its favorable geographic position and the potential of reaching other locations quickly. Migrants access the unapproved routes from Albania or North Macedonia and enter Kosovo either on foot, hitchhiking, or paying for a taxi/bus ride to the border/boundary with Kosovo, using alternative paths, bypassing the official crossings at Hani i Elezit/Đeneral Janković and Vërmicë/Vrbnica.

Kosovo law enforcement structures and agencies – border police, customs, and immigration services are in charge of proper and effective border management. They process entry of goods and people at official border/boundary crossings, work on detection of attempts of illegal goods and people smuggling, and prevent migrant smuggling and strengthen the protection of human rights of migrants.

The mentioned agencies are the first point of contact for international migrants; they cooperate closely with the Ministry of the Internal Affairs Department for Citizenship, Asylum and Migration (DCAM) in all illegal migration and human trafficking cases. Agencies follow the established operational procedures on handling and differentiating between the illegal migration cases and human trafficking/smuggling of migrants. However, one must differentiate the terms of asylum seekers and migrants. Once on Kosovo territory, those individuals who claim asylum become asylum seekers eligible for accommodation in one of the existing reception centers, with benefits like shelter, food, medical and legal aid. At the same time, those who decide to continue their journey are considered migrants and often end up living in rented apartments, often overcrowded, or even on the streets, being vulnerable and exploit-prone to networks of smugglers and cons.

Upon their first encounter with law enforcement, the migrants are taken to the nearest police station, from where the Department for Citizenship, Asylum, and Migration (DCAM) takes over by conducting the identification procedure, taking their identity details, photographs and fingerprints. Following the identification procedure, DCAM escorts migrants further inland to the receiving centers in Magurë/Magura, Vranidoll/Vrani Do, or Mitrovica.

Within seven days, the Ministry of Internal Affairs provides them with a temporary identification document to move freely in the country. The number of asylum seekers rapidly increased in 2020, forcing the DCAM to adapt to the newly created situation and increase their accommodation capacities besides the receiving facility in Vranidoll/Vrani Do. They opened the receiving centers in Magurë/Magura and Mitrovica. The receiving center in Mitrovica was operational only for two (2) months, and it was closed due to unrest between migrants who set it on fire, leaving six (6) people injured¹. This asylum center is closed since the other two (2) centers possess enough accommodation capacity.

Migrants in Kosovo who enter the asylum procedure are provided with shelter, food, and medical services, yet their institutional protection remains unsolved. Minors and women are at greater risk of becoming victims of sexual abuse, human trafficking, and smuggling. Many criminal offenses remain unreported due to fears of revenge, while the police react only to those crimes reported to them.

In 2020, 803 persons, 85 women, and 120 children claimed Asylum in Kosovo², but the majority left after filing the asylum application. It is not the intention of the majority of asylum seekers to stay for too long in Kosovo

¹ A refugee camp in Mitrovica set on fire, February 2021, RTV21, retrieved from:
1. <https://rtv21.tv/perfshihet-nga-zjarri-nje-kamp-refugjatesh-ne-mitrovice/>
2. AYS Daily Digest 28/1/21: Fire in a refugee camp in Kosovo leaves six injured | by Are You Syrious? | Are You Syrious? | Medium

² UN Agencies' attention on conditions of asylum-seekers in Kosovo, UNICEF, retrieved from:
<https://www.unicef.org/kosovoprogramme/press-releases/un-agencies%C2%B4-attention-conditions-asylum-seekers-kosovo>

receiving centers. According to information received during the primary research activities, the significant numbers of migrants apply for asylum only to prolong their legal stay, usually around 3 – 4 weeks. After that period, they leave in an unknown direction, without any notice. The majority of migrants travel to the municipality of Vushtrri/Vučitrn, and from there, they take a taxi or walk over to the city of Mitrovica and then head further to northern municipalities pressing the border/boundary with Serbia.

Demographics (asylum seekers in Kosovo)

According to the statistics received from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the number of asylum applicants in Kosovo in 2019 was 2081, which is an increase of more than three times compared to the previous year 2018 (595), followed by a slight decrease in 2020, with 1409 asylum seekers reported.

Table 2. Country of origin of migrants (2019/2020)

Source: Department for Citizenship, Asylum and Migration (DCAM), Ministry of Internal Affairs, Kosovo

| COUNTRY OF ORIGIN | 2019 | COUNTRY OF ORIGIN | 2020 |
|-------------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Syria | 911 (43.8%) | Syria | 649 (46.1%) |
| Iraq | 559 (26.9%) | Morocco | 649 (46.1%) |
| Morocco | 152 (7.3%) | Palestine | 121 (8.6%) |
| Algeria | 152 (7.3%) | Iraq | 119 (8.4%) |
| Palestine | 152 (7.3%) | Libya | 89 (6.3%) |
| other countries | 152 (7.3%) | other countries | 248 (17.6%) |

The most represented age group in 2019 was 18-34 years old with 66.2%, followed by 35-64 years old with 13.9%, 0-13 years old with 15.6%, 14-17 years old age group with 4.1%, and 65+ age group with 0.2 %.

In 2020, there were 1409 asylum seekers, 1261 (89.5%) male, and 148 (10.5%) female. Out of those 1409, 887 individuals entered Kosovo territory illegally, 20 of them entered legally, while it remains undetermined how 502 individuals entered.

Table 3. Migrants' entry to Kosovo (2020)

Source: Department for Citizenship, Asylum and Migration (DCAM), Ministry of Internal Affairs, Kosovo

| MANNER OF ENTRY | NUMBER (PERSONS) |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Illegal | 502 |
| Legal | 887 |
| Unknown | 20 |
| TOTAL | 1409 |

Table 4. Border points entry of asylum seekers (2019/2020)

Source: Department for Citizenship, Asylum and Migration (DCAM), Ministry of Internal Affairs, Kosovo

| ENTRY BORDER POINTS | NUMBER (PERSONS) |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Albania | 1232 |
| North Macedonia | 46 |
| Serbia | 99 |
| Montenegro | 1 |
| Airport "Adem Jashari" – Pr. | 15 |
| Unknown | 16 |
| TOTAL | 1409 |

During the 2019/2020 period, there was a significant increase in the number of asylum seekers aged 0-13, mostly accompanied by their family members, resulting from the general situation and the migratory movements from the Middle East countries.

Gender-wise, males dominated with 82% while females were represented with 18%.

During 2019, there were 1,924 first instance decisions rendered on the status of asylum seekers: in 89.7% (1,867) cases, a procedure was terminated; 1.3% (27) of applicants received a permanent favorable decision; 1.3% (27) of applicants voluntarily terminated the procedure; the asylum claim was denied for 0.10 % (2) individuals; 0.05% (1) asylum claim was denied as per the accelerated procedure; 6.8% (141) of requests were still in the application stage, and 0.77% (16) of requests were still pending the decision.

Smuggling of migrants

The smuggling of migrants in Kosovo presents a significant threat to overall security. Criminal networks exploit the vulnerabilities of migrants and their intention to get to the EU as fast as possible. One must bear in mind that the Western Balkans route is considered a low-budget route and only part of a much longer route.

Table 5: Smuggling of migrants cases under investigation in Kosovo 2016 - 2018:

Source: Risk Analysis, Intelligence and Data Administration Unit, Border Department, Directorate for Investigation of Organized Crime, Kosovo Police

| NATIONALITY | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | TOTAL |
|---------------------|------|------|------|-------|
| Kosovo | 15 | 27 | 12 | 54 |
| Albania | 8 | 1 | 5 | 14 |
| Serbia | 3 | 1 | 2 | 6 |
| Turkey | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| N. Macedonia | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| TOTAL | 26 | 31 | 20 | 77 |

In 2018, there was a 17% decrease in the investigation of migrant smuggling cases compared to 2017, while a 41% increase was observed in 2016.

During 2018, the number of persons suspected of smuggling with migrants was lower by 35% compared to 2017, or lower by 23% compared to 2016. Of the 77 people suspected of smuggling migrants, 70% were citizens of the Republic of Kosovo, 18% of the Republic of Albania, 8% of Serbia, 3% of Turkey, and 1% of North Macedonia.

The research staff was unable to obtain information on the smuggling of migrants for the Mitrovica region due to the confidential nature of such cases. Mitrovica KP South Station and Mitrovica Regional Investigations South have been contacted through respective units/departments, but were not ready to share any information.

Mitrovica

The spatial distribution of migrants that have not been accommodated by the receiving centers and have not applied for international protection with Kosovo institutions is typical for migrants' mobility patterns. In concentrated inflow and outflow, they move directionally along infrastructure corridors such as roads, railways, rivers, and places of population exchange, pushing the north towards border/boundary with Serbia.

In an attempt to gather systematic evidence of foreign nationals/migrants traveling through the Mitrovica region, outside receiving centers, and record their movement and displacement, the research staff consulted the local authorities (DCAM employees) and law enforcement agencies (South Police Station – Community Policing Unit & Border Police North officers) on the most frequent locations in Mitrovica visited by migrants. The research staff has been advised that migrants can most commonly be observed by the bus station in the South, taxi stations (both South and North Mitrovica), a railroad connecting South with North, a settlement in Mitrovica known as Lagja e Boshnjakeve/Bošnjačka mahala, and further up north around the border/boundary-crossing with Serbia - Gate 1/Jarinje.

During the reporting period, the research staff had five (5) sightings of groups of migrants:

- A sighting of a group of twelve (12) adult male individuals, eighteen to thirty-five (18 – 35) years old, accompanied by a younger female individual, all in winter clothes, with backpacks and what appeared to be sleeping bags attached to backpacks, walking down the **railway tracks in Mitrovica South** (close to the railway station), heading north.
- A sighting of a group of migrants, of approximately fifteen to twenty (15 - 20) adult male individuals, eighteen to forty (18 – 40) years old, winter clothes, backpacks, sleeping bags, in the vicinity of **Zvecan railway station** (close to the **Trepca refinery factory**), heading north.
- A sighting of a group of approximately ten to fifteen (10 - 15) adult male individuals, twenty to forty (20 – 40) years old, winter clothes, backpacks, **downtown South Mitrovica (IPKO offices)**, heading north.

- A sighting of a group of five (5) adult male individuals, fairly young in appearance, approximately 20-25 years old, no backpacks/luggage/sleeping bags, dressed lightly, observed exiting a bakery in Mitrovica settlement known as **Lagja e Boshnjakëve/Bošnjačka mahala**, heading north.
- A sighting of a group of approximately ten (10) adult male individuals, twenty to forty (20 – 40) years old, winter clothes, backpacks, **downtown South Mitrovica** (vicinity of **LUX shopping mall**), heading north.

Research staff attempted to contact these groups on sighting locations and interview them but failed on three (3) out of five (5) occasions. The reason for failure was primarily the language barrier, the lack of ability, or even the willingness of migrants to discuss their journey in lingua franca (a bridge language - English in our case). Most of them did not possess any knowledge of the English language, leaving the research staff with no choice but to abandon the opportunity. Language difficulties could potentially lead to absence or poor communication of their needs and lack of appropriate follow-up; therefore, the research staff did not pursue these three (3) leads further.

Research staff established contacts with 2 (two) migrant groups and conducted group semi-structured interviews. The first encounter was on the railway tracks in **Mitrovica South**, in the vicinity of International Business College Mitrovica **IBC-M** and **the railway station**. The group consisted of ten to twelve (10-12) adult male individuals, 20 – 40 years old. A single lady was observed as part of the first group traveling along the railway tracks. She appeared fairly young, around 20-25 years old, very reserved, and with apparent personal space between her and the rest of the group. '

The rest of the males of this group were young adults, and they shared the expectations of "ending up in Western Europe." The group has been told to follow the railway tracks, eventually leading them to Serbia. The majority of them were from Syria, who started their journey in Turkey. An adult male individual from Syria was considered a leader, presumably due to his English communication skills. A set of questions was introduced on the modalities of their journey until this point, and he explained that they entered Albania by boat, then crossed over to Kosovo, traveling on foot at night or early morning hours, avoiding law enforcement agencies. They did not register at the receiving centers in Kosovo and were going to Serbia; talking about himself, he said, "someday soon, I will be in the Netherlands." The group's clothing was dirty, shoes worn out; still, the group appeared nurtured and in good health.. Another set of questions was introduced about the issues they have faced throughout the journey. They emphasized the importance of the financial aspect as the most important one in staying mobile, then access to clean water and food, and medical assistance, since one of the group members who had COVID-like symptoms had to stay behind in Albania. The interview lasted for 20 minutes, and judging by verbal interaction and non-verbal clues,

appearance, tone of their voice, the group members were comfortable with each other, there were no signs of hostility between them as they discussed the interview in our presence, they appeared relaxed and optimistic about the outcome of their journey.

The second group of migrants was observed and approached on the north side of the **East bridge, Lagja e Boshnjakëve/Bošnjačka** mahala part of town. This group consisted of young adult male individuals with no apparent leader. The group counted ten (10) adult male individuals, approximately 20 – 40 years old. Only two (2) individuals from the group possessed some knowledge of English and the capacity to express themselves in a clear, concise manner, understandable to research staff. To a set of questions on modalities of their journey up to this point, one of the two explained that the majority of the group members spent some time at the receiving center in Vranidoll/Vrani Do; still, they decided not to stay any longer in Kosovo but instead to pursue their ultimate goal and seek asylum in the EU countries. Some group members refused to register at Kosovo registration centers but instead lived in private accommodation, hostels, or abandoned buildings. Like the first group, the group members were familiar and comfortable with each other. They traveled at night, avoided being spotted by the police, slept in sleeping bags and under makeshift tents. Also, this was the second attempt to get into the EU for some of them. To another set of questions about the issues they have faced during their journey, they responded that the priority was always on their safety and security, and an issue of charging their mobile phones, as a significant one as they have been trying to maintain contacts with their family members updating them on their wellbeing, but also using their mobile phones GPS for navigation purposes, pinpointing their exact location in real-time and findings ways through woods and less-trodden roads and paths. One of the migrants commented on their footwear, saying that they need shoes since they wear out quickly due to extensive mobility. Lack of food and finances have been mentioned as important aspects of their journey.

The interview with this group lasted for around 15 minutes, and according to verbal communication and non-verbal hints, their appearance, tone of their voice, the group members were adamant in meeting their goals by using less-traveled routes and illegal border crossings in Kosovo and Serbia to get a hold of the EU. They have never been to Mitrovica; this was their first contact with the town. They've only seen it on a map while planning their strategy and journey to the EU. They were aware of the dual sovereignty of the town, religious differences, and its notoriety for ethnic clashes.

In searching for answers on the issues related to migration and the asylum system in Mitrovica, the research staff learned that the entire system is centralized and managed on the main level by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. All interviewed institutions' representatives claimed they did not own information or documentation about Mitrovica Region since the camp was operational only for a short time.

The Ministry appointed a regional coordinator in Mitrovica to facilitate communication with the municipal institutions on migratory issues. The receiving center in Belvedere camp (KP ROSU - Regional Operational Support Unit) in South Mitrovica has been operational for two months only, from November 2020 until January 2021, and was closed as we learned due to constant clashes between groups of migrants from Morocco and Syria. They even managed to set a center on fire, after which the authorities decided to transfer all asylum seekers to one of the facilities in Vranidoll/Vrani Do and the one in Magure. Overall, the Mitrovica Region is mainly used as a transit for migrants to reach the border/boundary at Gate 1 (Jarinje) and move further into Serbia. When the Kosovo Police in this region spot them, they are sent to the Mitrovica South Police Station, where all information related to their origin and purpose is gathered. Then, those who decide to apply for asylum are being processed by a DCAM representative, who initiates the process of sheltering in the asylum centers in Vranidoll/Vrani Do or Magure. There have been no recent cases of asylum seekers being sent to a shelter in the Belvedere camp directly from the Mitrovica South Police Station.

Institutional support in Mitrovica region

International organizations have been working for a significant period on migration and asylum-seeking-related issues worldwide. International organizations like International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees *UNHCR) have always been involved in gathering important information over the years on the fundamental rights that migrants should have since the moment they leave their countries and enter a new territory/country. Their work is complementary with the International Migration Law (IML), thus supporting and aiming to fill in the gaps in each country's legislation and activities by adopting the critical aspects of the IML.

With the first cases of international migration reported, the Government of Kosovo established the **Department of Citizenship, Asylum and Migration (DCAM)**, operating under the umbrella of the **Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA)**. This department level of governance is centralized, still the **DCAM** appointed Regional Coordinator in every district in Kosovo operating under the Municipal Office for Communities and Returnees in the principal municipality. In Mitrovica, Mr. Fisnik Leku serves as the Regional Coordinator whose primary duty is to facilitate the communication between the MIA/DCAM with the actors working on migration.

The DCAM consists of various divisions, including the Division for Asylum and the Center of Asylum Seekers. This division explicitly works with foreign migrants and asylum seekers and maintains the functionality of receiving centers for asylum seekers. The DCAM team collects, analyzes, and evaluates the information related to migrants and asylum seekers. It develops and updates strategies of operation, action plans, and policies in close coopera-

tion with the Legal Department. Also, it has a core responsibility on processing the asylum application requests and managing the receiving centers.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs has contracted companies to provide catering, sanitary, medical, and other necessary services, including legal and financial support for asylum seekers. Besides the public funding, supporting international organizations provide additional financial support to fill in the gaps. Indeed, the involvement of other actors has a crucial role in the proper management of the migration and asylum-seeking processes. Besides DCAM, the key actors involved in the provision of services and assistance to foreign migrants and asylum seekers in Mitrovica Region are as follows: International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), Civil Rights Program in Kosovo (CRPK), and Kosova Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims (KRCT). Each of these organizations has a different role in supporting migrants and asylum seekers' stay in Kosovo.

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

IOM is the leading organization in the world dealing with migration. In Kosovo, IOM has operated since 1999 by initially dealing with displaced persons, returnees, and minorities to ensure stability in the community. IOM conducts its mandate under international regulations and the International Law on Migration (IML). The IOM Kosovo is part of the two regional projects under the Immigration and Border Management portfolio, namely 'Managing Irregular Migration Flows in the Western Balkans' and 'Strengthening Cooperation Between Law Enforcement Officials.' Currently, the project "Addressing COVID-19 challenges within the Migrant and Refugee Response in the Western Balkans" is being implemented by IOM, resulting in a new Receiving Center for migrants established with estimated funding of 450,000 Euros.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

The UNHCR has contributed actively to all processes related to asylum seekers' presence in Kosovo, initially adopting a legislative framework in 2008, continuing with developing institutional capacities to implement the asylum legislative framework. A significant number of training and study visits in the countries with a developed asylum system were organized for the officials of the DCAM, with the primary goal to develop and strengthen their capacities in the proper management of the reception centers and asylum requests processing. Since 2012 UNHCR has provided full support with the establishment and maintenance of the Center for Asylum Seekers in Vranidoll/Vrani Do. The same support was provided in 2020 with the opening of the centers in Magurë/Magura, and Mitrovicë/Mitrovica.

Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS)

JRS is an international organization operating in 57 countries around the globe. It supports and serves refugees and displaced persons by providing psychological counseling, reconciliation, advocacy, and educational programs. JRS work in Kosovo is focused on three (3) receiving centers for asylum seekers: Vranidoll/Vrani Do, Magurë/Magura, and Mitrovicë/Mitrovica. They are present daily in the receiving centers and provide the following services: Albanian language courses, computer courses, psychosocial support, medical, food, and sanitary support [1]. Moreover, JRS focuses on social interaction activities; it organizes entertaining activities for asylum seekers to familiarize them with the community and culture in Kosovo. Different entertaining activities inside and outside the reception centers are organized, including excursions to different cities/parts of Kosovo.

Civil Rights Program in Kosovo (CRPK)

CRPK was founded in 1999 by The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). From 2004, it started functioning as an independent non-governmental organization in the area of human rights, and it is an implementing partner of the UNHCR in all activities related to service provision on legal assistance in Kosovo. Indeed, this includes the service provision for asylum seekers. CRPK has a specific pillar on supporting and protecting asylum seekers in legal representation; system includes border monitoring also. In 2021 (January-June), CRPK conducted 102 border/boundary visits and 19 border/boundary station visits.

Kosovo Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims (KRCT)

KRCT was founded in 1999 as a non-governmental organization providing services on mental health and physical, social issues. Its main aim was to eradicate torture, and over the years, it has established partnerships with different institutions and international organizations in developing programs for all citizens of Kosovo and other victims of torture. KRCT's key pillars of work consist of: Rehabilitation, Treatment and Reintegration, Human Rights, Research and Documentation, Advocacy and Lobbying, and related topics on economic empowerment and reintegration.

These organizations' work and functionality are set at the central level while activities are implemented in regions in Kosovo, including the Mitrovica Region and the Belvedere camp. All activities and projects presented cover the region of Mitrovica and the management of asylum seekers centers and migrants' treatment. Besides these actors, local and national media play a crucial role in transmitting information related to the current trends in the Mitrovica region. Local media platforms such as Jepi Zë, Mitrovica Press, Kosovo Sever Portal have played an active role in informing citizens about the

management of the migration and asylum system and the functionality of Belvedere centers. Moreover, national media, including Indeks Online, Koha.net, RTV 21, Lajme 365, and many more, have been conducting interviews and reports sharing from the public authorities and international organizations' work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

-Decentralize institutional capacities

The research data indicate that the situation in Mitrovica regarding migration and asylum system is well-managed under the responsibility of relevant public institutions in close cooperation with international and national organizations. The governments' approach has been very pragmatic and flexible from the beginning of the migrant crisis, assuming that the migration through its territory was not permanent and only transitory, just like most Western Balkans countries. Still, the institutions regulate the situation on the main level, centralizing the entire process.

Such centralization of processes may impede effective crisis management to a certain level, creating an obstacle in systematic follow-up and reporting, including the underlying security-associated issues on the migrant population moving around unregistered. Also, such a situation creates an obstacle for the EU's asylum case processing system and the successful integration of migrants in the long run. Therefore, efforts in extending the institutional capacities further to the north should be made by reopening the existing receiving facility (camp Belvedere) in Mitrovica South. Besides the humanitarian aspect of providing food and shelter, the process should involve usual identification processes, registering, and following up on migrants' population movement, numbers, and demographics

-Ensure comprehensive data collection, processing, and sharing

Within the framework of this research, it was noted that a significant number of migrant individuals avoid reporting/registering with the receiving centers, exacerbating their mistrust of law enforcement by going completely "under the radar" to authorities or simply refusing to reveal their identity by hiding or destroying their identity documents.

There are also cases of multiple entries of migrants after numerous failed attempts to get a hold of the EU. With authorities failing to register a number of migrants, information is not easy to follow, leaving data often prone to inconsistencies, with limited understanding of migration processes and flows.

The priority with this issue should be on:

- Enhancing operational data sharing through a collaborative bottom-up approach, from local to national and regional institutions/entities.
- Improving data collection on migrants in the Mitrovica region by establishing mobile patrols of regional DCAM coordinator to the border/boundary areas, monitoring the most frequent routes used by migrants.
- Organizing workshops to build the capacities of the Mitrovica DCAM regional coordinator to process and understand the migration flow in the Mitrovica region based on an up-to-date, solid, reliable set of data.
- Utilizing the collected internal data for policymaking. Only accurate data could be used in the policymaking and strategic planning context.

-Establish a "one-stop-shop" in the Mitrovica region

The idea behind the "one-stop-shop" is to provide a wide range of institutional support services to migrants under one roof, despite their legal status. A step in that direction would be an initiative of Mitrovica civil society to come forward with a proposal addressed to the Kosovo government on the development of a "one-stop-shop" in Mitrovica South/North.

Civil society could collaborate and coordinate its work with the authorities, reinforcing the bridge of confidence between migrants and institutions, acting in a capacity of important outreach actors, and within the contextual framework of migration. The Government would act as an umbrella organization, defining competencies of the "one-stop-shop," keeping its executive role and competencies in the functioning of this facility, consolidating the "one-stop-shop" operations with its strategy on migrants.

-Ensure proactive involvement of Mitrovica civil society

Civil society has always had substantial power to make a difference in complex social and ethnic relations in Mitrovica, adopting numerous different approaches and mechanisms to match up to the difficulties of a divided town, often acting altruistically for the community's common good. Local-level proactive involvement of Mitrovica civil society on the issue of migrants could yet again bring important outcomes, shaping and defining proposals in addressing the humanitarian and social aspects of the migrant crisis in the Mitrovica region. Civil society involvement would be beneficial in building sustainable organizational structures through mentoring and advising, acting as socio/cultural mediators, responding in feasible, innovative ways, and developing resources and know-how, ultimately strengthening the capacity of the governmental mainstream tools.

Mitrovica civil society would act as an extension to institutional services in the Mitrovica region, providing the migrants and asylum seekers with various conveniences such as access to information, instructions on the asylum procedures, the current situation with border crossings, asylum situation in

the EU countries, legal and humanitarian aid, having all the information material on migrants native languages, overcoming the cultural and linguistic differences.

It could transfer the positive practice and substantial experience gained over the past two decades to national authorities, consolidating and addressing problems jointly. Eventually, this will form an institutional memory of national authorities, helping them establish more robust migratory mechanisms, not ideal by any means, but certainly the most durable and effective ones for migrant crisis management.

-Ensure proactive involvement of authorities

The authorities could offer the following activities to stakeholders in Mitrovica, enabling a greater outreach of services:

- Establishing discussion forums/workshops for civil society in Mitrovica, introducing them to the institutions' mandate, services, and facilities at the disposal of migrants, complementing and strengthening their support in delivering services.
- Establishing regular visits for key stakeholders in Mitrovica to receiving centers and the DCAM premises, introducing the civil society with their mandate, accomplishments, and plans, engaging them on targeted topics.
- Organizing workshops with law enforcement officials, facilitating the exchange of information, concerns, advising and liaising with officials through established mechanisms.
- Organizing media events, sharing updates and follow-ups on the latest developments
- Developing volunteering networks through training and workshops for NGOs, associations, individuals, etc., providing the capacity-building inputs for addressing the migration crisis.

Authorities need to be more transparent in providing information to the population of Mitrovica on the presence of migrants, their rights, obligations, and needs in an ever-growing public discourse stereotyping migrant.

Collaboration on this issue would be inherent to the humanitarian nature and the concept of modern society, advocating for the protection of people in need, bringing forward the true moral values and ethical argumentation in support of seeing migrants as nothing more than human beings.

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