



Serbian
Refugee
Council

Newsletter

Focus of this issue:

Integration

2nd issue: September – November 2006

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Dear readers,

We have the pleasure of putting before you the second issue of the Serbian Refugee Council Newsletter, with focus on the integration of refugees and internally displaced persons in Serbia.

Our intention is to contribute to an open dialogue about this important issue, as well as present some practical examples from the experience of SRC members. We do not claim that such a limited space can serve to encompass all of the existing practice, but we do hope that the texts presented here would enhance the contacts among organisations, institutions and individuals working to resolve this problem.

Integration is undoubtedly a long-term and complex process, affecting all aspect of the lives of an individual and of a community. It happens on a very private level of the person who has decided to remain in the new environment, as well as on the social level of the community that accepts its new inhabitants.

Therefore we believe that integration should be approached systematically and through collaboration between all relevant sectors - education, health, housing, employment, culture, as well as participation in governance and decision making.

Much has already been done in the field of integration of refugees in Serbia, thanks to all important stakeholders, from the Commissariat for Refugees of Serbia and responsible state institutions, through the non-governmental sector, to international agencies and organisations that have invested abundantly into the integration programmes.

That, of course, does not mean that this process cannot be advanced through innovative actions and partnerships as well as through an evaluation of current achievements and adoption of comprehensive systemic solutions in keeping with international standards.

The texts presented herein are focused on that very aim. At last but not the least, SRC invites your comments and suggestions in order to help us make this Newsletter indeed useful and interesting for all those working in this field.

*Secretariat,
Serbian Refugee Council*



- SRC Activities -

During the months of September, October and November the Serbian Refugee Council (SRC) member organizations within their joint activities organized a number of meetings with regard to the promotion of integration, repatriation, asylum and access to rights of internally displaced persons. The focus of the meetings was to discuss the content of the SRC analytical reports on these issues and to present them to interested individuals and groups as well as to bring forward SRC common recommendations on each of the thematic fields that the SRC has been respectively dealing with.

Refugee and IDP Integration Campaign Activities

On 18th of September, 2006 Serbian Democratic Forum (SDF) organized a round table on integration of refugees in Serbia, Belgrade. On this occasion, Nenad Opačić from Novi Sad Humanitarian Centre introduced the public with the draft of the analytical report on integration issues. Representatives of various refugee associations and other non-governmental organizations as well as the representatives of the Commissariat for Refugees, OSCE and the Danish Refugee Council were present at the round table. The participants of this meeting reached the conclusion that integration was a process to which neither Serbian authorities nor Serbian society gives due attention, and that there was a feeling of being left alone among refugees and internally displaced who opted to integrate into the Serbian society.



Photo SDF

In October 2006 another round of discussion on the issues of integration was organized by the SRC. Namely, on October 16 International Aid Network (IAN) together with the SRC organized a round table where the issues of refugee/IDP integration were discussed by the

Commissioner for refugees of the Zemun Municipality, representatives of the SRC member organizations and other interested NGOs, representatives of Zemun Social Work Centre and the National Employment Service, and also by refugees themselves. The participants of the round table talked about the refugee integration programmes of the Serbian Government and about the obstacles to integration process, as well. Unemployment, unsolved housing problems, inability of a refugee to register a mortgage for participation in credit financing programmes of the government, were identified as the hottest integration challenges. The situation in Zemun Municipality was chosen as a focus since it hosts around 50,000 refugees and internally displaced who opted for integration.



Photo Duško Korlat, IAN

On the 16th of November 2006, Pančevo was a place to host a round table on integration. This event was organized by Group 484 (within its SRC activities) in cooperation with the Pančevo Municipality. Presentation of the SRC analytical reports on integration of refugees and access to rights of internally displaced in Serbia was a prelude to a discussion of NGO activists with the representatives of Pančevo Municipality. Poverty among refugees and internally



displaced persons and other refugee/IDP core matters together with the issue of closure of refugee camps in Serbia were discussed on this occasion. The participants reached the conclusion that inter-sectoral cooperation need to be improved in order to solve these problems efficiently.

Refugee Repatriation to Croatia Campaign Activities

On 27th of October 2006, on behalf of the SRC, the Serbian Democratic Forum arranged a round table entitled "The Sarajevo Declaration: Two Years After". Along with the organizers from the SDF and the SRC Secretariat, the speeches were delivered by Milorad Pupovac, the President of the Serbian National Council in Croatia, Tonči Staničić, the Ambassador of Croatia in Belgrade, Trivo Indić, the regional affair advisor to the Serbian President and Christian Loda, the Chief of the OSCE Mission to Croatia. Representatives of both Serbian and Croatian NGOs as well as the representative of the state institutions of both countries took part at this event. Non-agility of the Serbian Government to set up the so called road map, prescribed by the Sarajevo Declaration, and unemployment among returnees in Croatia together with poor infrastructure in the areas of return were identified as major problems with regard to return. It was pointed out that the cooperation between Serbia and Croatia with regard to refugee repatriation improved, but that there were still numerous obstacles to refugee return process in Croatia. This led to a conclusion that the Sarajevo Declaration must be implemented properly and efficiently.



Photo Mediacentar

Advocacy of a New Asylum Law Creation

On 11th of October 2006, the Novi Sad Humanitarian Centre organized a round table on the right to asylum in Serbia, at which activists of various NGOs as well as representatives of other SRC member organizations took part. Vladimir Petronijević from the Group 484 presented his legal analysis of this issue and offered a comparison of the situation in Serbia with the EU policies on asylum matters.



Photo NSHC

On 18th of October 2006, the Centre for Civil Society Development Protecta also organized a round table on asylum in Serbia. The Niš asylum discussion was attended by SRC and UNHCR representatives, activists of NGOs from Niš and the surrounding area as well as by representatives of attorney offices from Surdulica, Vranje and Bujanovac municipalities. Organizing such a panel in the South East Serbia was of a particular significance since this part of Serbia is on the border with Bulgaria that is being passed through a large number of persons coming from conflict areas that could be potential asylum seekers. The participants of the round table in Niš concluded that there is a need to overcome the deadlock regarding legal regulations of asylum in Serbia, and that a separate institution for asylum procedure should be set up (for the time being the UNHCR regulates asylum in Serbia) and that the wider public should be made aware of the issue.

On 25th of October 2006, the Group 484, together with the SRC, organized a round table on asylum in Belgrade. The asylum issue was debated by experts from the UNHCR, Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Serbian Government EU Integration Office, the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights and by SRC member



organizations' analysts. The Belgrade asylum debate, as the one in Niš, came up with the conclusion that Serbia did not yet fulfill its obligations regarding asylum (i.e. adoption of a new law on asylum) that stemmed from Serbia's membership at the Council of Europe. The Government of Serbia was criticized for not launching public discussion when drafting the law on asylum. This draft law, according to Group 84 experts, neither defines which institution is responsible for the asylum procedure implementation, nor what the procedure itself is.

IDP Access to Rights Campaign Activities

The Novi Sad Humanitarian Centre (NSHC) and the Serbian Democratic Forum (SDF) on 3rd of October 2006, organized round tables in Novi Sad and Belgrade, respectively, on the issue of access to rights of internally displaced persons. Representatives of various NGOs dealing with the issue participated in these two separate events. The analytical report entitled "Internally Displaced in Serbia - Access to Rights", written by Danilo Rakić from Group 484 and Sandra Ilić from NSHC, was presented to the public.



Photo NSHC

Current security and political context and obstacles to return to Kosovo were particularly discussed in Belgrade, whereas in Novi Sad the problems of internally displaced Roma from Kosovo, as a specifically vulnerable group, were distinctly explored.

International Aid Network organized a round table on 31st of October 2006, also with the topic of access to rights of the internally displaced. The round table was held at the premises of the Red Cross in Zemun. Interested NGO activists and representatives of the National Employment Service together

with the SRC member organization activists and experts discussed socio-economic risks internally displaced are faced with, their difficulties in accessing the labour market in Serbia and their troubles in getting new personal documents issued by Serbian authorities, which they were entitled to after being forced to leave Kosovo.

SRC Documentation and Research Centre Activities

Within the Documentation and Research Centre programme, Hi Neighbour and International Aid Network (IAN) are conducting two researches on integration.

Hi Neighbour conducts a research on the issue of society's potentials to integrate refugees and IDPs. The interviewees are persons who sought refuge in Serbia and those who were displaced from Kosovo, as well as governmental institutions' staff and NGO activists who deal with forced migrations.

On the other hand, IAN steered its research towards exploration of psychosocial aspects of refugee and IDP integration. Total number of 302 examinees, refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and IDPs from Kosovo, participated in the research. As a complement to the quantitative research, a qualitative research was organised in October and November through 6 focus groups with over 80 beneficiaries. In these focus groups moderators explored participants' personal experience and view on integration. Focus groups were conducted jointly by: IAN Belgrade, NSHC Novi Sad and Protecta Niš.

In January 2007 the academic community and wider public will be introduced with the final results of the IAN and Hi Neighbour research.



Photo NSHC



- In Focus -

The SRC Analytical Report on Integration - Recommendations

Within the campaign on integration of refugees and internally displaced persons, the Serbian Refugee Council produced an analytical report entitled "*Integration as a durable solution for refugees and internally displaced persons in Serbia*". The authors of the report are: Danijela Korać Mandić, Nenad Opačić (NSHC), Bojana Škorc, Danica Ćirić (Hi Neighbour), Siniša Volarević (Group 484) and Nada Muždeka (IAN).

In this report the issues of the right to citizenship, obtaining personal documents, housing, property, employment, social protection, pensions, health protection and the right to free education for refugees and IDPs are being explored. Through this analysis as well as through consultations done within above presented round tables, four wider areas have been identified as of primary significance for further advancement in order to support sustainable integration of refugees and internally displaced persons. These areas are: legal framework adjustment, advancement of current programmes and achievements, participation of refugees and internally displaced in resolving their problems, and access to relevant information.

The list of recommendations is neither exhaustive nor final: we hope that it will serve to encourage fresh ideas and specific targeted action. Therefore, all options should be considered open and all citizens should feel invited to participate in joint efforts towards finding long-term sustainable solutions for the benefit all.

1.1 Organize a public hearing on Draft Bill on Changes and Amendments to the Law on Refugees in order to identify the best legal solutions, without ruling out the possibility of adoption of a separate Serbian law on integration of refugees from former Yugoslavia that would help regulate this issue in a comprehensive and just manner.

1.1 In addition, the existing National Strategy for Resolving the Problems of Refugees and IDPs should be re-examined, to determine its relevancy at the present time and introduce necessary changes.

2.1 Through a joint, framework strategy, strengthen the efforts of non-governmental organizations and refugee associations to exert a strong influence on the government of Serbia, with a view of putting refugee issues on the agenda of policy-makers and speed up the process of addressing the specific problems of refugees.

2.2 Better inclusion of refugees living in private accommodation in housing programs implemented by CRRS and its partners.

2.3 Plan and implement economic integration programs in a comprehensive

manner, including local communities and tailor all forms of assistance to the actual needs and potentials of refugees, in order to achieve true sustainability.

2.4 Build capacities of refugees and IDPs for accessing loans and similar funds through training, outreach programs and establishing "business incubators" in communities with sufficient number of potential beneficiaries.

3.1 In all municipalities with high concentration of refugees, there should be persons representing their interests before local authorities. Gender balance should be ensured since at least half of refugees are women.

3.2 Together with refugee representatives and in cooperation with all stakeholders in local communities as well as at the level of central government, thoroughly identify main issues and needs and jointly formulate guidelines and a plan of action and provision of adequate support and protection.

3.3 Establish and support refugee interest groups (with participation of local population, depending on interests and needs concerned)



to work on identification and resolving of specific problems.

3.4 Enhance cooperation between authorities, economy sector and civil sector, including associations and informal groups of refugees and IDPs, in order to find the most appropriate and economically sustainable solutions with respect to integration.

4.1 Exchange and dissemination of all necessary information needed for a successful integration of refugees should be coordinated and improved starting from the existing and projected responsibilities with regard to durable and sustainable solutions for refugees and IDPs. In this effort all available modern communication and technical tools should be used in order to disseminate information in a timely manner and reach out to all interested parties.

4.2 Secure methods and resources for enabling access to necessary information to

the refugees in the field and those living in remote areas, either through mobile teams or establishment of information desks (with a computer, telephone and a person responsible for passing on information to end users).

4.3 Organize round table discussions, public discussion forums and similar events on a regular basis, ensuring participation of refugees, local authorities and coverage by the local media.

4.4 Design a special program that would be broadcast weekly on the national TV station (RTS) and cover issues related to integration of refugees in Serbia or incorporate segments into existing TV programs, which would place refugee issues in the mainstream news coverage

4.5 Provide financial support to specialized publications, such as "Pravi odgovor", in order to enable it to be issued on a more frequent basis, and easily distributed to end users, refugees in the first place.

The SRC member organizations programmes - experience and practice

In the past years the SRC member organizations have been carrying out various activities in the field of integration of refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and internally displaced from Kosovo into the society of Serbia. Some of these actions were implemented through direct work with refugees and IDPs, whilst some of them were advocacy campaigns for refugee and IDP integration that targeted both the state and the Serbian society. Here are few illustrative examples of these actions.

Novi Sad Humanitarian Centre implements the project *Network of Mobile Teams for Extremely Vulnerable Refugees* aimed at providing refugees with psycho-social assistance as well as at setting up municipal networks of socio-humanitarian services for refugees.

In the past, Hi Neighbour implemented a project financed by the UNHCR that provided loans for refugees. Through its daily activities, Hi Neighbour implements the programme of

psychological workshops with particularly vulnerable groups such as refugees and IDPs.

In last two years, Group 484 worked on an advocacy project for rights of persons who were leaving refugee camps in Serbia.

Protecta carried out the programme of the so called alternative job market for internally displaced persons, within which this organization mediated in employment of the displaced from Kosovo.

International Aid Network, within its daily activities, offers free of charge courses in computer skills, English language, and social skills, as well as free of charge legal and psychological assistance.

Serbian Democratic Forum provides refugees and internally displaced with free of charge legal services related to their status and rights in Serbia.



Refugees and Integration – authorial article

By Jovo Borić, lawyer

Integration in the receiving country is one of four known options for resolving the refugee problem; the others being repatriation (return to the country of origin), resettlement into third country and family reunification.

Since the beginning of the crisis in former SFR Yugoslavia, only the resettlement model has been applied in an organised manner in the territory of Serbia, which was done with assistance of embassies of the receiving third countries. Other models, especially integration and return / repatriation, were largely left to the individual efforts of refugees themselves, as well as NGOs; the systematic approach by the state within the scope of voluntary and informed decision of refugees was much less visible in this field.

The causes of this situation stem from the very beginning of the crisis, when refugees in Serbia were being received in an insufficiently organised manner and with lack of a legal framework based on the usual international practice. They were largely left to their own initiative and therefore mainly settled in the households of their extended families or friends. This initial tacit transfer of state's responsibility to the families and friends of refugees with regard to their reception and accommodation has partly led to the deterioration of their family relations. Hence most of the refugees ended up living in rented apartments until the present. A smaller number of refugees were accommodated in collective centres organised by the state and also assisted by international governmental and non-governmental organisations. At that time there was no legislative framework in place and was hence partially resolved by the passing of an *ad hoc* law. This Law, as well as the later practice, have so far shown the lack of Serbia's fully fledged approach to the refugee problem as a serious legal, economic and moral issue of the country. The predominant view was political as well as humanitarian at the very beginning of the

crisis. Such approach to the refugee issue partly tends to persist even today. There were occasions when refugees were used as an argument for the internal political needs of the then regime; sometimes they were portrayed as being the culprits for various problems. Following the political changes in Serbia, refugees were merely dropped from the list of government's "usual culprits", but the essential approach has not changed substantially. There is still a tendency of the state to marginalise the refugee problems. This attitude is still visible in the case of internally displaced persons from Kosovo and Metohija. The main focus of the state with regard to this population is the political one, while other problems are being somewhat sidelined.

The impression is that the passage of time has so far been the key means so far used with respect to the integration of refugees. The long time that has elapsed since the beginning of their exile and the lack of a proper institutional framework for the resolving of these problems in the country of origin (for refugees) or the region of origin (for IDPs) have led to their factual, somewhat chaotic, natural and long term integration into the local community, with all the shortfalls that such a situation brings. This creates an illusion that the problem has been resolved. Hence it could be concluded that refugees have been left to their own gradual assimilation, in the absence of a feasible country integration strategy. The effects of a more or less organised approach by the state, with assistance of international agencies and NGOs, are only visible among the refugee population that has been residing in collective centres for the past 15 years. Efforts towards housing solutions, through the assistance in building materials, construction of apartments or the purchase of abandoned rural houses represent some of the successful exceptions undertaken by various donors. Even in these exceptions sometimes a principle of ghettos was applied, so houses for refugees were constructed on edges of towns. The exception is the purchase of rural households, which could be a good example to follow in the



future. Nevertheless, as 90% of refugees reside outside of collective centres, these measures have so far failed to produce a significant long term effect on resolving the problem of their integration.

By introducing changes in the Law on Citizenship, the state has enabled refugees to become citizens of Serbia. A large number of refugees have used this opportunity during the past years; many of them have regulated their residence through renouncing refugee status and obtaining local identity cards. According to the latest census, there are 106.996 refugees in Serbia: compared to the number of about 700.000 by the end of 1995, this indicates that for around 600.000 people the problem of exile has been resolved in one of the above mentioned ways. Most of those cases were formally resolved by granting Serbian citizenship. Refugee status and citizenship of the receiving country are two mutually exclusive concepts; nevertheless, the integration needs do not cease only because someone has been granted citizenship. The citizenship should be the crown of a long process of a refugee's integration into the country of asylum, such as it is done in those countries where some of them have moved through resettlement programmes. Serbia has practically skipped the process of integration, while granting citizenship in fact served as means through which refugees were equalised with local inhabitants. Then their problems were approached by placing them into specific categories according to their social and property status: in most cases into the category of poverty-stricken vulnerable population in need of social welfare.

If the state's approach to this problem does not change soon, the results expected from the integration process could not be achieved. Judging from the proposed normative solution that the government has offered through the Law on Changes and Amendments to the Law on Refugees, there has not been a substantial change in the approach to this issue. There is still an effort to change and amend a 15-year-old *ad hoc* law in the same *ad hoc* manner, without a comprehensive analysis of the problem.

A serious approach to the refugee issue and the issue of migrations in general can only be formulated through a comprehensive Law on Asylum in Serbia, which would also regulate the issue of future potential refugees. The problem of integration of current refugees, as well as those whose vulnerability comes as a consequence of exile, regardless of whether they have already obtained Serbian citizenship, needs to be resolved through a separate and comprehensive normative act, not limited only to housing provision. It is necessary that the state should render practical assistance to these people with respect to realising their pre-war acquired rights in the country of origin. These primarily include property and tenancy rights, right to pension arrears, privatisation-based rights, rights related to old hard currency savings accounts and the like. During previous periods the state has not been very active in this field, or at least its engagement has not been effective. With the involvement of the state, these acquired rights would certainly be resolved in a qualitatively different manner; once these problems were resolved, all other remaining aspects of integration (primarily employment and housing) could be actively overcome with the immediate engagement of refugees themselves. The government's proactive work has so far led to the ratification and implementation of the agreements on social insurance with Croatia and BiH respectively, but rights of individuals in this field still need to be fully realised. The signing of the Succession Treaty as well as the Sarajevo Declaration has also been a significant step forward in the protection of the acquired rights of refugees in their countries of origin. Nevertheless, visible practical results still need to be achieved.

It remains to be seen if the latest activities by the state in the overall context of EU accession preparations would yield tangible results and enable the equal participation of all stakeholders, particularly refugees. We hope that there is awareness about the need of adopting systemic, feasible and measurable solutions for the integration of refugees in Serbia.



- Coming Up -

❖ **SRC Annual Assembly**

On 8th of December 2006, the second Serbian Refugee Council Annual Assembly will be held at the Media Centre premises in Belgrade

❖ **Sixteen days of activism for women's human rights**

On November 24, 2006 Group 484, with the support of the SRC, joined the action called »Sixteen days of activism for women's human rights«, which is for the territory of Serbia coordinated by the Autonomous Women Centre. Leaflets »Do You See Violence Against Women?« will be distributed throughout Serbia. On the initiative of the Group 484 and the SRC a text on vulnerability of women during forced displacement has been included in this leaflet together with the quotations from the UNHCR resolution on violence against forced migrant women.

❖ **Presentation of analytical reports and the SRC Documentation and Research Centre activity**

On 15th December 2006, at 3 PM, at the Media Centre premises in Belgrade, the Serbian Refugee Council will present the analytical reports written within the SRC campaigns on asylum, integration, repatriation and access to rights of internally displaced. The SRC will also present the work of its Documentation and Research Centre to the public.

❖ **Distribution of New Year presents**

The Serbian Refugee Council working group will prepare and distribute New Year presents for especially vulnerable children.

The **Serbian Refugee Council** is an alliance of six local refugee and IDP assisting NGOs (Group 484, Hi Neighbour, International Aid Network IAN, Novi Sad Humanitarian Centre NSHC, Serbian Democratic Forum SDF – Belgrade, Centre for Civil Society Development PROTECTA) established with the view of enhancing their role and influence in the process of finding durable and sustainable solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons in Serbia and the Western Balkans, through joint advocacy and lobbying on decision-making and public policy level.

SRC is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation with a vision to create a fairer world for refugees, displaced persons and other forced migrants, as well as to improve tolerance, equality and prosperity in the society.



Group 484



Hi Neighbour



International
Aid Network
IAN



Novi Sad
Humanitarian
Center NSHC



Serbian
Democratic
Forum SDF -
Belgrade



Centre for Civil
Society
Development
PROTECTA