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# A migrant “hot potato” system: The transit camp and urban integration in a bridge society

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## ABSTRACT

The literature on migrant camps around urban spaces has concentrated on permanent, long-term camps in destination societies. Yet the 2014–2017 Middle Eastern refugee crisis in Europe demonstrated the centrality of transit camps in bridge countries for urban integration and the lack thereof. This article presents results of fieldwork from the Preševo migrant center near the Macedonia–Serbia border in January 2016 and from migrant camps across the country since. In a model bridge society, Preševo was the largest refugee camp on the Balkan route. Drawing on interviews with migrants, camp officials, experts, nongovernmental organization (NGO) and government representatives, I argue that transit camp operations are characterized by a “hot potato” system that thwarted urban integration by emphasizing hectic processing, bypassing cities, and urgent transportation of migrants off sovereign territory. I conclude with preliminary implications for the role of transit camps for urban integration more generally.

## Introduction

Recent migrant waves, such as the Syrian and Rohingya, have renewed attention to the role of camps in urban integration (and its obstruction).<sup>1</sup> Camps have rightly been identified as important sites where migrants are at risk of violence, trafficking, and other abusive practices—often far from urban eyes, thus invisible. The physical and mental health stakes are immense (Crisp, 2000; Paardekooper, De Jong, & Hermanns, 1999). The alternatives to encampment, meanwhile, could arguably be even worse, breeding dangerous “informal settlements” between city and camp without aid or supervision (Sanyal, 2017). Furthermore, comparative studies of host countries suggest that reasons for non-encampment are often historical contingencies and narrow elite motives (Turner, 2015), not a strategic or humane alternative to encampment.

Migrant camps have been studied as paradigmatic urban sociocultural realities; they generate their own hierarchies, biopolitics, stratified cultures, spatial and temporal states of exception, and peripheral and exclusionary statuses within broader cities (Agier, 2002; Diken, 2004; Peteet, 2005). Some have even raised alarms that refugee camps are “dangerous sanctuaries,” themselves causes of civil wars (Lischer, 2015). The “urbanity” of migrant camps is contentious (Grbac, 2013; Jansen, 2009; Sanyal, 2012), as raging debates recur across cases as to whether a given camp is merely that or a “city” worthy of the title. Montclos and Kagwanja (2000) ask whether the durability of northern Kenyan sites implies “camps or cities.” Though some marvel at the “instant city” that is Za’atari Camp in Jordan (Ledwith, 2014), others think that the designation is a sinister misunderstanding of the surveillance, confinement, and misery of “a camp, and not a city” (Crisp, 2015, p. 1). Ramadan (2013), reflecting on Palestinian camps, answers both yes and no:

Superficially, the refugee camp might seem similar to other unofficial settlements that also lack formal legality, but even the slum belongs and is part of the story of the city. The camp simultaneously is part of the city and divergent, an enclave of exceptional sovereignty impinging upon but never truly integrated with the city, existing both in the here and now and simultaneously within another spatial–temporal dimension. (Ramadan, 2013, pp. 73–74)

Intriguing as this is, it begs the question. The task is to explain the variety of migrant camps (including those unrecognized by political power centers), which obviously affect urban integration differently.<sup>2</sup> Some camps are built in downtown urban areas, whereas others are relegated to the middles of deserts, inaccessible and invisible. Some camps are deliberately designed to be temporary—“in the here and now”—during a migration wave; others are permanent. Some camps are bottom-up, improvised products of the migrants’ own agency (and thus imply significant, autonomous migrant sovereignty), whereas others are top-down government projects imposing “exceptional sovereignty” and ghettoization.

I suggest that the urge to classify camps as cities, or to position them vis-à-vis familiar urban forms, has been misguided. Conventional approaches to camps have failed to ask under what conditions different camps (for our purposes, transit camps in particular) prevent urban integration of migrants. The dominant research agenda has had an overwhelming selection bias toward certain kinds of camps, from which generalizations proceed. Following the “transit migration” agenda (Papadopoulou-Kourkoulou, 2008), this article seeks to remedy such bias.

Ramadan’s (2013) urge to move beyond the “superficial” resemblance of migrant camps with other urban forms coincides with another temptation: scholars routinely conflate all migrant camps with a select few, most prominent exemplars. A relatively small subset of refugee camps has received most of the attention: permanent, highly regulated camps in destination societies. These sites—such as Za’atari in Jordan, Dadaab in Kenya, even Calais in France—are important but exceptional (Dalal, 2015; Horst, 2006; Rygiel, 2011). Around and between such camps are typically dozens of unofficial, semiregulated, and transitory migrant camps where scholarly, media, and government research efforts are less intense (for an innovative concept of *campscapes*, see Martin, 2015). Informal and temporary transit camps are not only critical sites to understand state policy effects, they also refocus our attention to “migrants as subjects rather than objects and [their] journeys as fractured and complex movements rather than linear routes from A to B” (Ansems De Vries, Carrera, & Guild, 2016, p. 1). Just as Spanish enclaves Ceuta and Melilla serve as “migration gateways” between Europe and Africa (Gold, 2000), camps such as Preševno may play the same formative role between nation-states within Europe.

As the globalization of labor migration continues, and as refugee crises multiply, transit camps will proliferate around border crossings, administrative borders, bus and train stations, ports, public parks, and under bridges around the world. These understudied, ghettoized places pose unique puzzles of urban integration and migrant assimilation.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas official, highly regulated migrant sites have transparent government and NGO presences, what journalists call impromptu, makeshift, or ad hoc migrant settlements are more frequented by smugglers, lack humanitarian and security infrastructures, and serve as substitutes for residential and labor solutions in host societies. Important migrant experiences—including injury, trauma, exploitation, and dispossession—occur in such spaces. Even as major urban landscapes on every continent are strewn with such camps, very little data gathering is done in them. Research efforts have largely focused on the safer, more visible, and institutionalized camps with outstanding public relations and a well-developed routine for visitors. With the dominance of quantitative, large survey-based research methods, the unofficial migrant transit camps are a “blind spot” of our vision of migration in urban areas.

Work on European “borderscapes” preceding the recent migrant flow helpfully contextualizes the transit camps (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2012). The decentralized, occasionally even incoherent, European migration policy has externalized control and repression through the “transnational network of control nodes” (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2017, p. 29) that constitutes continental border control regimes; instead of understanding these borders as mere reactions to forced migration, scholarship has recognized that they *themselves* cause displacement: “border-induced displacement” (Lemberg-

Pedersen, 2017). Examining a temporary hub, Preševo, in this borderscape context sheds light on how urban integration proceeds or is obstructed by the border-induced displacement during the recent migrant wave.

Below I argue that transit camps in bridge societies have a unique function: they nurture what I call a “hot potato” system of migration, developing rules and institutional cultures aimed at urgently processing individuals at the expense of any capacity to integrate them into the society’s urban environments. Unlike the overstudied permanent camps, regulated transit camps like Preševo are in the business of dumping migrants onto other jurisdictions. Critical decisions are made shaping the duration and direction of forced migration in such camps and thus the extent of urban integration. Finally, the constellation of unregulated temporary camps that emerges around government-organized ones—in Belgrade and Subotica, for instance—is just as formative of urban landscapes as are the formal sites.

Through ethnographic and interview-based research, I explore critical processes shaping the extent of urban integration in the aftermath of the Preševo migrant center, a paradigmatic transit camp, and its effects on irregular migrant camps in Serbia. This case study is a rare window into contemporary forced migration processes, with qualitative research methods uniquely equipped to look at them.

### **A note on terminology**

The popular marker *European Migration Crisis of 2014–2016* is doubly misleading. First, the volume of migrants entering Europe was negligible compared to the volumes burdening Turkey (>3 million refugees by 2017), Jordan (1.4 million), and Lebanon (1.5 million, constituting over one quarter of the national population).<sup>4</sup> The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) documents that nearly 85% of the world’s displaced remain in regions of origin. The proportion of migrants integrated into urban settings is also dramatically more modest in European destination countries; in bridge societies like Serbia, urban integration is negligible. In sum, the crisis was a *Middle Eastern* one but only gained attention when a small subset of the refugee population spilled into Europe and an even smaller subset began to reside in cities (for a critique of “Eurocentrism” from a bridge society perspective, see Mavrommatis, 2016).

Secondly, the crisis did not begin in 2014 (when spillage into Europe began) but 3 years earlier. Thus, the minor episode of population transfer known as the European migration crisis should more accurately be thought of as the late spillover phase of a Middle Eastern migrant wave that began in mid-2011, when the Syrian Civil War propelled the first few hundred refugees into Turkey. The crisis that countries like Serbia experienced was thus belated, and the dreaded risk of urban integration of large numbers of Muslims and Arabs in Belgrade and other cities comes at the heels of years of integration of such refugees in Amman, Beirut, Ankara, and other Middle Eastern cities.

For the purposes of this article, the *migrant wave* refers only to migrants entering the European continent in the period between July 2014 and January 2018.<sup>5</sup> I refer to an earlier phase of the flow (July 2014–March 2016), when the Balkan route was open and migrants transited through Serbia quickly and freely, and a later phase (March 2016–January 2018), when migrants in Serbia were stranded in the country, unable to proceed to western Europe. I will argue that, in the later phase, modest urban integration has in fact occurred despite Serbia’s hot potato system of camps.

### **Methods**

The article draws on data primarily from fieldwork in the Preševo migrant center during the Middle Eastern refugee wave into Europe and secondarily from fieldwork in Belgrade, Subotica, and other urban and suburban sites in Serbia after the March 2016 closure of the Balkan route (on the cynical political context of the European Union [EU]–Turkey deal, see Collett, 2016; on the extent to which the “closure” was not, see Weber, 2017). Together, the two provide a rare glimpse into the obstacles to urban integration of migrants in an exemplary bridge society.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Preševo migrant camp**

I spent 18 full days (~7 a.m. to 11 p.m.) researching the Preševo migrant camp at the Serbian–Macedonian border in January 2016. The fieldwork included in-depth, semistructured interviews with Syrian migrants ( $n = 30$ ); open-ended interviews with dozens of experts, camp staff and officials, and Preševo residents; and ethnographic study of migrant behavior, camp operations, and all migrant routines from entry to exit. Though limited in scope, this in-depth, exploratory study illuminates aspects of the migration crisis that are impenetrable in macrolevel studies. Furthermore, the timing was at a unique moment in the Middle Eastern migrant flow into Europe: near peak migration (on average 2,000 migrants processed daily) and less than 2 months before the EU–Turkey deal closed the Balkan route. By the time of this study, the migrants and the camp had left an indelible impact on Preševo’s landscape and history.

In the earlier phase of the wave, most of the migrants were Syrian; the rest, Pashtun Afghan and Iraqi. The core sample (in-depth interviews) consisted of 30 Syrians who transitioned through Serbia, as well as dozens of shorter interviews conducted informally. Non-Syrians were excluded for lack of on-duty camp translators for Pashtun, Farsi, and Urdu; they were either unavailable or unwilling to spend hours upon hours assisting my unpaid research. Expert interviews included a senior official at the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia; Ministry of Interior officers; UNHCR representatives; the head coordinator of the camp and his deputy; two Serbian government officials from the Ministry of Labor, volunteers and/or coordinators of Red Cross, the Danish Refugee Council, Swiss Humanitarian Aid, Caritas, and Remar SOS Foundation; and all medical personnel on site from two clinics (a local Serbian government one and another, Israeli, one from the Natan International Humanitarian Aid mission). I also interviewed seven security guards and other policemen on duty, Preševo residents, three bus drivers at the gates of the center, fellow guests of local inns, and acquaintances of camp staff who live near the site.

### **Access and significance**

Access to the camp was provided through the Belgrade UNHCR office, with which the author has collaborated in the past for previous research on Kosovo. I was given a visitor’s pass and unrestricted access to all offices, tents, and outdoor areas. Only two restrictions applied: a ban on photographing uniformed personnel on camp premises (i.e., police guards) and occasional limits on being in the camp’s registration area, where security screening is done (being asked to leave was sporadic and unsystematic, depending largely on the whim of the guard on duty or on how conspicuous I was in a given moment). Camp staff were generally amused that someone is spending his entire day there—many more hours than most volunteer shifts. Near-unanimous contempt was expressed for journalists who visit fleetingly (“like a zoo”), ask a few questions, and abscond forever. I gained some underserved respect as a contrast to that kind of investigator.

As the largest migrant center with the highest number of registered migrants processed on the Balkan route, the Preševo camp was arguably the most theoretically interesting site of the 2014–2016 Middle Eastern refugee wave.<sup>7</sup> It was the greatest European—possibly even Western—exercise in migrant processing aimed *neither* at refugee warehousing (Smith, 2004; Verdirame & Pobjoy, 2013) *nor* at urban integration (Campbell, 2006; Montclos & Kagwanja, 2000) but simply at transporting migrants onward as quickly as possible.

### **Belgrade and other sites**

Secondarily, fieldwork was conducted in the later phase of the wave in dozens of migrant sites in Belgrade (notably the Krnjača and Obrenovac asylum centers and improvised settlements around the train and bus stations), Subotica (Cigłana and near Horgoš and Kelebija border crossings), Šid (the Serbia–Croatia border crossing, the reception center, and Adaševci motel), as well as around Preševo

itself (the Serbia–Macedonia border crossing and all of the eateries, hotel/motel options, and taxi/bus pickup sites around the camp). Belgrade’s Refugee Aid Miksalište center—both at its original location nearer the river and after its resettlement north of Luke Čelovića Park—was the densest and most voluminous point of convergence in the capital. I interviewed aid workers, guards, visiting volunteers, local neighborhood residents, journalists covering migration in Belgrade throughout, officials from nine of the largest operating NGOs, government regulators, as well as short- and long-term migrants.<sup>8</sup>

## Results

### *The town that enabled the migrant wave*

Preševo is an Albanian-majority town (over 90% of this small municipality of 34,000 people is Albanian). Its modest size was compensated for by a tumultuous history: it was a frontline conflict zone repeatedly during the Serbia–Kosovo conflict (1998–1999) and the 5-month uprising (2000) of the Liberation Army of Preševo, Medvedje and Bujanovac. Remnants of NATO’s bombing of Yugoslavia are still visible. Various signs of a cleanup effort by the government to remove decades-old depleted uranium shells (hundreds of bullets have been extracted, along with thousands of cluster bomb fragments found in backyards, farms, and buildings) are scattered around surrounding villages and roads. Physical warfare was replaced with symbolic nationalist struggle, epitomized in a statue meant to honor fallen Kosovo Liberation Army militants deemed terrorists by Belgrade. As with many postconflict zones, everyday life proceeds with Serbian–Albanian cooperation and neighborly normality, occasionally punctured with public displays of nationalist nostalgia.

Bloodshed was disproportionately concentrated in border towns like Preševo. Long-term trends of demographic decline of the Serbian population (Serbs have gradually fled the area since 1961) were accentuated by ethnic purges. In the late 1990s, Serbian forces cracked down brutally on Kosovo Liberation Army strongholds in the town, killing hundreds, many of them civilians. Albanian guerrilla forces, including the Preševo-centered Liberation Army of Preševo, Medvedje and Bujanovac, engaged in terrorism after the toppling of Slobodan Milošević’s regime. The town was a stronghold from which a major insurgency was launched in 2002. Pacified partly by international peacekeeping Kosovo Force (KFOR), the episode left a suspicion among Serbian residents that they live in a treasonous, hostile territory supported by (a now-independent) Kosovo to the south. Since the 2002 counterinsurgency, it has been a peaceful area, with a reasonably functional relationship between central authorities and local Albanian governors.

Preševo became the migrant wave’s pivotal transit site partly as a result of the Serbian government’s striving toward EU membership. At a sensitive time for the candidate country’s EU integration process, an opportunistic consensus emerged between Serbia’s ruling elite and the German-led effort to organize a regulated, government-supervised, and orderly migration through the Balkan route. Unlike Budapest or Warsaw, Belgrade was headed by a leader—Aleksandar Vučić—eager to show his European and humanitarian credentials. Known to have made such parliamentary pronouncements as “For every Serb they kill, we will kill a hundred Muslims!” in his nationalist youth, the repentant leader subsequently turned into a fanatical pro-Europe integrationist with a benevolent policy toward Muslim Arab migrants. On top of enormous funds from Europe and international donors to administer in Preševo, the Serbian governing elites gained tremendous symbolic and political capital.

On the German-led EU side, Europe could rely on Serbia in a way that it could not rely on potential partners to manage the migrant wave within the EU. A continentwide uprising of right-wing parties fueled antimigrant hysteria. The Dublin Convention (1990) was stressed beyond redemption, and the Dublin II Regulation (2003) and Dublin III (2013) were being undermined from within the EU. The rejectionist stance of the Višegrad countries—above all Hungary—

undermined a lofty quota system to accommodate 160,000 refugees, create a European refugee agency, and respect international asylum laws. Germany needed all the help it could get to manage their nominal *Willkommenskultur* toward migrants.

At Europe's doorstep, Serbia proved effective in this regard. Negotiations on Chapter 24 of the country's accession path were opened in July 2016—and happened to include provisions on asylum and other migrant-related human rights standards. EU funds and technical support for refugee management were met with a clear posture by Belgrade authorities that they will process migrants legally, humanely, and in line with Europe's design to create buffer states in Greece and Italy (including through the March 2016 EU–Turkey deal, which Serbia respects by accepting deportations from Hungary, Croatia, and Bulgaria) and transit, bridge countries in Macedonia and Serbia. This international pressure would be instrumental in enabling Serbia's bypassing of urban centers in channeling migrants from Preševo directly to Šid.

### ***The Preševo camp: The rise of the hot potato system***

The Preševo camp was the largest and most developed of the camps on the Balkan route.<sup>9</sup> With a total staff of 150–200, it included four large heated tents (capacity > 600), dozens of cubicles and smaller tents, WiFi hotspots and charging stations, two medical clinics, emergency ambulances, a sanitation crew, clothing and food suppliers, mother–child rest areas, a post office, and hundreds of sleeping units. State-run vans and buses shuttle from the Macedonian border crossing, some 4 km away.

The camp became fully operational barely a year prior to the fieldwork, toward the end of 2014. Beginning as a “small booth next to a tree on an open field,” in the words of a UNHCR veteran, it slowly amassed resources and staff to construct the infrastructure over an abandoned tobacco factory. The complex is now “the biggest thing ever to happen [in Preševo],” a resident observes. Dozens of skilled and unskilled residents were employed at the center. The pinnacle of the flow was in the summer of 2015 when as many as 8,000 migrants were dumped into Preševo daily for a period of close to a week. On the other end of the spectrum, records indicated a single harsh winter day during the crisis when less than five migrants entered the camp grounds—“a miracle,” a UNHCR official told me. On average during the wave, 2,000 migrants entered daily. Staffers expressed amazement at how little effect harsh weather had on upsetting the steady rate.

Before the camp, transportation and shelter were handled by local criminals. A migrant entering Preševo in the earlier phase of the wave relied on vehicles controlled by smugglers based in Kosovo, Preševo, and other Albanian sites in the Balkans. A then-record 12,000 illegal border crossings were detected at the Serbian–Hungarian border in December 2014, 40% of which were from Kosovo via Preševo. Taxi drivers, buses, and vans associated with private firms—many of them transitioning from the extensive drug trade in the province—developed regular routes and procedures for taking migrants northward toward Hungary. Brazen advertisements flashed the services and prices of quasi-legal travel agencies in local newspapers. Criminal scouts and recruiters patrolled borders, drafting desperate customers.<sup>10</sup>

Preševo residents fondly remember these smuggling days before the government stepped in to erect the camp. A local resident (ethnic Albanian) recalled the European origins of the migrant onslaught:

Q: So, at least business is good here now?

A: Well, look out, to tell you honestly, it was best [in 2014] before these [Middle Eastern guys] started coming. When it was from Kosovo. It was *thousands, thousands* of them coming ... and staying a little, you know, staying for days. But there was no camp then, nothing. And they were glad, you know, Preševo is like home to them, the last home before Germany. But then all the swindlers, of course, were coming in. I'll drive you here, I'll take you there ... you give me some money, don't take the taxi, stay at my house, eat something, I will take you later in *my* car. They had no money. But when they left Preševo, they had even less money, you know.

Q: Did you have any business with them?

A: My friends did, they drove them to Hungary. [strokes chin, gesturing good money]

This not only revitalized Preševo as a transit point, it also established a land route routine from Preševo to Belgrade and then from the capital toward Subotica, a border town near Hungary, via smuggler taxis, vans, and trucks carrying cargo. Some trailblazers paid for their own taxis or unregistered drivers. In addition, many walked for tens of kilometers along highways and crossed into Hungary clandestinely on foot. In this earlier phase, the travel within Serbia was diffuse; there was no single itinerary from south to north. Urban centers were frequented, not bypassed. Migrants were visible.

As migrant volume increased, as Hungary erected a border fence, and as governments began establishing camps and transition points, three important changes took place. First, smugglers' vehicles and long-distance walking became unnecessary. Authorities provided buses and trains directly from the Preševo camp to Šid. Second, Hungary was replaced by Croatia and Slovenia as bridge countries; the Balkan route simply took a westward turn. Third, and most important, the transport within bridge countries began to bypass major cities and population centers; notably, migrants no longer went to Belgrade but directly from Serbia's southernmost to its northeastern most border.

In sum, as the camp became operational, a hot potato system emerged that sought to process migrants as quickly as possible, bypass all cities (especially Belgrade), and urgently deliver them across the Croatian border, pre-empting any integrative steps into the bridge society.<sup>11</sup>

Duration of stay in the country plummeted. Though precise estimates are difficult, the average registered migrant preceding the Preševo camp appears to have stayed for at least a week in the territory of the Republic of Serbia. Between the opening of the camp and the closure of the Balkan route in March 2016 (i.e., 700,000 out of ~950,000 migrants), the average migrant spent less than 72 h in Serbia (for the legal basis of the "intention-to-seek-asylum paper," see Bhabha et al., 2016, p. 128). With the closure, the hot potato system became impossible: Croatian and Hungarian border crossings were now blocked, buses and trains stopped running, transit sites between cities were dismantled, and camp staff was halved. Soon enough, the average stay of migrants (now barely trickling into Serbia) gradually grew to weeks and months. By the summer of 2017, 7,000 migrants remained in the country (thousands more estimated, unregistered); 40% of them were in the country for longer than 6 months, and as many as a fifth had been there for longer than a year.

The Preševo camp's formative policy regarding integration was to thwart it by bypassing urban centers in transporting migrants. A cheaper, €15 train option would arrive at the Croatian border in 11 h; a more frequent bus (€35) took 7 h. This replacement of smuggler-based mechanisms of migration with government-organized buses and trains effectively ended any possibility of urban integration. A handful of migrants went to Belgrade to wait for traveling companions stuck behind them on the route or meet contacts for resources or advice in the city. The overwhelming majority, however, found themselves at the Adaševci motel on the Šid highway or a temporary reception center on the Serbia–Croatia border on the very same day of entering Serbia.

The central impetus of the transit camp is: get the migrants off "our" territory as quickly as possible. "So long as they are here," one camp driver explained, "they are our problem. [Pointing arbitrarily at a migrant in queue for registration at the camp.] Who knows if this one is a terrorist? I cannot tell you that." Thus, the "merry-go-round" was thought to be, in the words of a registration officer, "The Greeks dump them on the Macedonians, the Macedonians dump them on us, and what are we, cretins? We dump them on the Croatians." Camp coordinators are single-mindedly oriented toward getting people fed, clothed, screened by doctors if necessary, and off camp grounds onto the bus or train as quickly as possible. Translators, guards, and volunteers are trained to patrol the camp in search of "clogging" in queues—and to hasten movement.

The alarming experience of 2015, when the volume of migrants peaked, was formative in creating such a mentality and institutional culture. Veteran camp administrators were unanimously terrified of being overwhelmed by numbers again. Panicked narratives of "mobs" and "floods" scarred veteran aid workers. Incoming amateur aid workers and volunteers (especially from western Europe) were initiated with horror stories of a hundred men waiting for a single lavatory for days. The camp coordinator—saturated in information from sister camps in Greece, Macedonia, and Croatia on a

weekly basis—was eager to point out how different things are “now” from “then.” The crisis period of the summer of 2015, when 6,000–8,000 migrants a day flooded in from Macedonia with less than a few hundred beds to accommodate them—was fresh in the minds of guards, translators, nurses, and administrators. They explained much of their job, their daily routine, and their jurisdiction, in relation to the basic defensive need to prevent such congestion.

If the Preševo migrant camp had a slogan, it would be “Keep it Moving!” Inscribed in staff perceptions, logistical arrangements, and totemic objects in the camps (such as a portrait of a drowned minor who was separated from his family when blockage at a Greek camp overwhelmed the staff) was the clear injunction: it is either the hot potato system or chaos and death.

### **Improvising identity**

For many migrants, this was also the first time they were registered since entering Europe. Registration included fingerprinting, photographing, a brief interrogation procedure (<15 min, unless anything was suspicious), and issuance of a transit document (in Cyrillic, incomprehensible to the migrants) that indicated name, origin, age, and travel companions. Practically none of the migrants had passports or other IDs, most because it was dangerous to have one issued in Syria, some because smugglers took them as collateral, others because they willfully threw them away to misrepresent themselves.

Because the Preševo camp’s reputation preceded it, migrants often arrived knowing that goods and services could be obtained there. Proper identification could guarantee access. The UNHCR and Red Cross offered clothing and winter boots (including children’s boots and coats). This was the first place to spend the night; beds, heating, sheltered tents, soup kitchens, and translators were scarcer in Greece and Macedonia. Finally, this was the only camp where migrants got a one-time payment of 5,000 dinars—roughly \$40–45 for every child, invalid, or elderly person in a single traveling group.

Indeed, this system was so attractive that abuses began. Younger people misrepresented themselves as elderly; strangers posed as married couples; migrants reregistered multiple times in the hopes of getting doubled funds. In one incident, a “rent-a-baby” market was operational for days among the Syrians. Namely, a family with a toddler, upon completing registration, rented their child for €20 to friends and countrymen waiting to pass registration to streamline the process and extract money. When a vigilant guard began to notice the same baby for the tenth time, he ended the swindle, railing at the “ungrateful cheats.” Needless to say, such transgressions only reinforced the camp staff’s impetus to hurry the deceitful hot potatoes along.

As the volume of migrants escalated in 2015, ethnicity/nationality became an identity marker of asylum-seeker status. True, genuine, deserving refugees were known by their country of origin. Those from “safe countries” were stigmatized as opportunistic imposters: uppity economic migrants with no real claim to asylum.<sup>12</sup> The distinction between an economic migrant and a refugee—contrary to professed state policies—was in practice determined through *perceived* national distinctions. Whatever the difference between economic migrant and asylum seeker was in international law, the practical, on-the-ground division was an improvised national categorization scheme: Syrians are legitimate asylum seekers, non-Syrians are not. Distinctions between the two were made, in order of frequency:

- By on-site *translators* who happen to be on shift. They typically made an improvised judgment on, for instance, whether the migrant is speaking Arabic with a Syrian or Pashtun accent. The decision was made within minutes, discretely conveyed to the guard or registration officer (sometimes with a mere nod or wag of the finger). My diligent translator who assisted with interviews confessed that even she, let alone the less-fluent colleague translators, was often incapable of correctly assessing dialects. She was, nevertheless, repeatedly asked to do so in full view of her superiors, in front of whom she did not dare appear linguistically incompetent.

- By *registration officers* tasked with filling out forms indicating origin country and nationality. They rely mostly on non-passport migrant documents filled out by their Greek and Macedonian counterparts; the Preševo registrators merely copy what is already recorded from a Macedonian form onto a Serbian form. Alternatively, they relied on the migrants' answers, which often sought to conceal non-Syrian and non-Kurdish roots.
- By *higher-level camp managers or coordinators*, who sometimes arbitrarily designate migrant nationality markers to expedite their settlement in a given tent, their speed of registration, their position in a queue for medical checkups, or simply to calm them down or shorten their interaction (typically questioning, yelling, demanding) with camp staff.

For obvious reasons, these three mechanisms of distinction led to frequent and consequential error. Kurds from Syria were regularly mistaken for Kurds from Iraq and vice versa. In one case, the translator mislabeled a traumatized Syrian man as an Afghan. In another striking instance, the UNHCR Belgrade office revealed what an expert described as a “You come as a Pakistani, you leave a Syrian” scheme. Namely, a handful of policemen registering migrants in late 2015—“out of pity, but also they *know* what it means to be a refugee”—were intentionally mislabeling migrants as Syrians on their transit documents. They were accidentally discovered to be doing this, to the embarrassment of their supervisors. “They came this far, just let them go” was the reported logic.<sup>13</sup> Finally, migrant interviews alone revealed over 20 instances of mistaken ethnic/national identity (all to the detriment of the migrants) before Preševo, in far more confused bureaucratic situations.

Ethno-national identification could even raise the stakes to coercion and violence. Dozens of countries were origin nations until October–November 2015, though Syrians were by far the most sizable category.<sup>14</sup> Afghans and Iraqis were, it was thought, masquerading as refugees and taking others' rightful places in Europe. Several policemen identify violent clashes among migrants as the most serious and difficult part of their jobs, whether because of what their colleagues had told them about earlier months or because they themselves had to intervene to break up fights.

The solution? Speed up the hot potatoes to ensure that the violence happens on someone else's jurisdiction. Elaborate, meandering queues snaking through camp grounds enabled guards to prevent clogging and to monitor any large gatherings inside tent areas. Fences between queues, entrances, and exits from cubicles and tents were arranged for crowd control; there was little opportunity for migrant-on-police clashes. On the other hand, migrant–migrant skirmishes are a different matter: “Forget terrorism,” one seasoned policeman recalled. “They're gonna kill each other right here, and I'm in between two fires.” Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghans were visibly self-segregated in all areas. As the other nationalities disappeared, camp areas were divided into three salient national groups. “The Arab brothers can stab each other,” an Albanian guard said, “but not on my terrain.”

In sum, urban integration of Syrians themselves never existed as a practical possibility. The hot potato system of the camp simply diverted migration away from cities, bypassed populated centers, and thwarted or penalized any longer-term stays outside government jurisdiction. The impetus to get rid of migrants was fueled by the constant confusion and improvisation about *who they are*. The identification struggles of the migrants only reinforced their designation as undesirable liars and imposters. Migrants themselves raced to leave Serbia as urgently as possible. Fearful of Germany's change of policy on (what were perceived as) open borders, migrants and officials alike were animated by the abysmal thought: “We are running out of time. It's now or never.”

### ***The aftermath: Urban integration as unintended consequence***

Upon the closure of the Balkan route, matters changed. The volume of migrants entering Serbia shrunk from thousands a day to a trickle of a few dozen a month; the average length of stay in the country grew from days to *years* as stranded migrants awaited unlikely authorization to proceed to Hungary and Croatia; more probable, deportation awaited them. The Preševo camp's staff was cut by half, and various smaller camps expanded in Belgrade, Subotica, and other urban centers. The ethno-

national categories were no longer those that the Preševo camp processed. After March 2016, the forsaken migrants in Serbia were primarily from Afghanistan, secondarily from Algeria, Somalia, Morocco, and Tunisia. They created dozens of impromptu, bottom-up camps outside state jurisdiction, immersing themselves into urban life.

Belgrade authorities repeatedly went through a cycle of neglect, suppression, and closure of the bottom-up migrant sites. First, they belatedly provided basic services to informal settlements, then erected barriers to disincentive or shrink them, and, finally, shut down unofficial sites and transferred migrants to formal, government-run centers out of the public eye.

Most notable, migrants from public parks around Belgrade's downtown train and bus stations were shifted to the Obrenovac and Krnjača asylum centers on the outskirts of the city. Initially, authorities had hoped that the convergence of (mostly women and children) migrants in the parks would be temporary; the migrants, however, began sleeping there regularly, using sections of the parks as lavatories, erecting tent-like structures, and working informally for surrounding cafes and other businesses. Belatedly, the city began to provide portable cubicle toilets, set up modest first aid medical and food booths, increase its security force, and direct NGO monitors to the area.

Then, these basic provisions would disappear and the city would turn to suppression: fences and other barriers were erected around all grassy park areas, local businesses and opportunists were warned not to interact with migrants, and policemen and other guards would patrol and restrict movement. Hysterical tabloid stories of migrants raping elderly women or stabbing each other for food scraps pressured authorities to remove the strangers (for analysis of media politicization of the migrant phenomenon, see Jevtović & Aracki, 2017; Kleut & Drašković, 2017; Perović, 2016). Though Belgrade residents bringing blankets and other donations would be redirected to Miksalište, migrants would be escorted or encouraged to visit the nearby police station for documents enabling entry into a formal camp on the city's outskirts. Loitering, urinating/defecating, and sleeping in public downtown had become both criminalized and logistically difficult.<sup>15</sup>

By mid-2017, five asylum centers and 18 migrant reception centers were being administered by the Serbian government, and downtown Belgrade was purged of visible impromptu sites. Due to confusion and fear on the part of migrants, as well as increased police control and occasional misdirection on the part of NGOs administering aid, many migrants hesitated or failed to transition from informal to formal sites. Thus, many lingered in new urban spaces—under bridges, at other public parks, near pre-existing Roma settlements—for days and weeks, restarting the cycle by creating new, budding informal sites that the government would seek to shut down. A testimony to the limits of the city's encampment drive is the fact that, in 2017, the number of housed migrants in Krnjača and Obrenovac ranged between 750 and 1,400. The rest of the ~10,000 registered and unregistered migrants remained scattered outside formal sites.

International aid flows have, likewise, been redirected from informal camps to government-regulated camps. Prior to the EU–Turkey deal, domestic and international NGOs could receive funds directly to administer to migrants, including in public spaces and unrecognized camps. Since then, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies and the Commissariat for Refugees have monopolized aid recipients and distribution—a source of repeated bureaucratic scuffles between the private humanitarian sector and the government. As of 2017, all EU donations and funds are exclusively directed at official camps.

The formal intention of both the Serbian government and its international partners is to deny integration and citizenship to these migrants through encampment. But the migrants undermined this throughout the capital—with their feet. In search of proximity to smugglers, local civilians' charity, opportunities for work (including petty theft), and other resources, migrants gravitated toward Belgrade's center. In search of public safety, population control, and an ability to “sweep under the rug” disturbances associated with homeless, stigmatized foreigners, the government tended to push migrants as far away from the urban center as possible.

In this dynamic, the government had a critical ally: the weather. Migrants sleeping outdoors during the three winters of 2015–2017 were at risk of severe colds, hypothermia, and worse. Often without winter coats or blankets, migrant families huddled at  $-15^{\circ}\text{C}$  under trees in “Afghani Park” or between parked cars in garages near Miksalište. Neighborhood solidarity networks distributed sweaters and caps and even organized a rotating schedule for hot showers at local private apartments. Taxi drivers charged fees for migrants to spend the night in their back seats, and one hostel operator proudly gave his eight bunk beds to migrant minors free of charge. Overall, however, moving into government camps was the obvious choice. Civilian encouragement of unregulated camps was clearly discouraged.<sup>16</sup>

Against the government’s encampment policy, however, economic and cultural integration in several Belgrade neighborhoods is clear and visible. Savamala, Dorćol, Zeleni Venac, and the city’s central street, Knez Mihajlova, have significantly reoriented their daily landscapes toward buying and selling migrant goods and services. Food, clothing, medicine, cigarettes, and refugee aid itself are traded at marketplaces, street corners, and taxi stands. Arabic and Farsi signs advertising to migrants are common. Accommodation offers, not to mention drugs and alcohol, are lucrative markets in urban spaces outside regular government supervision. Thus, the years-long system of quick passage bypassing local urban centers ended unceremoniously with unrecognized but actual integration of thousands of unwanted migrants into Serbian society.

## Discussion

Serbia’s experiment in a hot potato system based on a large, temporary transit camp for migrants in Preševo revealed effects (intended or otherwise) on urban integration. It is, naturally, only a fragment of broader migration industries with diverse research agendas addressing them (Cranston, Schapendonk, & Spaan, 2018), and the limited integration of the case at hand is a weak indicator of a budding “displacement economy” in Serbia (for analogies in Africa, see Hammar, 2014). Nevertheless, it sheds light on a rare, intense migratory episode and its aftermath.

The repressive and exclusionary nature of ostensibly “humanitarian” approaches to migrants has rightly been exposed (Cuttitta, 2017; Fassin, 2011; Walters, 2010). Far from being contradictory, humanitarianism and the securitization of migration can be perniciously symbiotic. Transit camps are an ideal window into this dynamic, because they host staff who often advocate contradictory purposes within the same jurisdiction and over the same migrant constituency. Furthermore, camps vary in their priorities; temporary transit camps strike a different balance of priorities from permanent ones. Furthermore, camps have divergent institutional imperatives and financial resources governing humanitarian and security concerns, not to mention contrary attitudes toward integration into the bridge or destination society. The incompatibility and tension among these imperatives are critical to our understanding of urban outcomes.

Even within the Preševo camp, contradictory purposes emerged, partly from different staff and bureaucratic jurisdictions. Some took the view that the essence of the camp is humanitarian. “This place,” one official said, “is here to save lives.” Medical aid, mother–child spaces, nutrition, etc., are thought to be essential. Yet the hot potato system compelled the migrants to only receive as much aid as necessary to proceed; they were not patients, nor was Preševo a nursery or hospital. Other camp administrators took a different view: “The purpose of this camp is to keep blood off the streets,” a security imperative. Screenings, antiterrorism measures, prevention of intramigrant violence, prevention of human trafficking, etc., were considered priorities. Yet, the hot potato system again undermined the purpose: registration was rushed, minimal, and superficial. Taken to its logical conclusion, security concerns treat migrants as prisoners—and Preševo was anything but a prison.

When asked about access to formal, regulated camps in Belgrade’s suburbs, officials likewise gave (indicatively) contradictory answers. Some said that migrants are permitted to sleep and eat there if and only if they formally declare their interest in seeking asylum in Serbia. Others qualified this to allow that women, children, and certain people with health emergencies are, on an ad hoc basis,

permitted to enter. But other informants insisted that, for humanitarian reasons, all are allowed to reside in the Obrenovac camp regardless of status. Still others—including long-term guards at the camps—witnessed a process of gradual weakening of original restrictions, with a short initial period of strict monitoring of whether migrants have filed for asylum followed by an open-door period since September 2016. Migrants themselves commonly report being expelled from “reception centers,” preferring affordable apartments or hostels in downtown Belgrade whenever possible.

This is paradigmatic of a broader dilemma: the migrants are present for years, but Serbia is officially committed to nonintegration. Camps provide services—medical, educational, even cultural—that contribute to integration, which is formally prohibited. Urban integration is criminalized, yet the encampment policy incentivizes extensive assimilation into the cities’ informal economy, housing, and culture. In a word: the migrants are *here* but forbidden to be.

Nowhere are the contradictory purposes of camps more apparent than in language education policies. From the perspective of a humanitarian or security imperative to socialize children (lest they turn to delinquency and drugs), migrant education is merely a “holding action.” Language classes would, ideally, teach the mother tongue (i.e., Farsi or Arabic). However, from the perspective that migrant education is preparatory for resettlement into a western European society—with Serbia as a bridge country—the purpose of the language classes is to equip migrants to integrate into their future host societies (i.e., to teach German, Scandinavian, English). Yet another option, however, is to implement language policies with the purpose of integrating migrants into the *current* host society—Serbia—with the pragmatic realization that they are here to stay for the foreseeable future.

Even as the last purpose—to integrate them into Serbian urban life—is vehemently denied by official Belgrade and all of its NGO and international partners, the language policy is in fact to teach them Serbian and to place them alongside locals. In 2017, some 700 migrant children have begun education in 12 of Belgrade’s elementary schools. Their classes are in Serbian, though their legal status remains temporary and unresolved and their long-term integration prospects are officially denied. Critics rightly wonder what the purpose of such education is, other than to provide a pleasant veneer of complying with international humanitarian law.

Simultaneously, economic integration is repressed, pushing migrants into the black and gray markets. Aside from monthly cash cards from a local charity organization and remittances sent through Western Union from abroad, migrants in Serbia have no legal sources of income. Aid workers complain that migrants sell the goods that are donated to them on illegal markets. Labor permits are practically nonexistent (barely a dozen migrants have been issued the right to work legally in Serbia), yet dozens are *de facto* employees of the state working as translators, volunteers, and guards in the camps. More generally, the government’s Office for Asylum cites 3,830 individuals who registered interest in gaining Serbian asylum; of those, barely 150 proceeded to submit the next step in the asylum request process. In total, less than 75 migrants were granted asylum in Serbia from 2014 to October 2017.

## Conclusion

This article has offered an analytic glimpse of the migrant urban integration dynamic via the unique role of transit camps in Serbia. The broader historical analysis has yet to be done, because the country—along with neighboring ones on the Balkan route—has layered institutional memories of how to manage, process, and integrate migrants. Fieldwork in the ex-Yugoslav republics invariably leads to ironies of forced migrations past. In Šid, at the Serbia–Croatia border, hundreds of thousands of Serbs fled the Croatian war from Krajina in the summer of 1995; 20 years later, the same border crossing saw a million Syrian, Afghan, and Iraqi migrants cross—in the opposite direction, westward. In Belgrade, the Krnjača reception center was established in 1992 to help those expelled from Bosnia (later Kosovo) resettle in Belgrade; decades later, the very same site services Middle Eastern migrants instead of Yugoslav ones. Both migrant waves faced resistance to local integration by the host society, coupled with ideologies of magnanimity, national solidarity, and

humanitarianism. This article has argued that the role of the transit camp is central to these outcomes.

The unintended urban integration of migrants stranded in bridge societies poses deadly dilemmas. On the one hand, they cannot integrate further because of official obstruction; on the other hand, they are connected enough to local communities to engage in tremendously risky (even deadly) attempts to leave the bridge country. This was vividly illustrated in a recent daring feat of an unaccompanied child. On December 27, 2017, an underaged migrant was discovered under a bus going from Belgrade to Zagreb, Croatia (~400 km). Desperate to enter EU territory, he had been clinging for *over 5 hours* by his bare hands and legs to the metal tubing connecting the back wheels of the bus. When passengers heard thumping, they stopped the bus and discovered him covered in dirt, “shivering, in a state of shock.” The bus driver notes in a report: “It’s a miracle he’s alive.”<sup>17</sup> As of this writing, this boy’s fate is unknown.

Analysts and policymakers alike may do well to consider the effects of encampment on the desperation and cruelty that migrants like this endure.

## Notes

1. Ager and Strang (2008) define four domains of refugee integration, setting conceptual benchmarks for measuring success. In this article, I define urban integration in a narrow, modest sense referring only to one of those domains: “social connection” in urban settings. This confined definition of urban integration sets a very low threshold for integration. I readily concede that such integration is a glaring failure when the other three domains (citizenship, language/culture, and achievement/access) are considered. Nevertheless, I will argue that migrants have undergone urban integration in this narrow sense—modest, insufficient, and partial though it was. Furthermore, I show that this process was an unintended consequence of Serbia’s official hot potato policy. It occurred *despite* official efforts against integration. Note, finally, that citizenship and urban integration do not presume each other: Jordan gave citizenship to many Palestinian refugees who remain significantly unintegrated, and many Afghans and Iraqis have been, I found, partially integrated into Serbian schools, communities, and urban economies without citizenship.
2. The suggestion that “the slum” “belongs” whereas the refugee camp is in some sort of vertigo of simultaneity is intriguing. Nonmigrant Roma settlements throughout Europe, to name only a single example, demonstrate that all of the obscure features attributed to refugee camps here are equally applicable to slums. Furthermore, what constitutes being “part of the story of the city” in Ramadan’s (2013) view is mysterious. Urban sociologists and ethnographers of slums and ghettos hardly lend support to such “stories” (see Duneier, 2016).
3. I sketch a pair of continua for our purposes: the level of *regulation* of a camp (highly regulated vs. unregulated) and the level of *permanence* of a camp (short- vs. long-term). These are, naturally, matters of degree and do not correspond neatly to legal regimes. As a rough approximation, I categorize Za’atari and Dadaab as highly regulated and permanent camps, as was Calais in France. This is an idealization, of course, because some camps (like Za’atari) are UNHCR-administered sites, whereas others (like Calais) are not. To contextualize the Preševo camp, we merely need to distinguish highly regulated permanent camps in destination societies from highly regulated temporary camps in bridge societies.
4. To put matters into proportion: Turkey has as many as 22 government-run refugee camps across 10 urban centers. This is in addition to an entire ecology of semipermanent, unofficial bottom-up camps between and around these towns and cities.
5. I use *flow*, *wave*, and *stream* interchangeably to refer to the processes of migration, acknowledging the insidious political implications of metaphors like *flood* and *tsunami*—unfortunately common. Scholarly terminology for forced migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees has rightly diverged from legal definitions for these categories (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Loescher, Long, & Sigona, 2014). To simplify, I use *migrant* throughout to refer to subjects of this study (not *refugees*, *forced migrants*, *irregular migrants*, *economic migrants*, or *asylum seekers*), without prejudging their legal status. Serbia, like most bridge countries on the Balkan route, eventually followed Europe’s lead in a discriminatory policy of designating legitimate asylum seekers as those from “unsafe countries” (Syria) and economic migrants as those from “safe countries” (Afghanistan and Iraq). See Results section on “Improvising Identity” for how this distinction was implemented in practice. For a survey of “refugee labeling” pitfalls, see Zetter (2007).
6. The Balkan route consists—in sequence of movement from Turkey—of Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia. These are *bridge societies*, largely unintended as destinations by migrants and with governments that primarily opted for transporting the migrants onward to Austria, Germany, Scandinavia, etc., instead of integrating them. Among the bridge countries, Serbia hosted the most-staffed and most infrastructurally

- developed camp on the entire route. For the Western Balkan route and the EU-intended role of bridge societies (Serbia and Kosovo in particular), see Collantes-Celador and Juncos (2012). The only camp bordering two non-EU, non-Schengen states, the Preševo camp was responsible for the overwhelming majority of refugees transferred to western and northern Europe. Serbia is a remarkable case—possibly unprecedented in history—of such massive migration across such a small territory with such little urban integration.
7. Ethnography in the Preševo center was part of a wider fieldwork effort in all major refugee sites (permanent, semipermanent, and transit; regulated, semiregulated, and impromptu) on the Balkan route, conducted by a research team headed by the author in Jordan, Turkey, Greece, Serbia, and Germany. For broader context and methodology in Serbia compared to other Balkan Route countries, see Mandić and Simpson (2017).
  8. Key informants from Miksalište represented ATINA Srbija, the Commissariat for Refugees, the Ministry of Interior, *Politika* and *Danas* newspapers, the Initiative for Development and Cooperation, UNHCR's Belgrade office, Oxfam Serbia, the Danish Refugee Council, and the International Organization for Migration.
  9. Strikingly, even after the closing of the route in March 2016, the Greek camps—where unprecedented clogging has occurred—remain less developed than Preševo was in 2015: the tents are nonheated and without floors, medical clinics are much less staffed, and overall spaces (cubicles, rest areas, lavatories, children's playrooms) are pitiful compared to conditions in Preševo. The author would argue that this is precisely because these camps have been transformed from transit to permanent migrant sites.
  10. Migrant smuggling has been widely misperceived as unequivocally sinister, exploitative, and abusive. But analysts have correctly emphasized the nuanced nature of the smuggler-migrant relationship among Syrians (Achilli, 2018; Mandić, 2017), West Africans (Maher, 2018), and others (Tinti & Reitano, 2017). Legal evaluations of "humanitarian smuggling" have raised serious questions about Europe's blanket condemnation of refugee smuggling (Landry, 2016).
  11. Similar transit-to-containment trajectories have occurred throughout the Balkan route, particularly on Greek islands such as Moria.
  12. For a conservative review of the problematic distinction in law and morality, see Gibney (2004). For revealing evidence on differences between refugees and economic migrants in assimilation outcomes, see Cortes (2004).
  13. The expert quoted made clear how difficult and uncomfortable this revelation was to the UNHCR Office: it was concealed for months, and even during our interview she wondered, "Have we gone on record with this? I don't think we went on record. But anyway, don't quote me on that." I assured her that publication was far from immediate, and she added, "But, realistically, can you blame them?"
  14. The head coordinator of the camp flashed to the author the full spreadsheet of registered visitors through the camp. He refused to allow me to take a photo of the graph or to copy the file, explicitly indicating that "I am not supposed to show you this, but. ..." I clearly recall from memory that the spreadsheet—when scrolled horizontally from left to right—took up more than four full computer screens. By rough estimate, there were at least 50 separate source countries, including marginal sub-Saharan African states and nations over 5,000 km away. The author remembers glimpsing a single migrant registered from Botswana and another lone "1" in a column for Mongolia.
  15. An additional pressure to relocate migrants from informal to formal camps came from the ongoing, pre-existing realization of the Belgrade Waterfront: a massive commercial construction project and signature promise of both city and national authorities. The Vučić administration—and the Siniša Mali mayorship—staked much of their political capital in seeing the United Arab Emirates-funded project proceed quickly, against considerable resistance from downtown Belgrade residents. The proposed erection of massive luxury apartment complexes, shopping malls, and tourist walkways along the Danube happened to overlap with most informal, bottom-up refugee camps from 2014 to early 2016. In urban circles, conspiracy theories abound that the refugees are cynically used as pawns to further the corrupt construction project, which will indeed transform Belgrade's urban landscape. In reality, expert testimonies suggest that Belgrade Waterfront was a coincidental, useful alibi to dislodge impromptu refugee settlements, relocate migrants, and pursue encampment in the suburbs.
  16. One informant—a middle-class, 39-year-old woman from Belgrade's downtown Dorćol neighborhood—recalls changing her refugee aid work habits. Initially, she collected food, clothing, children's toys, and hygienic products from neighbors and co-workers and distributed them weekly at informal camps around the city's downtown area. "I stopped," she recalls,
 

when it became clear that the new policy is no aid, no food outside the [official] camps. Police started arresting *me* for bringing donations. No more staying outside, and since I was helping them stay outside, [guards] told me to stop.
  17. See *Politika* (2017). Original: "Дете путовало од Београда до Загреба држећи се за осовину испод аутобуса."

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