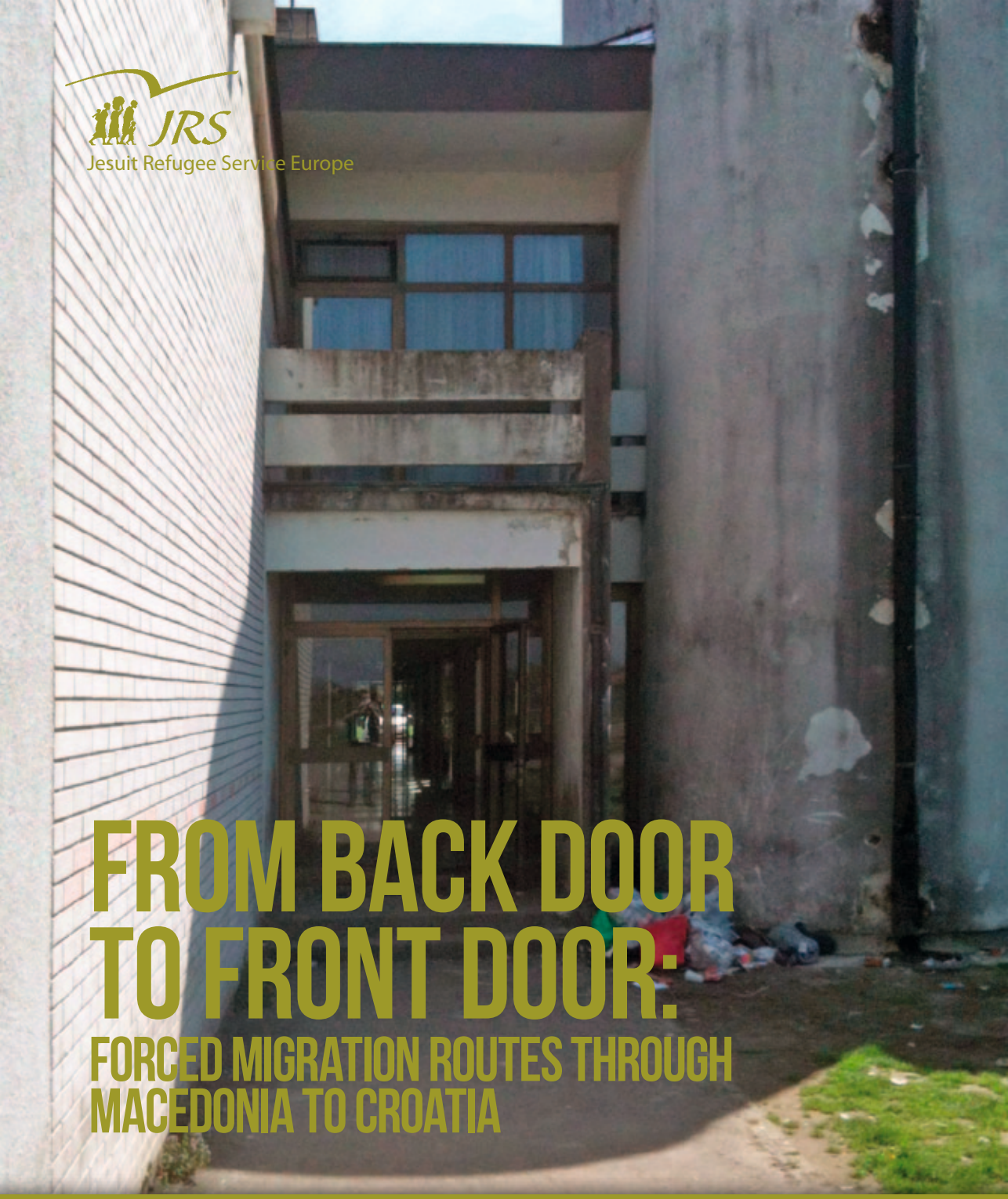

JRS
Jesuit Refugee Service Europe

FROM BACK DOOR TO FRONT DOOR:

FORCED MIGRATION ROUTES THROUGH MACEDONIA TO CROATIA

June 2013

Research by Benedict Coleridge

Based on interviews with forced migrants in Zagreb, Croatia, Skopje and Lojane, Macedonia

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The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic organisation established in 1980 by Fr Pedro Arrupe SJ. Its mission is to accompany, serve and defend the cause of forcibly displaced people.

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Back and cover photo: The front door to the Kutina reception centre for asylum seekers and migrants in Croatia. © JRS Europe

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INTRODUCTION

For centuries the Balkans region has been a crossroads between different cultural worlds - a corridor along which goods, armies and migrants have travelled between the eastern world and Europe. It is a region with a deeply complex history of inter-cultural and inter-ethnic relations, which are still playing out today as the region re-forms itself in the wake of the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. At the same time, the Balkans has never relinquished its role as a highway, a transit route to Europe and it continues to play this role in a contemporary context.

Across Europe's periphery, from Central Asia to Northern Africa, human rights violations, violence and conflict continue to force large numbers of people to leave their homes and seek some form of protection and a new life in European countries. In recent years it has been possible to identify an emerging trend – as other routes to Europe have become more difficult, the Western Balkans has seen an increase in the number of forced migrants transiting the region in order to reach EU countries to claim asylum. And with Croatia's accession to the European Union on 1 July 2013, the numbers of migrants transiting through the Balkans are likely to rise further.

The journey that forced migrants take across the Balkans involves a great variety of hazards and dangers, and it forms only one part of a much larger journey from countries like Afghanistan and Iran. In Afghanistan the route to Europe via Turkey and the Balkans has come to be labelled the 'Torah Larah', or the 'Black Way', in light of the terrible difficulties it involves, including frostbite, kidnapping, drowning at sea or suffering violence.[1] Whereas it may take twelve hours to drive from Skopje to Zagreb, a forced migrant will spend months travelling on foot through a mountainous landscape with very little food.

This report examines the experiences of forced migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and in Croatia, two countries experiencing different political and societal circumstances but also facing common challenges. Both of these countries form part of the Balkans migration route to Europe; both are attempting to deal with complex border control and migration issues while also managing ever closer relations with the European Union and struggling to address domestic economic stagnation.

Within the mixed migration flows that pass through the Balkans there are a wide variety of migrant profiles, from economic migrants to asylum seekers and refugees. Yet despite their various backgrounds, forced migrants often share many experiences in common: they face the same challenges with regard

[1] See Foreign Affairs, "On the Black Way", available at: http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139390/jere-van-dyk/on-the-black-way

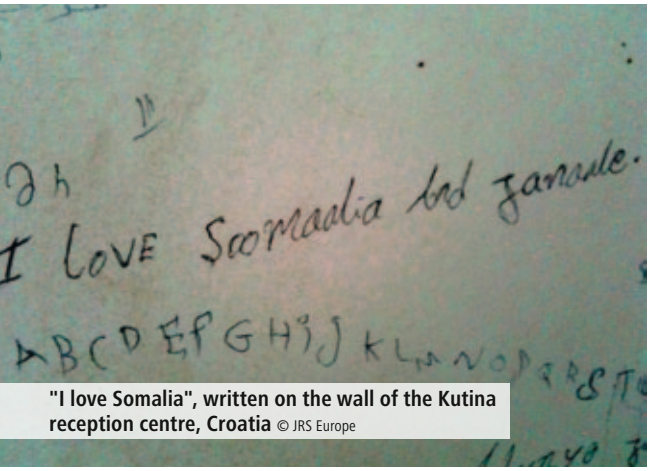
JRS interviewed over 30 migrants in Croatia and Macedonia

to crossing borders, transiting to their country of destination safely and resolving their legal status once there. These are the experiences that JRS report hopes to illuminate.

The report is based on interviews with forced migrants, asylum seekers and refugees whom JRS encountered in Macedonia and Croatia. JRS was able to interview residents inside the reception centres and forced migrants transiting these two countries (notably however, in both Macedonia and Croatia, JRS was unable to secure access to the closed detention centres.) JRS interviewed over 30 forced migrants in the two countries of interest; in Macedonia in the reception centre at Vizbegovo and in the village of Lojane on the Serbian border, and in the Croatian reception centres at Kutina and Porin in Zagreb. JRS also held meetings with government officials and NGO representatives in both countries.

The interviews that JRS conducted were designed to identify the key challenges faced by forced migrants in transiting the Balkans to seek asylum in Europe: what caused them to leave their homes, how did they experience the journey to the Balkans (or to other Balkan countries in the case of refugees from Kosovo), and how they encountered the Macedonian and Croatian border control and asylum systems.

Current concerns with forced migration through the Balkans are set in the context of a history of mass people movement over the last two decades. As a result of the conflicts of the 1990s, hundreds of thousands of people were displaced throughout the Balkans region.



"I love Somalia", written on the wall of the Kutina reception centre, Croatia © JRS Europe

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 300,000 people remain displaced, in exile from their homelands.[2] However a transition is taking place in the region: whereas regional governments had hitherto been familiar with the challenge of mass internal displacement caused by conflict, now they are dealing with migrants from outside their region with various reasons for transiting their territory. So in Croatia the number of irregular border crossings from outside the region has increased from 2,193 in 2011 to 5,066 in 2012.[3]

JRS holds the view that attending to the following testimonies and the needs they raise is important in helping to discern the areas in which the governments concerned (assisted by the EU) might make improvements to their asylum procedures. Both Croatia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia are parties to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and to its 1967 protocol, and both have introduced asylum laws in accordance with these. Additionally, Croatia is obliged to fully implement all of the EU's asylum laws. The question is whether these legal frameworks have been properly implemented and where standards need to be raised.

This report follows a number of other reports published by JRS drawing attention to the plight of forced migrants travelling to the European Union. These reports have highlighted the consequences for these migrants of a European approach to border control that shifts responsibility for protection of asylum seekers to countries on the European periphery.

JRS Europe is grateful to the following institutions and people who supported and enabled this research: JRS Macedonia, UNHCR Macedonia, MAARI, JRS Croatia, the Croatian Jesuit Province, the Croatian Law Centre, Dejan Strakovski, Josip Divkovic and Ljube Sholievski.

JRS Europe warmly thanks all of the people who agreed to be interviewed and shared their experiences with us.

The names of the people whose testimonies are featured in this report have been changed to protect their privacy.

[2] See UNHCR, 2013 UNHCR regional operations profile - South-Eastern Europe. Available at http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48d8f6.html

[3] UNHCR Croatia Briefing Note: Asylum Migration and Statelessness, 2.

PHOTOGRAPH REMOVED AT THE REQUEST OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

MACEDONIA

Alone and on foot, Emmanuel, 21, fled Nigeria and travelled to Libya, arriving in mid-2011. In Libya he caught a boat from Benghazi which took him across the Mediterranean, to Turkey. The boat journey was extremely difficult – 25 people crowded onto a small and unstable fishing boat. They endured three days without food and only minimal water: "it was very hard; we were cold and I was starving".

Emmanuel subsequently spent two weeks in Turkey, with a local church organising accommodation for him. He then paid smugglers €1800 to transport him from Turkey to Macedonia. Alongside eight others he was smuggled in the back of a truck, cramped amidst the cargo of electricity generators it was carrying. As with the sea journey he endured two days without food and little water, remaining cramped in darkness. Once across the Greek border he was set down and told to travel to Skopje to hand himself into the police. After walking to Skopje and gaining information from local residents, he made his way to the Shutka district, where the reception centre is located, and handed himself into police. It was November 2012. The police transferred Emmanuel immediately to the open reception centre at Vizbegovo where his details were registered along with his claim for asylum in Macedonia.

Emmanuel is one of many so called 'new asylum seekers', forced migrants arriving in Macedonia from countries outside the Balkans and Europe. This term is used to distinguish them from those asylum seekers and refugees from within the region who were displaced during the conflicts of the 1990s. As the countries of the EU-27 have become more difficult to reach to claim asylum,

the phenomenon of transit migration through Macedonia has become more pronounced. Forced migrants travelling from Iran, Afghanistan, Nigeria and other countries arrive in Macedonia via Turkey and Greece, hoping to continue on through the Balkans towards EU borders. Many also get stuck in Macedonia due to lack of resources or ill health. As of 2012 Macedonia was home to over a thousand (1,154) stateless persons. It also accommodated 389 asylum seekers, although this number fluctuates significantly given Macedonia's position as a country of transit.[4]

REASONS FOR FLEEING

People decide to leave their homes to seek asylum for a wide variety of reasons – forced migration flows are produced by a great variety of causes and circumstances, from political and religious violence or oppression to poor economic conditions.

Violence, often produced by political or sectarian conflict is one of the central causes for people to seek asylum in Europe. Violence of varying kinds is endemic across key source regions for forced migrants, from Nigeria to Afghanistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Area of Pakistan (FATA).

Emmanuel is an enthusiastic football player. And he has reason to be enthusiastic about the game – when he was 19, football literally saved his life. His father was a pastor in Nigeria and a respected man in the locality. One day Emmanuel went out to play football with friends and when he arrived home later that afternoon his house had been burnt to the ground, his family incinerated with it. A group of men associated with the Islamist Boko Haram movement had come without warning to kill his father and everyone close to him. Throughout 2011 and 2012 the frequency and violence of Boko Haram attacks had escalated and Emmanuel's family were amongst the victims.

Latif's story follows a similar pattern. He ran a small farm in a village outside Lahore, Pakistan, but was forced to leave due to political violence. He was shot twice, in the arm and the cheek, by a member of a local political organisation and upon recovery fled Pakistan for Iran. Like Emmanuel, he eventually made his way via Turkey to Macedonia.

Rashid left Afghanistan after the Taliban killed his father and uncle in 1994. His family travelled to Peshawar in the Federally Administered Tribal Region of Pakistan. Rashid lived there until 2011, however life became exceedingly difficult. He faced hostility from the local population who threatened him with violence and tried to extort money from him. Along with the regular bombings and mass violence occurring in Peshawar, the situation grew increasingly difficult. Eventually the threats made against him

[4] All numbers according to UNHCR, 2013 UNHCR regional operations profile - South-Eastern Europe. Available at http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48d8f6.html.

became concerning enough for him to leave his remaining family and embark on the hazardous journey to Europe.

Franck, of Ivory Coast, fled when his father was murdered by a local gang who had been trying to extort money from him. Having received threats and fearing for his life Franck travelled to Liberia and then to Turkey by ship. Like those interviewees mentioned above, the journey proved extremely hazardous.

A TRAUMATIC JOURNEY

The journey from Central Asia or Africa to Europe is long and extremely hard, with the possibility of exploitation, suffering and death along the way. The great majority of those interviewed for this report had experienced violence and trauma of some kind on their way from their countries of origin to Macedonia.

Rashid's journey illustrates these dangers. He travelled the 'Torah Larah', the Black Way, from Pakistan to Macedonia. In Peshawar in Pakistan, Rashid paid a Pakistani man $6000 (€4507) for transportation to Greece. He travelled by foot to Quetta city, in Balochistan province, from where he took a bus to Zahedan in Iran, and then made his way across Iran by bus to the Iranian/Turkish border. He crossed the border on foot, walking for 14 hours through the mountains. From there he travelled to Istanbul and then to Izmir, a journey that involved hitch-hiking, bus travel and another 24 hours continuous walking. In Izmir he boarded a small boat along with 22 other people. The boat was overcrowded and unstable, and half-way into the journey to Greece the engine caught fire, threatening to burn the vessel. The crew radioed for help from the Greek coast-guard who rescued the stranded vessel and transported its passengers first to Samos and then to Athens.

The Macedonian-Serbian border

A VARIETY OF ROUTES

The rest of Rashid's story is instructive in that it demonstrates the variety of routes that migrants take on their way to EU countries. Although we might speak of a 'Balkans route to Europe', this language can be deceptive: it implies a single route taken by migrants across the region. At one level this is accurate – there are indeed well recognised routes through the region which many of those interviewed by JRS in Macedonia and Croatia had taken. The Western Balkans route that most forced migrants take involves travelling via Turkey and Greece and then through Macedonia north to Serbia or Kosovo, then onward to Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia. Stretching back from Croatia to Greece is a long channel of information, passed by word of mouth, exchanged in reception centres and villages, about the most advantageous routes to take. However at the same time the variety of people's circumstances and needs, and the unforeseen events that occur on the hazardous journey, mean that there are a great variety of means employed and routes taken to arrive in Europe.

Unlike Emmanuel, Rashid set out with the idea of travelling to the EU very clearly established in his mind. He wanted ideally to travel to Austria and envisioned doing so via Italy. After spending four months in Athens, he boarded another small boat and travelled from Athens to Italy. However in Italy he was promptly apprehended by Italian police and subsequently returned to Greece. In light of this he decided to travel overland to Macedonia. Rashid walked to the Macedonian border and then hid himself in the undercarriage of a truck which was crossing the border. He clung to the engine of the truck, an extremely dangerous position, as it drove across the border. Once across he caught a bus to the village of Lojane on the Serbian border where he was apprehended by Macedonian police and returned to Skopje.

Rashid travelled via Serbia to Hungary and even managed to reach Denmark and France at one stage. Both times he was returned to Hungary. However according to Rashid, the situation for asylum seekers in Hungary is "very bad, the accommodation building there is very old, the food they give to the refugees is terrible – it is impossible to stay there for long." Rashid was then returned to Macedonia under their readmission agreement with the EU after he had absconded from the reception centre and tried to leave Hungary several times. So he found himself again in the reception centre in Skopje. This places Rashid in an impossible situation, but one familiar to forced migrants around Europe's periphery. He is living in very difficult conditions in the reception centre in Skopje and sees no prospect of his being granted refugee status in Macedonia. Yet if he attempts to claim asylum in a European country he is likely to be returned to Macedonia immediately. He is held fast, unable to move forward or back with any reasonable prospect of securing a stable future.

Nevertheless Rashid refuses to give up:

"What else can I do? I have to keep going forward; I will try again and again." He still wants to travel to France and given the length of the asylum procedure in Macedonia and the uncertainty about his claim, he sees no reason not to make another attempt to enter the EU. The only obstacle is accruing enough money to be able to pay for the journey.

Franck's journey from Ivory Coast was similarly difficult. He travelled from Liberia to Turkey by ship and then from Turkey to Athens. He stayed in Greece for nine months, in Ermione, with a group of 16 other men from West African countries. In Ermione they lived in appalling conditions, sleeping in cardboard boxes: "We lived a very bad life there…we used to go and look for food in the garbage bins." Furthermore, they had several negative encounters with locals. One local man agreed to pay them to do some labour for him, but refused to pay them when they had done the work and, in response to their protests, he brought out a gun and shot several of their group.

After this incident they decided to leave Greece as soon as possible. Franck took the train, along with seven others, from Ermione to Macedonia and then travelled on foot to Lojane on the Serbian border.

THE MIGRANT 'BLACK HOLE' IN LOJANE

For most migrants, including asylum seekers, Macedonia is a country of transit rather than a final destination. The fact that Macedonian authorities have not granted any asylum claims in 2011

Lojane central square, situated approximately 45km northeast of Skopje, about 600m from the Serbian border. © JRS Europe

reinforces this trend, as do the generally poor conditions in the reception centre at Vizbegovo [5]. Some migrants attempt to pass through Macedonia without spending any time there – Rashid being a case in point. He travelled straight to the Macedonian/Serbian border without spending time in Skopje. On the other hand, many migrants choose to spend some months in Macedonia – perhaps even hoping to gain asylum there – before continuing their journey towards EU borders.

One of the most used points of departure from Macedonia is the village of Lojane, north of Skopje near the Serbian border. Lojane is a small ethnic Albanian village located in the foothills about 600 metres from the border. The dirt road leads up from the village to the border, which is marked by the transition to a paved asphalt road. The border itself is unguarded on the Macedonian side but just across the border a Serbian border police post guards the road. As such, most migrants wait for nightfall before crossing the mountainous border on foot.

Most migrants hear about Lojane by word of mouth or through the internet; hundreds can be staying in the village at any one time. Many plan to travel through Serbia on foot to Hungary and then from Hungary to Austria. They understand it is a dangerous journey, but feel that once they arrive in Austria, they say that "everything will work out".

The presence of the migrants in Lojane is obvious – groups of young men can be seen wandering through the surrounding fields or in the streets of the village. They are comfortable relating to the locals who appeared to know some of them by name and be on relatively good terms with them. Franck stayed for several weeks in Lojane, living with a group of other men in an abandoned house, paying rent to the locals. He claims that the locals were friendly and did not mistreat him.

The Macedonian authorities are not visibly present and it appears that the only authority in the locality is the village head man, with whom JRS spoke. The head man has contacts with the police and claims that he is able to call on them in case of misbehaviour on the part of the migrants.

However many also become stranded in Lojane due to lack of money. The migrants live in very difficult conditions without protection from the cold in the winter. They either pay rent to the locals – approximately €10 per day – or camp out in the surrounding bushes. In this way the situation is not entirely an adverse one for the local population: as long as there is no real disruption of village life then the influx of migrants can be a source of extra income for the residents.

Most of the migrants JRS encountered in Lojane were poorly clad and many were experiencing flu or cold symptoms, and in

[5] Smilevska, M (2012). Trends in asylum-seeking in light of Macedonia's accession processes in the European Union, p.3

some cases early stages of frostbite. One Pakistani man had spent seven weeks in Lojane and was running out of money, but he was too ill to continue his journey and did not want to return to the reception centre in Skopje.

And there are other dangers waiting for some migrants on the road through Lojane. Latif, a resident of the reception centre in Skopje, spoke to JRS about his being kidnapped by a group of Afghans nearby Lojane and held for several days tied to a chair with wire. His kidnappers, who were aware of him through contacts from Pakistan, had threatened to kill him unless he paid them €5,000. "They told me to call my family in Pakistan, that unless they sent the money they would slit my throat. But one night they got drunk and I escaped through a window, but the wire cut my wrists and I was bleeding", he said.

ASYLUM SYSTEM IN MACEDONIA

THE RECEPTION CENTRE AT VIZBEGOVO

For those who do stay and claim asylum in Macedonia, the process can be long and uncertain. And it involves living in difficult material conditions in Macedonia's reception centre at Vizbegovo. The reception centre was opened in June 2008. Early photographs and reports indicate that the centre was initially in good condition, and for some time was kept clean and well maintained. A European

PHOTOGRAPH REMOVED AT THE REQUEST OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

PHOTOGRAPH REMOVED AT THE REQUEST OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

Commission report published in 2011 found that while certain services to the reception centre residents were lacking, living conditions in the centre were "satisfactory".[6]

By March 2013 however, conditions in the centre had changed dramatically. The centre employs one cleaner who rarely cleans the residential building. Residents are charged with keeping their own rooms clean, but the public areas are very dirty and waste management procedures are clearly inadequate.

The Macedonian government relies on NGOs to work in the centre and operate some of its services. JRS, for instance, funds and operates the reception centre's medical facility as well as the centre's kindergarten for children in residence. Similarly the UNHCR provides funding for equipment, most recently industrial washing machines. However, there appears to be some degree of administrative dysfunction when deploying these donated resources. When JRS visited the centre, the washing machines were still unwrapped and unused three months after being provided.

The centre is divided into two main buildings: an administrative facility with office space for centre employees and with the medical centre, and a two-storey residential facility. While the administrative facility is kept clean, the residential facility is extremely dirty, with garbage piling up in the corridors and, at the time of visiting, with dog faeces on the floor in the entrance lobby.

There appears to be very little organisation in the residential facility, with young and potentially vulnerable

[6] See European Commission, "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2011 Progress Report", chapter 4.24, available at: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2011/package/mk_rapport_2011_en.pdf

children living in very close proximity to the other residents. Furthermore, room space is unequally allocated. In some cases residents live three or four people to a room, whereas other residents have large rooms to themselves. This seems to imply that room space is not allocated systematically but instead is bartered for by residents or secured by other means.

Due to overcrowding in some rooms and a general lack of cleaning services, the conditions in many of the residential rooms are very unhygienic. This leads to residents developing various minor health problems - many of the residents interviewed complained of skin diseases as a result of these conditions. Joel, for example, had rashes on his upper body and hands, which he says began as soon as he moved into the centre. He attributes them to poor diet and an unclean sleeping environment.

Emmanuel's subsequent experience of living in the centre at Vizbegovo highlights some of the challenges facing the centre's administration and the relevant Macedonian government ministries. Over the ensuing months he claims to have had no further updates about his asylum claim or any regular on-going legal advice. And his is not an isolated case. Several of the residents in the centre whom JRS interviewed had had no meetings with lawyers since their arrival. Joel, for example, had been there for three months and had no further information on his claim since his initial briefing. Furthermore, as of mid-March 2013, after five months of residing in the centre, Emmanuel had received no proper identification documents. The centre had issued him with a slip of paper stating his name and place of residence but this temporary documentation did not prevent difficulties with Macedonian police - Emmanuel referred to 'harassment' from the police when he left the centre during the daytime due to this lack of proper identity documents.

This also restricted his ability to find some meaningful activity to engage in while waiting for further news about his asylum claim. Emmanuel is keen to join a local football team, but without some form of documentation this is impossible. His lack of proper documentation is therefore a source of great frustration and restricts his daily activities.

Furthermore, several interviewees had very strong concerns about what they saw as a lack of security in the centre. Rashid, from Afghanistan, referred to outbreaks of violence in the residential unit which, he felt, were largely ignored by the centre's administration. "No one hears us…it's like talking to a wall", he said.

The night before JRS interviewed Rashid there was a fight between two groups of residents which had left blood on the floor of one room. Rashid claimed that this kind of fighting occurred fairly regularly without intervention from the centre's security guards.

The threat of violence stems not only from internal discord but also from

the outside. Emmanuel and one other interviewee, for example, claimed to have received threats from local inhabitants, one of whom is rumoured to run a kidnapping and human trafficking organisation. Emmanuel is therefore concerned that the lax security at the centre makes him vulnerable to violence or kidnapping.

Moreover, the lack of security in the residential facility means that women can be particularly vulnerable. Oni, a young asylum seeker from Nigeria, referred to her experience of sexual harassment when she first arrived at the reception centre: men would come to look at her while she used the toilet or the shower. Eventually she became friends with Emmanuel who now shares a room with her and whom she views as a protector.

This kind of environment also has implications for the children living in the centre. When JRS visited the centre, Alexa from Kazakhstan was living in a small room along with three young girls, her two daughters and another child. It was apparent that the centre's open spaces were unsafe or unfit for children and that she had therefore tried to create a separate and secure space for them. However the room was unclean and poorly ventilated.

In this area JRS Macedonia has been able to assist by funding and running a childcare facility in the reception centre. The facility is in a separate part of the building from the residential spaces and is a clean, safe space for children to spend time while supervised by a JRS staff member.

POOR DIET

Asylum seekers living in the Vizbegovo reception centre suffer from a restricted diet. Almost all of those interviewed felt that the food – generally a form of soup – was inadequate and the diet not varied enough to meet their basic nutritional needs. Furthermore, no food was supplied to the residents on weekends, with many of them going hungry or relying on NGOs to provide them with food over the weekend period. One resident's diet consisted of this thin soup and occasionally some bread with Nutella. He was regularly sick and almost never ate fruit: "I have no energy, the food is not good, always the same."

IMPORTANT MEDICAL TREATMENT UNAVAILABLE

Basic medical treatment in the centre is offered by a small facility sponsored and operated by JRS in partnership with the Macedonian authorities. This centre is designed to meet basic medical needs and is equipped accordingly. However,

some residents in the Vizbegovo reception centre have more serious medical needs that the Macedonian authorities have been unable to meet. For example, Latif, from Pakistan, was shot twice prior to fleeing his home. The bullets are still lodged in his body, one in his cheek and the other in his forearm. These injuries require a surgical operation to remove the bullets, something which has so far been unavailable to him. He is therefore left in pain and with potentially dangerous wounds that have not been able to heal properly.

LACK OF LEGAL ADVICE OR GENERAL INFORMATION

In addition to this difficult physical environment, asylum seekers in Macedonia struggle to gain any sense of their status or the prospects of their asylum claims. Legal advice to the residents of the reception centre is nominally provided by the Macedonian Young Lawyers Association (MYLA), who are backed by UNHCR. When migrants arrive at the centre an initial consultation is held during which their details and asylum claim are registered. The MYLA then visits the centre weekly in order to be available to any residents who require updates on their status or any further legal consultation.

However, in practice, this system experiences difficulties, as referred to above in the case of Joel. Most of the residents spoken to by JRS indicated that they had almost no knowledge of Macedonian asylum procedures and had not seen a lawyer since they arrived in the centre – often a period of more than six months. Many interviewees asked JRS for information about the statistical likelihood of their claims being accepted and refugee status being granted.

For Franck this was one of the key problems of life at the centre: "they don't tell me anything." He claimed to have had no advice from lawyers or proper information about the Macedonian asylum process. As a result he found it difficult to decide what step to take next, whether to stay at the centre and wait for his claim to be processed, or to leave and travel further.

This lack of information is also connected to the lack of interpretation services available in the centre. The Macedonian government lacks interpretation capacity, particularly in Pashto, Urdo and Farsi, in the section for asylum and in the reception centres. As a result it is unable to communicate properly with many of the forced migrants with whom it deals and who reside in the reception centre at Vizbegovo. This makes it impossible to adequately explain asylum procedures and to offer effective legal advice.

The poor material conditions outlined above could perhaps be endured if residents of the reception centre had a clear timeline for their asylum procedures, upon which they could make further plans. In the absence of proper information however, the great majority of residents give up on the Macedonian asylum process and depart.

PROTECTION WITHOUT INTEGRATION: REFUGEES LIVING IN POVERTY

At the same time as it is grappling with the challenge of improving the processing of 'new asylum seekers', the Macedonian government faces the challenge of providing meaningful protection and integration to refugees from Kosovo who are already resident in the country.

One Albanian refugee, Miranda came from Kosovo in 1999 with her son. That was the last time she spoke with her husband. Her asylum claim was accepted after a year-long process and she now has refugee status. She receives 10,000 denars (€162) per month from the government, which she says is not enough to fund her basic needs and those of her son. And while she has the right to work, she is concerned about losing the welfare payments she currently receives. Furthermore, she worries about being without her husband, and about her son, now in his late teens and without any education (he cannot read).

She feels particularly vulnerable about her housing situation. The Macedonian government, specifically the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, is currently constructing new housing facilities in partnership with UNHCR Macedonia.[7]

[7] See UNHCR Representation. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Country Update 1 January – 31 March 2013. Accessible at www.unhcr.org/50f3db1c9.html.

Migrants in the border town of Lojane.

However, Miranda had received no information about a possible timeline or whether she could expect to be selected to move into the new facility. Because of this lack of information and certainty about her housing prospects, and due to the material difficulty of her circumstances, Miranda had plans to leave Macedonia at some point in the future. While she would not dare to undertake the hazardous trip north across the Serbian border without documents, she hoped to receive a Macedonian passport and then to apply for asylum in an EU country – Germany or Switzerland in particular.

Odeta finds herself in a similar situation. She also came from Kosovo in 1999 and claimed asylum in Macedonia. It took two years for her claim to be processed but she now has refugee status. However her situation is very difficult – she had three children, aged 2, 8 and 10, with a Macedonian man who abandoned them two years ago and has not been heard from since.

Along with her children she lives in a two room apartment with leaking walls, gaps in the windows, poor bedding materials and damp seeping through the roof. Her young son has asthma but she struggles to afford the necessary medication for him. Furthermore she cannot afford the sort of specialised baby food that her two year old son requires. She receives 11,000 denars (€178) per month from the government, of which about half is spent on rent, with the rest on electricity, food and clothing for the children. Items such as medication place a lot of strain on her budget. And these difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that she has few social connections in her local community, and thus few people to go to for material help or support. She feels extremely isolated.

But the situation is even more confused and difficult for those families who, despite being displaced by the conflict in Kosovo in 1999, are still without refugee status. The Doe family – a Roma family with two parents and three children - live in the Shutka district of Skopje, not far from the reception centre at Vizbegovo. They arrived from Kosovo in 1999, having spent six months in a refugee camp before being transferred to Skopje and then to the Shutka district. They lived there for the next few years, relying on the UNHCR to

provide them with food and healthcare. Life in the camp was extremely hard; they all lived in a single small room. However, in 2003 the UNHCR closed the camp and the Doe family decided to travel to the Greek border. They remained at the border for some months but after a violent encounter with Greek police, they turned back to Skopje where they were provided with housing by the Macedonian authorities.

In March 2010 the family applied for asylum in Macedonia. However their asylum claims have still not been resolved and the family has been subjected to a long and torturous process, without information or any sense of their future prospects. They cannot find work in Macedonia as most of the family are without identification documents. Only Sebastian, the eldest brother, has been granted identity documents. The family lives off the proceeds of odd jobs, or from collecting garbage (plastics) and selling it. In an average week they might hope to earn €5 to €10 for food, a sum which places them close to or below the international poverty line. And their income fluctuates dramatically from week to week, meaning that in some weeks they have to go without. They have no money for utilities (they are constantly late with their electricity payment, despite restricting themselves to using electricity only when they cook). Additionally they live in very poor housing - a small apartment without furniture, rugs on the floor and damp seeping through the walls. And while the UNHCR have promised them new accommodation, implementation is slow.

In the meantime in their current residence they feel threatened by their neighbours and the surrounding community. On 4 March 2013, Sebastian was attacked in the street and beaten by locals. In the wake of this incident Sebastian has been suffering from severe stress and anxiety for which he has had to take medication.

The situation of the Doe family is complicated by the fact that while one of

PHOTOGRAPH REMOVED AT THE REQUEST OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

their family members, Sebastian, has been granted identification documents, the rest of the family has not. The mother's claim for asylum has already been rejected once. This puts strain on the family as they are unsure how to remain together when their asylum claims appear to be destined for different outcomes. Their situation seems impossible – the family cannot return to Kosovo because an Albanian family has taken over their old house and they would be unwelcome in their former village, perhaps even unsafe. But their lives in Macedonia are unbearably difficult, taking a severe strain on their health and wellbeing. And while their young daughter is able to go to school due to financial support provided by the Red Cross, the two young men have very little to do and are deeply frustrated and depressed.

In light of this one might ask why the family have not attempted to travel to EU borders to claim asylum. But the family's circumstances prevent it– they would have to pay around €3000 to a smuggler in order to travel to the EU, a sum which they have no hope of accumulating when they are barely able to feed themselves. And with a young daughter and with Sebastian's delicate health the journey would be too risky. The family is therefore stuck, imprisoned by circumstance.

They do not hope for much. All they desire are the basic requirements of life, that is, the right to work, to have a determined status and identity documents. They want a proper home in a safer neighbourhood where they do not have to fear beatings or threats from local residents.

The Doe family fit within a category of people whom the UNHCR identifies as in danger of statelessness.[8] These people are made all the more vulnerable by their material and social circumstances. Their lack of social capital and low income renders them vulnerable to shocks: households in these kinds of circumstances are most affected by crises such as the ill health of a family member – their miniscule incomes (in the case of the Doe family, beneath the recognised poverty line income) offer only a narrow margin by which they manage to provide for their needs.

These case examples indicate the kind of vulnerability that characterises the lives of many refugee families in Macedonia. Without social connections, with poor housing conditions and barely adequate income, it is grindingly difficult for families to survive, let alone build a future for their children.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Since 2005 the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has held candidate status for EU membership. And while this may not be an immediate prospect it is still one important dimension of the context against which the Macedonian government – specifically

[8] See UNHCR, 2013 UNHCR regional operations profile - South-Eastern Europe. Available at http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48d8f6.html.

the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Ministry of the Interior – operates the asylum system: the standards set out by EU asylum laws form a goal towards which Macedonian policymakers might aspire. Those countries on the borders or near the borders of the EU (such as Macedonia) will face growing pressure as transit countries for migrants travelling to the EU. At the same time, the externalisation of EU policies through its enlargement in the Balkans may encourage advances in refugee protection in neighbouring Balkan countries, as those countries (like Macedonia) attempt to bring their asylum and migration procedures into accord with EU standards. This is a view shared by the authors of the European Commission country report on Macedonia who understand Macedonia's candidacy for EU membership as an important driver of policy reform with regard to the asylum process: "the other more influential aspect of externalisation is through the EU accession processes, which is far more significant in defining the Macedonian asylum policies today."[9]

However in practice Macedonia is experiencing real difficulties in approximating EU standards. The condition of Macedonia's asylum infrastructure is poor with inadequate facilities, maintenance and staffing. Similarly, Macedonia's asylum procedures fail to offer certain basic provisions to those who claim asylum in the country. The stories in this report highlight the serious problems that forced migrants, asylum seekers and refugees encounter in Macedonia: they experience poor reception conditions, the threat of violence, inadequate and lengthy asylum procedures and scant legal advice. And if they do decide to leave Macedonia and cross borders without documentation, they have to risk trusting human smugglers, or to take the dangerous route through Lojane, beyond the help of any NGOs or supportive organisations.

Addressing these problems will be an enterprise made more complex by the difficult economic conditions experienced in Macedonia. In 2012 Macedonia's official unemployment rate stood at 31.3% and the percentage of its population living below the poverty line was 30.4%.[10] And in light of the global financial crisis Macedonia saw a significant decrease in foreign direct investment. These economic conditions are worth taking note of as they form an important backdrop to the Macedonian government's attempts to deal with the refugee situation in that country – the government's immediate priorities lie with stimulating economic growth and reducing unemployment. A standard argument that JRS encountered in Macedonia was that the government had to focus on the many challenges facing its own citizens before it attended to those who come from without. Amidst Macedonia's many domestic concerns, the voices of forced migrants are lost.

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[9] See chapter 24 of the report, accessible at http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2011/package/mk_rapport_2011_en.pdf

[10] See CIA world factbook, Croatia - https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mk.html

Croatia's entry into the EU means more frequent border checks, such as this one at the Slovenian border. © JRS Europe

CROATIA

Kenneth was 19 years old when he was tortured by his father. Kenneth comes from Tofa in Nigeria; his father is a Muslim while his mother was a Christian. She died when Kenneth was five years old. When Kenneth was twelve he decided to go to church to encounter his mother's Christian faith. However, his father, a member of the fundamentalist Boko Haram movement, responded by torturing his son – he held Kenneth down and sprinkled pepper into his eyes and onto his penis. He then went on to disown Kenneth who had to leave his father's house and start sleeping out. His father then organised for a group of men armed with knives to kill Kenneth, who managed to escape and flee from Tofa to find safety.

He was subsequently adopted by a Christian family and worked for them in the family business. However, in 2009 he returned to visit his father who was sick, feeling it to be a filial duty. When he then made to leave Tofa again his younger brother (who stood to gain from his death by way of inheritance) attacked him along with a group of young men. They stabbed him repeatedly in the stomach.

Sometime later Boko Haram destroyed the home and the shop of Kenneth's adoptive Christian family and they decamped to another region of Nigeria "where it would be safe for Christians". However, for Kenneth it was difficult to live with a Christian family on Christian

territory due to his accent and Muslim family background – he faced mistrust and tension. In light of this and the pressure it placed on his family, he decided to leave and seek refuge in Europe.

As with migrants in Macedonia, many of those forced migrants living in Croatia's reception centres have passed through deeply traumatic or violent events. They have journeyed from other continents, encountering exploitation and suffering on the journey to Europe, risking their lives to find a peaceful and protected future.

Croatia's migration situation is clearly different from Macedonia's – at the time of research it is on the verge of becoming an EU member state. However Croatia faces many of the same challenges as Macedonia, albeit to a lesser extent. Like Macedonia, Croatia is also working to improve and maintain its asylum infrastructure and to build proper asylum processes. Moreover, the challenges that Croatia faces with regard to forced migration are linked to Macedonia's in that these two countries form two ends of the same Balkans migration route. In the immediate future both countries will have to manage increasing numbers of migrants while also improving and consolidating their asylum systems.

According to the European Commission, in 2012, 6,541 'irregular' migrants were identified in Croatia as compared to 3,461 in 2011.[11] Among this flow of migrants 726 unaccompanied minors were identified or intercepted at Croatian borders, a number that is almost twice as high as the previous year.[12] And the number of people applying for asylum is similarly increasing – in 2012, 1,193 people applied for asylum in Croatia, which represents a 50% increase compared to 2011.[13] And with Croatia's accession to the EU on 1st July 2013 these numbers can be expected to increase again, including the numbers of returnees to Croatia under the Dublin Regulation.[14] Currently around 85% of those who lodge asylum applications in Croatia leave before the process is resolved.[15] Indeed, according to the UNHCR since 2004, only 80 people have been granted protection in Croatia.[16] Under the Dublin Regulation, however, many of those who leave during the procedure will be returned to Croatia. The challenge then is to build Croatia's asylum capacity in order to prevent its asylum system from collapsing under the sort of strain that Greece's system has been placed under.

The European Commission's 2013 *Monitoring Report on Croatia's Accession Preparations* notes that "in the field of migration, alignment with

[11] http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/fule/docs/news/20130326_report_final.pdf

[12] UNHCR Croatia Briefing Note February 2013, 2.

[13] UNHCR Croatia Briefing Note: Asylum Migration and Statelessness, 1.

[14] Council Regulation (EC) No 343/2003 of 18 February 2003 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an asylum application lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national. As of this writing, the EU had just adopted a renewed 'Dublin' Regulation that Croatia will have to implement.

[15] UNHCR Croatia Briefing Note: Asylum Migration and Statelessness, 1.

[16] ibid

the acquis [the EU legal framework] is almost complete".[17] However despite this assessment there are some areas of concern which the Commission report notes and which JRS also recognised in the course of this research. As the *Monitoring Report* notes, the Croatian asylum system is currently relying on a number of "temporary solutions" to deal with the recent increase in the volume of migrants in the country, including converting a hotel into a reception centre (Porin) to accommodate around 400 asylum seekers. In parallel with its efforts to enhance asylum capacity, the Croatian government is strengthening border controls. In preparation for entry into the EU, Croatia has increased the number of border police to around 6,000. These police will monitor and patrol Croatia's border with Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.[18] This reflects a two way movement – to prepare to manage increasing volume of migrants while also enhancing security at Croatia's borders.

The European Commission has also expressed concern about the full implementation of Croatia's legal framework on asylum. The Croatian Law on Asylum was introduced in 2003 and grants those with refugee status a number of entitlements and benefits, including: (1) sojourn, (2) accommodation, (3) right to work, (4) health care, (5) education, (6) freedom of religion and religious upbringing of children, (7) family reunion and maintenance of the unity of the family, (8) right of access to courts and right to legal counsel, (9) social assistance and (10) assistance in integration to society.[19] However, as the European Commission has emphasised, "refugees still face difficulties in securing access in practice to the rights granted to them by national law."[20]

HISTORIES OF TRAUMA

Kenneth's story highlighted the sort of intense trauma that forced migrants might have experienced in their lives. Samuel left his home for political reasons. He was a political activist in his home country Zimbabwe. His parents were killed when he was four years old because of their political affiliations. Their house was burnt down because they were involved in what Samuel described as "anti-Mugabe agitation". He was then removed to Botswana by his aunt, where he grew up. When he grew older he moved to South Africa, from where he began to make regular trips into Zimbabwe to involve himself with anti-Mugabe political activities (handing out leaflets and political documents). However he soon paid a high price. In Pretoria, South Africa, men from a pro-Mugabe organisation who had travelled from Zimbabwe arrived at his house and forced their way in before beating him and stabbing him multiple times in the leg. They threatened to kill him but he

[17] http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/fule/docs/news/20130326_report_final.pdf
[18] http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2013/05/23/feature-01
[19] http://www.irmo.hr/files/azil%20brosura%20fin%202%20web.pdf
[20] http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2012/package/hr_rapport_2012_en.pdf

The Croatia-Slovenian border and a departure point to the EU for many forced migrants. © JRS Europe

bit one of them and managed to escape, dragging himself to a local hospital for emergency care. He was subsequently so terrified for his safety that he decided to leave South Africa and seek asylum in Europe.

Samuel paid a smuggler €1,000 for a fake passport and bought a flight to Istanbul. In Istanbul he lived for a short period in very poor conditions, without adequate food. He then paid smugglers to drive him in a truck carrying industrial goods all the way to Hungary. There was no food or water in the truck and the journey lasted for two days, during which time Samuel became disorientated, exhausted and frightened: "I couldn't see and it was dark, I didn't know if it was daytime or night time.''

He arrived in a small village in Hungary at night time in the middle of November. The weather was cold and he was poorly clad. Very soon a local person spotted him and called the police who arrived and detained him. He referred to poor treatment by the Hungarian police – they took his wallet, including €300, his mobile phone and some jewellery that he was carrying with him.

The police subsequently drove him to the train station where they placed him on a train to Croatia, warning him to "leave this place and don't come here again". He hid in the train toilet compartment for the entire overnight journey to Zagreb, emerging in the early hours of the morning in a deserted train yard: "I came out in the early morning and it was so quiet, I didn't know where I was. I was cold and afraid".

In light of these histories of violence and trauma, psychological support services for asylum seekers living in Croatia's reception centres is vital. The Croatian Law Centre (a local NGO) runs a project to provide psychological support for victims of trauma amongst asylum seekers – if there is a legacy of trauma that should be considered important to the asylum claim they are able to bring medical opinions or evidence to bear on the asylum procedure. Yet the Law Centre representatives with whom JRS spoke acknowledged that there are still significant problems in caring for the needs of psychologically vulnerable asylum seekers. While the Ministry of Social Welfare can appoint guardians for mentally ill detainees in the centre, according to the Croatian Law Centre these special guardians often have too much work and do not have the time or the knowledge to really look after people's interests. Indeed the Croatian Law Centre representatives referred to one particular situation where an appointed guardian acted in a way that was "very harmful for the asylum seeker to whom they were assigned."

CROATIA NOT ALWAYS A TARGET COUNTRY

Samuel's story also demonstrates that Croatia is not always a target country for forced migrants – many migrants find themselves channelled there by circumstances beyond their control. Several of the migrants whom JRS interviewed in Croatia had passed through Macedonia. They were familiar with its asylum situation and had vivid memories of the reception centre at Vizbegovo and the passage through the mountains at Lojane. Their goal had been to get to Europe, but at each stage of their journey circumstance had forced them to adopt *ad hoc* solutions: terrible conditions for migrants in Greece had forced them to Macedonia, where inadequate asylum procedures and sub-standard living conditions had prompted them onward towards Croatia.

Prior to arriving in the country, Samuel had no idea that Croatia existed: "I did not know this country, I never heard of Croatia before." He had to ask a taxi driver for information, and the taxi driver took him to the local UNHCR office. UNHCR representatives then gave him some basic information about the Croatian asylum process before driving him to the police station, from where he was taken to the reception centre at Kutina where he lived for the next eight months.

Salman and Aliya travelled from Mogadishu, Somalia, where they had no access to work, food or medical care and

Graffiti-lined walls of the Kutina asylum reception centre. © JRS Europe

where violence was a constant threat. In 2010 they flew to Syria, spending six months in Damascus before continuing to Istanbul. They then made the dangerous crossing to Greece in a small boat with 24 other people. In Athens they said they were poorly treated by Greek police, with Salman receiving beatings. In light of this they paid a smuggler €2,000 to transport them to Milan, Italy. However the driver of the truck left them outside Zagreb while telling them that it was Milan. In Zagreb they were taken to the reception centre at Kutina by the police, where their baby was subsequently born. However the family still hopes to travel further, to the UK in particular.

Similarly, Ibrahim did not initially intend to travel to Croatia. A Shiite Muslim from southern Lebanon, Ibrahim left his home in July 2012. He flew to Bosnia by plane, via Turkey. He then stayed in Bosnia for one month before paying €3,000 to be smuggled to Austria from Turkey. The smuggler took him and three others in a minivan from Bosnia to Slovenia. When they arrived in Slovenia the smuggler told them that they were near Vienna and that they had to get out of the van and pay him. However Ibrahim had been to Vienna previously and protested. In response the smuggler pulled a gun on him, so he ran away and was subsequently detained by Slovenian police. He claimed asylum in Slovenia and his fingerprints were taken there. But after a period of two months in Slovenia he was transported to Croatia. The relevant Croatian authorities conducted a background investigation and found that there was no proof that he had passed through Croatia to warrant his

being returned there. They therefore sent him back to Slovenia where he stayed for one week before again being sent back to Croatia.

Upon reaching Europe, Kenneth also experienced this sort of confusion between the Slovenian and Croatian authorities. Having fled Nigeria and arrived in Albania he attempted to reach Italy in a small boat along with 15 others. He made it successfully to Italy and from there to Slovenia, to Novo Mesto, and then to Ljubliana where he was caught by the Slovenian police. Kenneth was detained in Slovenia for three months during which time he applied for asylum. But the Slovenian authorities, refusing to believe that he had come via Italy, transported Kenneth to the Croatian border, despite the fact that at that time Croatia was not bound by the Dublin Regulation. When they arrived at the border, however, the Croatian police wanted to see evidence that he came from Croatia in the first place. According to Kenneth, they then argued with the Slovenian police for more than two hours, with the Croatian police eventually driving him to the train station and directing him to the reception centre at Kutina.

Gabriel took a more circuitous route before he arrived in Croatia – his story reinforces the observation that there is no single 'template' which migrants in Croatia fit into. Gabriel left Kosovo during the conflict in 1999. He travelled to Montenegro and then to Sarajevo. He spent time in a refugee camp in Bosnia from 1999 until October 2002 when he moved to the USA through a UNHCR resettlement program. For the first three months he learnt English. His wife managed to secure a job in a hotel and he found work at a paper production plant. However, due to what he described as a "domestic dispute" with his wife he was charged in court and sentenced to a seven month prison sentence. During this time his wife began a relationship with a local American man. Once released Gabriel travelled back to Kosovo and then to Serbia, only to find that his house had been destroyed and that he could not contact any of his extended family members, all of whom had left the country and had not returned.

In light of this he decided to travel from Bosnia to Croatia by foot crossing the border at night time and arriving at Tsetingrad, a journey made more hazardous by the risk of landmines on the border dating from the conflict of the 1990s. He hoped to make his way further into Europe, to Austria perhaps. From Tsetingrad he walked to Karlovatz, then taking a bus to Zagreb. He then took a bus to Rijeka on the Slovenian border where he was apprehended by Croatian police and interrogated at the police station. The police suggested that he apply for asylum and he claims that they treated him well: "they were very good police". He was given the address of the Porin reception centre in Zagreb and was left make his way independently. He made his way to Porin from where subsequently removed to Kutina while his asylum application was lodged.

His first application for asylum was unsuccessful however, with the process taking six months. At the time of our

interview (May 2013) he had recently been informed about the possibility of his being granted subsidiary protection for a two year period.

Gabriel is extremely grateful to Croatia for the succour it has offered him: "I love Croatia; I only have to be thankful". Although initially Croatia was not the country he hoped to claim asylum in, he now wants to stay there and build a life. He hopes to find work as a shepherd if and when his asylum application is successful. "I want to work, I want to live here, I want to start life again", he said.

LIFE AT THE RECEPTION CENTRES: KUTINA AND PORIN

Upon entering the reception centre at Porin, one is immediately struck by the run-down state of the building: pieces of concrete are falling off the walls and the stairs to the entrance are chipped and broken. The grass around the centre is overgrown and the entire exterior is in need of maintenance. Inside the building the walls are marked with

Play equipment now used to dry clothing, Kutina asylum reception centre. © JRS Europe

graffiti scrawled in permanent marker. A television plays incessantly on the wall, bleating out pop songs while several bored looking men sit around it on cushions and chairs.

As in Macedonia, the Croatian Government relies on NGOs to assist it in the operation of its reception centres. There are a small number of NGOs working in the area of asylum and integration, including the Croatian Law Centre, the Centre for Peace Studies and the Croatian Red Cross. These NGOs play different roles in partnership with the Croatian government. Yet despite this burden sharing, the Croatian reception centres suffer from lack of capacity in a number of important areas.

SECURITY

Residents at the reception centres at Porin and Kutina have real concerns about their living conditions, particularly about their personal security. While most interviewees were satisfied with the food and the treatment they received from the centre staff, many expressed concern about security, especially at the Porin reception centre where a number of violent outbreaks have occurred. Gabriel, for example, referred to the "crazy stuff" that occurs there, including drug addiction and violence: "last night four Algerians broke into the basement and stole some equipment…I'm frightened by this, I don't know what these people might do". He is also worried that this sort of behaviour will have a negative impact on the local population's perception of asylum seekers and will therefore undermine his chances of work and social integration in Croatia.

There have been recent outbreaks of mass violence in the reception centre, in the course of which one security guard was seriously injured and hospitalized. At any one time there are two security guards on duty at the centre, alongside Red Cross and medical staff members. In the case of mass violence or misbehaviour they have found it very difficult to control the situation. And while the Croatian police have recently been deployed to the centre, they remain in their cars patrolling the adjacent district and are not based in the centre itself.

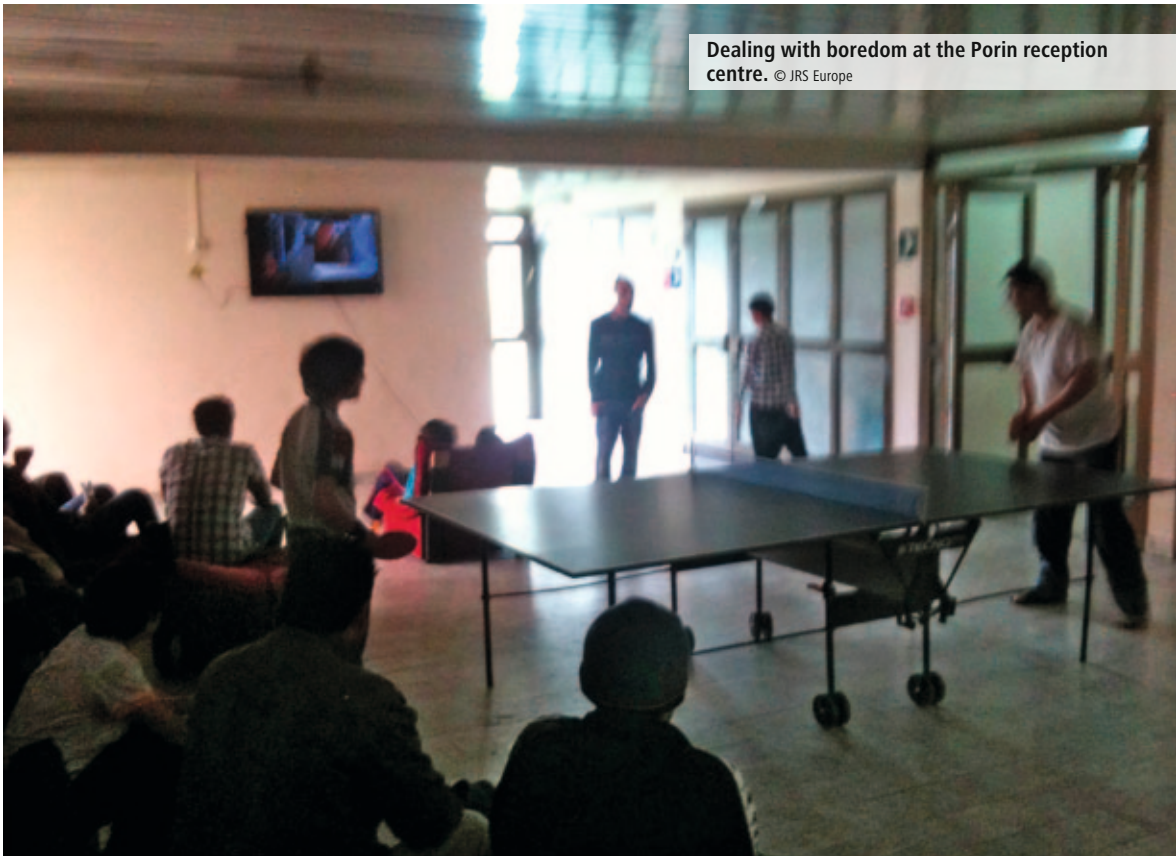
As with the Macedonian reception centre at Vizbegovo, the lack of security has implications for the women and children living at the centre. The reception centre at Porin is not a purpose built facility – it was originally built as a hotel. It is therefore spatially inconvenient and difficult to separate the women and children from the men.

This lack of proper security and the resulting bouts of tension and violence that erupt in the centre is one of the reasons for the significant number of asylum claimants who depart from Croatia before the asylum application process is resolved. Nesreen, from Libya, said that security concerns were one of the key reasons for her not wanting to remain in the centre. She had left Libya in 2011 due to the political crisis, a hazardous experience which included being shot at by Libyan army soldiers

loyal to the Qaddafi regime. With a group of others she went by boat from Libya to Turkey, then from Turkey to Greece. From Greece she travelled to Croatia hidden in the back of a truck with several others. Her initial plan had been to travel to the Netherlands. And she still planned to do so – for her Croatia was only a point of transit. But this determination was reinforced by the fact that she feels uncomfortable in the reception centre at Kutina. She admitted to feeling vulnerable without her husband in an environment where women are a minority and where security is clearly lacking.

RECREATION

Another important and related issue is the lack of recreation in the centre – a situation that undoubtedly exacerbates any tension. There is a Ping-Pong table and a television but very little else to occupy the time of the residents. At the time JRS visited the centre there were groups of men sitting around obviously bored, staring at the television. This kind of boredom leads to real frustration, as Samuel expressed: "I just want something to do…we are young, we should not be sitting here wasting everything…I want to do something." One young boy with



Dealing with boredom at the Porin reception centre. © JRS Europe

whom JRS spoke talked about his life in the centre: "I play ping pong most of the day; there is nothing else to do. I like ping pong but I feel bored a lot." This particular boy was bright and imaginative; he loved playing sport and liked learning languages. He spoke Farsi, English, Russian and some Croatian. But without any more structured program to occupy his time, he was not able to learn and to exercise his mind – he was reduced to playing Ping-Pong all day. This boredom can also boil over into real anger and resentment. One interviewee, clearly very distressed, spoke of his dislike of the Croatian authorities and people: "they have a bad hat, I'm telling you, a bad hat. They were once refugees, but they treat me like this".

LACK OF INFORMATION

The frustration is also fuelled by the lack of information that people receive about their situation and the status of their asylum applications. The Croatian Law Centre provides legal information and consultation services to the residents of the reception centres, visiting the centres twice a month. However it does not itself follow their actual asylum cases, a role that is played by lawyers from the outside. In addition the Centre for Peace Studies provides Croatian language instruction to asylum seekers at the reception centres at Kutina and Porin. But while residents of Croatia's reception centres receive more information than those in Macedonia, many still struggle to understand the asylum process.

When he arrived in Croatia, Samuel had no knowledge about its asylum procedures. He made an initial application for asylum when he arrived at the Kutina reception centre but had to wait seven months before hearing the result of his application. He lodged the application in mid-January 2012 and the process (including his appeal against the initial rejection) took until November. He has now applied for asylum again in January 2013. This means that at the time of interview Samuel had been resident in Croatian reception centres for around a year and four months. During this time he claims to have had very little information about Croatia's asylum procedures, only meeting with representatives from the Croatian Law Centre once. Ibrahim similarly claims to have had no further information about his asylum claim since 7th February, when he did his initial interview. He claims to have had no interview with a lawyer during his time in the reception centre at Porin.

MINORS

Providing care to unaccompanied minors is an important aspect of Croatia's asylum obligations, given the vulnerability of children who are separated from their families. There is currently no properly functioning support scheme outside the asylum procedure for unaccompanied children in Croatia and as of 2013 there is still no separate reception facility for minors. At the time of research the reception centre at Kutina – currently

the main reception centre – was being converted to house women and children, including unaccompanied minors.[21]

All unaccompanied minors who apply for asylum in Croatia are assigned with guardians throughout the procedure. However, in keeping with the statistics cited above, around 80% of unaccompanied minors leave Croatia prior to their asylum procedure being resolved.[22] (Of the 70 unaccompanied minors who applied for asylum in Croatia in 2012, only three were granted refugee status).[23]

Given the number of minors passing through the Croatian asylum system it is important to establish proper recreation, education and care programs for children, and to ensure that their particular needs are met. While there is a clean and well-staffed kindergarten at the reception centre at Kutina there are no properly organised activities or programs for school-aged children which might occupy their time.

A recreational space for children at the Kutina reception centre. © JRS Europe

[21] http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/fule/docs/news/20130326_report_final.pdf

[22] UNHCR Croatia Briefing Note: Asylum Migration and Statelessness, 2.

[23] ibid., 2

CONCLUSION

At the start of Croatia's membership to the EU, an underlying concern is whether it will come to face some of the same difficulties with its asylum system that Greece is now experiencing. The above research identifies several key areas in which both Croatia's and Macedonia's asylum systems require development in order to better meet the needs of asylum seekers.

In Macedonia, the asylum system is in disarray. Asylum claims are processed slowly, and asylum seekers have very little information and inadequate legal advice. The authorities lack the interpretation capacities that would enable them to communicate effectively with the asylum seekers in their care. The physical infrastructure used to accommodate and process asylum seekers is very poorly maintained, with asylum seekers living in sub-standard conditions. Moreover, the problem of the 'migrant black hole' at Lojane has grown beyond government control, with the hundreds of migrants who stay there living in extremely difficult conditions and vulnerable to exploitation by smugglers and locals. The border is unpatrolled and Macedonian authorities are nowhere to be seen.

In Croatia, the asylum system is currently operating at the limit of its capacity and is relying on temporary solutions to deal with the recent increase in migrant numbers. The lack of security in the reception centre at Porin presents a significant challenge and means that vulnerable residents such as women and children are not properly protected. Furthermore, asylum seekers in Croatian reception centres lack adequate information about the asylum procedure, a situation that exacerbates the existing frustration and tensions they experience.

In the context of economic stagnation, protecting refugees and asylum seekers does not rank high on political agendas. Nor does it feature as a significant issue of public concern. In Macedonia there appears to be very little, if any, civil society involvement around the issue of asylum. Access to the reception centre is tightly controlled by the director of the centre and there are no society organisations attempting to build understanding of asylum issues.

In Croatia there is growing civil society engagement on the issue of new asylum seekers. Unlike Macedonia, in Croatia there is regular interaction between government, academic and non-governmental circles seeking to share information and expertise on asylum law and procedures. Furthermore, NGOs, along with the Croatian Section for Asylum, are actively seeking to engage those local inhabitants in the vicinity of Croatia's reception centres to promote a dialogue about asylum seekers and how local communities should attempt

to incorporate them into their social life. JRS attended one such small community meeting where local residents aired their views on how to improve community understanding of asylum issues.

The issue of asylum and protection for forced migrants should be of real political importance, not only because of the moral and legal imperative to afford real protection to those in need, but also because it is an issue with regional implications. Improving the asylum systems in both Macedonia and Croatia is vital to managing the increasing mixed migration flows through the region. The Balkans should be considered as an integrated whole – an adverse situation in one country will have impacts for regional neighbours. The situation in Greece, for example, has already had implications for its regional neighbours: almost all of the forced migrants interviewed by JRS in Macedonia had spent time in Greece before continuing onward through the Balkans, not wanting to remain in Greece because of poor treatment either by police or locals.

It is clear then that a systemic failure in one country cannot be isolated – it will have regional consequences. If Macedonia's asylum system does not function, then its regional neighbours, including Croatia, will be placed under greater strain. Working against this possibility will involve not only supporting the Croatian government, but also supporting and encouraging Balkan states such as Macedonia to improve their asylum procedures. It will require that the legal frameworks on asylum that both countries have adopted are properly implemented, and therefore that EU standards are more closely approximated.

Finally, in both Croatia and Macedonia and throughout the Balkans region, the protection of forced migrants must be reaffirmed as an important political objective. Even in the context of domestic challenges, the plight of forced migrants cannot be side-lined or ignored.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE CROATIAN GOVERNMENT

- Croatia must properly implement all of the EU's asylum rules into their national law and practice. The protection of asylum seekers and refugees must rank high on the political agenda. Temporary solutions to deal with the increase of numbers of asylum seekers must be replaced by sustainable measures.
- Enhance and improve the asylum application processing capacities of the authorities.
- Improve the standard of care and assessment of needs for asylum seekers in vulnerable situations, such as women, children, torture victims and other traumatised persons.
- Thoroughly inform all asylum seekers about the country's asylum procedures, their rights and duties within it and its time frame. Ensure unrestricted access to qualified legal assistance.
- Improve the level of security at all asylum and migrant reception centres.
- Continue the positive policy of engaging in dialogue and cooperation with civil society organisations.

TO THE MACEDONIAN GOVERNMENT

- Prioritise the protection of asylum seekers, refugees and other forced migrants in law and in practice.
- Enhance and improve the processing of asylum applications.
- Provide a higher standard of care to vulnerable asylum seekers, such as women, children, torture victims and other traumatised persons.
- Ensure that asylum seekers are thoroughly informed about all aspects of the asylum procedure, their rights and duties within it, and the time frame. Provide unrestricted access to qualified legal assistance.
- Improve the translation and interpretation capacities in order to ensure proper communication between asylum seekers and the Macedonian authorities.
- Quickly improve the infrastructure and hygienic condition of the Vizbegovo reception centre and all other reception facilities.

- Pay special attention to the situation of asylum seekers and other migrants who stay in Lojane, with a view to upholding their fundamental rights and ensuring their access to asylum and migration procedures, and to appropriate and dignified reception conditions.
- Engage in a systematic dialogue with civil society organisations and invite them to provide services to asylum seekers and migrants in reception centres and detention centres. Enable civil society organisations to monitor asylum and migration procedures, as well as reception conditions, with a view to making comprehensive improvements to the system.

TO THE EUROPEAN UNION INSTITUTIONS

- The EU institutions, most notably the Commission, should develop a holistic approach to the situation of asylum seekers and other migrants in the Balkans region: An adverse situation in one country has inevitable impacts for the regional neighbours.
- Ensure that protection capacities in the Balkans region is prioritised as highly as are border control measures and migration management procedures.
- Croatia should be given immediate assistance (including those provided by the European Asylum Support Office) in order to properly implement EU asylum acquis and to avoid a new crisis like in Greece.
- The Commission should invite EU member states to be very careful with transferring asylum seekers to Croatia under the Dublin regulation, at least as long as Croatia's capacities remain insufficient for dealing with higher numbers of asylum claims, as is now the case.
- The Commission should especially request Slovenia to refrain from transferring asylum seekers to Croatia when there is no proof that they had passed through Croatia.
- The Commission should immediately provide Macedonia with assistance in order to improve the situation, especially regarding accommodation and asylum procedures.
- EU member states should be requested by the Commission to suspend any transfers of migrants under the existing readmission agreements to Macedonia, at least as long as the accommodation and processing capacities in this country are not sufficiently enhanced.
- In both countries, the EU institutions should support civil society organisations that are engaged or want to be engaged in rendering assistance to asylum seekers and other forced migrants.

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