

Out of Sight: Afghans on the Balkan Route after Taliban Return



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Belgrade, April 2023

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The following report presents the findings and results of the project 'Countering Human Trafficking and Gender-Based Violence Among Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Serbia', supported by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), between April 1, 2022 and March 31, 2023.

I. Introduction

The boy¹ said that the scars on his arms were the result of injuries he sustained while working in a factory in Turkey. The mental scars he must be nursing are not so visible to the naked eye.

Just 13 years old, the child had been held against his will, beaten, threatened with death, and put to work in factories at various stages of his 18-month, roughly 6,000-kilometre journey by land from his home in the eastern Afghan region of Nangarhar to an asylum centre in central Serbia.

And he is far from the only one since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 triggered the latest exodus in four decades of conflict and chronic poverty in Afghanistan.

Leaving behind his parents, three brothers and four sisters, the boy crossed into Pakistan, where smugglers held him for a month in a house near the Iranian border, beating him and threatening to kill him if his parents did not send more money; when they did, he was released and crossed into Iran, where border guards hit and robbed him as he tried to enter Turkey.

Turned back, he spent two months in Tehran working on a construction site to raise enough cash to continue. In Turkey, the boy spent a further 15 days with smugglers in a house that he described as "a kennel" on the outskirts of the eastern city of Van, and then a year working in an Istanbul factory. He would spend nights in one of the factory rooms with men from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India; conditions were inhumane, he said.

Eventually, the boy crossed into Bulgaria and then Serbia, reaching a state-run camp in a converted motel on a highway within walking distance of the border with Croatia and the European Union. There, gangs of violent Afghan and Pakistani smugglers hold sway, he said, and sexual abuse of unaccompanied minors is rife. Some boys, he said, are forced into prostitution, while others are recruited as smugglers.

The boy's account, given at a camp in the central Serbian village of Bogovađa in December 2022, is one of dozens recorded in Serbia by NGO Atina between April 1, 2022 and March 31, 2023 under a project supported by the IRC to address the dangers facing Afghan refugees and other refugees and migrants.

The accounts speak in the starkest terms to the labour exploitation, physical violence, sexual abuse, and gender-based violence

¹ The names of all Afghan refugees in this report have been withheld to protect their identities

experienced by Afghans as they flee the repressive rule of the Taliban, seeking shelter in Europe.

The Taliban's return, on the heels of withdrawing foreign forces, has contributed to a significant new rise in refugee and migrant numbers; according to the EU border agency, Frontex, in the first 11 months of 2022, the EU registered 308,000 attempts to enter the bloc without permission, the highest number since 2016 and a 68 per cent rise on the same period of 2021.

In 2021, the western Balkans registered 60,541 border crossings without permission, roughly double the number reported in 2020, while between January and November last year authorities in Serbia reported 110,947 new arrivals to state-run centres, compared to 55,429 over the same period of 2021, according to the UNHCR. In September alone, 19,345 refugees and migrants arrived; across the year, roughly a quarter of new arrivals were Afghans, sometimes up to a third.

Those interviewed by NGO Atina in Serbia cited a number of reasons for leaving, from violence or the threat of violence at the hands of the Taliban, to discrimination, a lack of jobs, the imposition of strict religious rules, and the dreams dashed by bans on education for girls beyond primary school.

This report details the risks facing Afghan refugees, particularly women and minors, as well as their treatment in Serbia, and the actions undertaken by NGO Atina to aid those identified as victims or potential victims of human trafficking and/or gender-based violence.

It also outlines some of the steps that authorities should take to better protect them, based on the premise that, regardless of the perception that they are simply 'in transit,' it does not mean they are not entitled to the same protections and support afforded to others.

With the eyes of the international community and world media firmly fixed on Russia's war in Ukraine, NGO Atina hopes with this report to raise awareness about the ongoing plight of Afghans forced to flee their homeland.

II. Rights Rolled Back – Afghanistan under the Taliban

By mid-2021, two decades after it was toppled by US forces following the 9/11 attacks, the Taliban had taken control of over half of Afghanistan. The capital, Kabul, fell in August 2021. The Taliban's return has turned back the clock on the rights of Afghan women and girls and – in light of the refusal of the international community to recognise the new government – led to the cut-off of much vital international aid, plunging the country deeper into economic turmoil.

It has also exacerbated a displacement crisis brought on by four decades of conflict and chronic poverty. According to the UN-HCR, today some 3.5 million Afghans – the large majority of them women and children – are internally displaced, including more than 900,000 since 2021; some 2.6 million Afghans are registered as refugees around the world, of which 2.2 million are registered in Iran and Pakistan alone.

In October 2022, the World Bank estimated that the Afghan economy had contracted by about 20 per cent in 2021 and faced an accumulated contraction of close to 30-35 per cent between 2021 and 2022, blaming a sharp decline in public spending and household consumption as well as a suspension of most international aid and the freezing of access to Afghanistan's foreign exchange reserves. Over two-thirds of households were struggling to cover basic expenses, the bank said.

"With the withdrawal of foreign troops and international organisations, the country has lost a huge part of its income and many people have been left without work," said Momir Turudić, a Serbian journalist and translator from Farsi who worked with NGO Atina on the project as a male cultural mediator. "A huge part of the country is hungry and there's no prospect of anything changing."

"I spoke to a significant number of people who cite security in the second place," he said. Now, the main reasons for leaving are "poverty, lack of work, and the lack of any prospects whatsoever."

But while civilian casualties from armed conflict are down, the presence of anti-Taliban militant groups is growing and bomb attacks on civilians continue, often attributed to Islamic State. There

has been a rise in the number of extrajudicial killings, detentions and torture by the Taliban, as well as discrimination and violence against minorities.

The UN says that between August 2021 and June 2022, it recorded at least 160 extrajudicial killings of people who previously worked for the government or the security forces.

As soon as the Taliban seized power, it began rolling back the rights gained by women under 20 years of Western occupation, re-introducing regulations on clothing and laws forbidding access to public areas without a male guardian.

Within weeks, women-led protests had broken out in a number of Afghan provinces; the Taliban response was brutal.

Having already announced that girls would no longer be permitted to attend secondary school, in late December 2022 the Taliban banned female students from university and women from working in local or international NGOs.

Protests were dispersed by force, while international media and rights watchdogs have reported on the detention and torture of organisers and participants. Days before the anniversary of the Taliban takeover, some 40 women marched in front of the education ministry in Kabul to demand the right to education and work. Taliban fighters dispersed the protesters, beating some of them with rifle butts.

The ban on NGO work has exacerbated the economic crisis by forcing the pullout of a number of aid organisations such as the Norwegian Refugee Council, whose secretary general, Jan Ege-land, warned that it could end up pushing 6 million people into famine and leave 600,000 children without education. It may also leave 13.5 million people without a safe water supply and 14.1 million without protection services, he said in January 2023.

According to the World Bank, female participation in the labour force, which had grown to 22 per cent by 2019, shrank to 15 per cent in 2021.

Hajar Mohammadi, who fled Afghanistan in 2016 after the television station where she worked was attacked by the Taliban, said women were afraid to leave their homes and unable to perform the most basic of tasks such as go to a bank or rent an apartment.

If they protest, she said, the Taliban threatens to confiscate their family's property.

"They [the women] are not afraid," said Mohammadi, a member of an advocacy group created in Serbia by NGO Atina in 2016 and now a student of psychology in Sweden. "But when the family is in a position in which they will suffer, they will of course stop."

III. Atina and the IRC

The Balkan route remains the most common path taken by refugees and migrants from the Middle East, Asia and Africa trying to reach Western Europe. From Turkey, they cross either by land into Bulgaria or to Greece via the Evros river or by small boat across the Aegean. From Bulgaria, they cross directly into eastern Serbia, or from Greece they go north into North Macedonia or Albania, trying to reach Serbia directly or via Kosovo.

The aim is to cross the EU border at Hungary or Croatia and press on into Western Europe. As part of a broader initiative covering Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Albania and Kosovo, the IRC partnered with NGO Atina to work in Serbia on developing a more functional identification and protective mechanism for trafficked persons in the migrant and refugee population, in this case particularly Afghans transiting the Balkans, in order to contribute to a more effective and sustainable national and regional anti-trafficking response.

The project had the aim of activating the existing mechanisms of prevention, identification, and protection of victims of trafficking (VoT) and survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) – which the states apply to their local populations – among migrants and refugees, who often share a perception held by state authorities too that the countries in question are merely ‘transit countries’ and so it makes little sense to seek such services or for the states to offer them.

Another objective was to better connect anti-trafficking/violence prevention actors in the four countries on the western Balkan route.

The work involved initial screening and referral among refugees and migrants in reception/transit/asylum centres and/or at the borders, providing presumed trafficked persons, unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), and GBV survivors with temporary accommodation, services, and information regarding their rights, obligations, legal options, and consequences for violating the rules, and the referral of victims who agreed to accept assistance and/or join a support programme.

The programme ran between April 1, 2022 and March 31, 2023.

At the outset, NGO Atina created a team initially of four professionals – a project coordinator, two case managers, and a counsellor dedicated to education, employment, and independent living. The case managers were split between southern Serbia and the rest of the country, including Belgrade. Later, a male cultural

mediator was added, reflecting a shift in NGO Atina's traditional focus on women in line with changes in the structure of the refugee population and the need to address the dangers faced by Afghan boys.

A mobile team implemented project activities in Asylum/Transit centres in Šid (near the border with Croatia), in Krnjača (on the outskirts of Belgrade), and in Bosilegrad (near the southeastern border with Bulgaria) as well as in Atina's Reintegration Centre and safe houses.

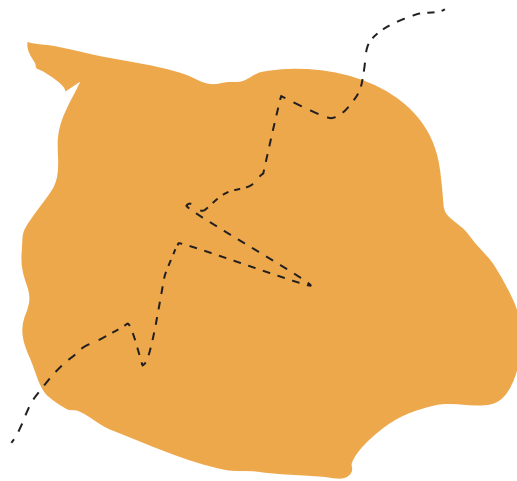
Besides weekly visits to these locations, the mobile team also visited areas bordering Croatia and Hungary, Transit Centre Preševu in southern Serbia, Transit Centre Obrenovac near Belgrade, and Transit Centre Bogovađa in central Serbia, as well as informal camps.

In April/May 2022, at the start of the project, according to the UNHCR there were 5,186 refugees and migrants on the territory of Serbia, one third of them Afghan nationals. Of the total, 4,724 were housed in 13 state-run centres across the country. That number had risen to 6,185 by end-September. By the last three months of the year, there were 6,229 in state-run centres and roughly 1,000 in alternative accommodation.

The following observations were made at the outset:

- Information on the ground pointed to a slightly higher share of young men among incoming refugees from Afghanistan, forced to urgently leave the country due to militarisation under the Taliban.
- Whereas previously adult men would often claim to be minors, more recently not even minors have been identifying as such.
- Women were finding it hard to flee Afghanistan given the risks they faced even venturing outside under the Taliban, let alone trying to cross the border.
- Most Afghan families arriving in Serbia were those of police officers, public sector employees, or relatives of politically-active individuals.
- At the start of the reporting period, in May and June 2022, NGO Atina's case manager in southern Serbia registered a rise in the number of Afghan families arriving but moving on within days. They expressed a reluctance to go to the transit centre in Bosilegrad, which was designated for families, because of its location near the border with Bulgaria, because they did not wish to be separated from the groups they were travelling with, and because they had been told they could more easily find smugglers at the transit centre in Preševu.

It should be noted that the reporting period was marked by significant developments on the political and diplomatic front and in Serbia's handling of migrants and refugees. One was the appointment in August 2022 of Nataša Stanisavljević, as head of Serbia's Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, replacing Vladimir Cucić, who had held the post since 2008. Another was an announcement by Hungary at the end of October 2022 that it would increase the height of its border fence, placing further pressure on Serbia. That month, Serbia halted visa-free travel for citizens of Burundi and Tunisia, bowing to EU complaints that Belgrade was fuelling the number of migrants entering the bloc thanks to its visa-free regimes with – besides Burundi and Tunisia – Morocco, Egypt, and Turkey.



IV. Main findings

Border violence: NGO Atina's reporting during the duration of the project points to the continued use of violence by security forces along the route taken by Afghans, particularly in Iran, Turkey, Bulgaria, Greece, and Hungary, including inhumane treatment such as migrants and refugees being made to kneel for hours, being tossed on the ground, stripped and having their personal belongings destroyed. Migrants and refugees have spoken of being beaten with belts and batons, being kicked, punched, pepper-sprayed and tear-gassed. The right to seek asylum is violated on a regular basis through so-called 'pushbacks' in which border forces summarily turn back refugees and migrants. Some interlocutors reported shooting by army and police in Iran and Turkey, amid a general rise in the use of force and intolerance towards Afghan refugees in both countries. "Over the last few months it has become almost 'normal' that the Iranian police and army use force, i.e. beatings and, according to some accounts, shooting on the borders," said Turudić. "Accounts from the Turkish-Greek border are also very dramatic," he said, with the Greek army and police employing "terrible force."

Families of former state employees: Among new arrivals in Serbia, there are a growing number of families of former Afghan police officers, soldiers, public sector employees or individuals who were politically active prior to the Taliban takeover. "Any small connection you had with the last government, to the Taliban you are a 'dangerous person' and, therefore, you yourself are in danger," said Mohammadi. Field data indicates that the majority of Afghans who find themselves in Serbia left Afghanistan after the Taliban return to power.

Failure to identify and aid minors: Evidence on the ground suggests a slight rise in the proportion of young men among Afghan arrivals, possibly due to the danger of mobilisation under the Taliban; some of them are almost certainly minors but who do not declare as such. "The trend is for more and more unaccompanied minors to set off," said Turudić. "Some said they had decided themselves, but a large number say it was a family decision, that their parents decide to send them out of fear of harassment by the Taliban or some kind of revenge, and out of a belief that they, as young people, will have a greater chance of being taken in, to go to school and later to gradually help get the rest of the family to Europe." NGO Atina's team observed large numbers of minors in state-run centres in Serbia, but their presence is not reflected in the official statistics apparently because they are declaring themselves as adults so as not to be separated from the adult men they may be travelling with. "Authorities in Serbia have failed to create a mechanism

that would allow for the proactive identification and referral of UASCs and to provide them with assistance. Definitely that puts them at huge risk because they are exposed to adult single men and they are not recognised as children so they do not receive the protection they would if they were recognised as children,” said Andrijana Radoičić Nedeljković, coordinator of NGO Atina’s programme of direct support for victims of human trafficking. Systemic shortcomings in terms of protection and response are driving a growing number to seek accommodation in informal settlements, outside of the state-run system and where they are at constant risk of violence and exploitation, including sexual exploitation and forced criminality. “Those who pay less are much more exposed – the less money, the less security and the greater the probability that they will be abused in any number of ways,” said Turudić. “When they talk about personal experience of abuse, minors don’t go into detail, but there was a significant number who said they know about beatings by smugglers and sexual violence towards minors.”

Fear of Taliban reprisals keeps Afghan women from state-run facilities: The number of Afghan women refugees and migrants in state-run facilities has visibly dropped, amid indications that a growing number are staying in private accommodation, squats or abandoned buildings around the southern town of Preševo, on the outskirts of Belgrade and near the border with Croatia. See next section: **"In the Middle of Nowhere":** Afghan women in Serbia’. In general, the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration reported that a growing number of refugees and migrants are living in informal settlements, with this number climbing further during the summer months when weather conditions are more favourable.

Lack of action: Authorities in Serbia are failing to act on evidence of human trafficking and/or GBV among refugees and migrants due to the time and cost involved in processing such cases, particularly when the crime was committed on the route or in the country of origin. If a person is identified as a victim of human trafficking, a state is obliged to take action. But, said Radoičić Nedeljković, “for authorities in Serbia it’s too expensive and too difficult to get into some kind of international investigation or to seek data from Burundi or Afghanistan; it’s too time-consuming. For them, they don’t see an interest in that because the person will almost certainly leave before the procedure is finished.”

Fuel on the fire: Although refugees and migrants say they face fewer problems in Serbia than in other countries on the route, inflammatory and xenophobic reporting in local media is fuelling hate speech and intolerance, particularly in areas where refugees and migrants are accommodated or in border areas; armed incidents involving smugglers have triggered informal efforts to segregate refugees and migrants along lines of nationality, leading to situations in which just one or two women are accommodated in facilities with more than 300 men, just because they are all Afghans; field workers have found it difficult to provide support to refugees and

migrants afraid to move freely in their surroundings due to fear of discrimination and xenophobia.

Counter-productive security measures: A crackdown on informal settlements and other security measures undertaken by Serbian authorities in the wake of a number of armed incidents involving smugglers are forcing refugees and migrants to take less well-trodden routes, further exposing them to the risk of violence from smugglers, traffickers and other, potentially hostile migrant and refugee groups; they become less visible and less likely to access available services and humanitarian assistance; further tightening of security at camps risks leaving many UASCs in effective isolation, unable to access their basic rights. In one incident in July 2022, according to media reports, a shoot-out blamed on Afghan and Pakistani groups in the forest near the Hungarian border left at least one person dead and six others wounded, including a 16-year-old girl. None of those hurt in the incident were registered with asylum authorities in Serbia.

Unequal treatment: Since the start of Russia's war in Ukraine in February 2022, those arriving in Serbia from Ukraine have received the kind of state support usually conferred on Internally-Displaced People, IDPs, in terms of status, accommodation, financial support, and the right to work, unlike refugees and migrants from Afghanistan, Syria and elsewhere. It is a phenomenon not exclusive to Serbia but one that reflects what Radoičić Nedeljković described as deep-rooted xenophobia and racism towards mainly Muslim refugees and migrants from the Middle East, Asia or Africa. "You can see it more clearly now when we have people coming from Ukraine who are white and the same religion as most people in Serbia," Radoičić Nedeljković said. "It's not just a structural issue."

Illustration 2:

V. 'In the Middle of Nowhere' – Afghan women on the road

One woman's story is indicative of the dangers facing Afghan women refugees.

Now 18 years-old, the woman said she was married at 15 to a man who was already in Serbia, after which she lived with his family in Afghanistan for two years while they saved up money for her to join him.

In the first nine months after arriving in Serbia, she had no contact whatsoever with the established system for supporting refugees and migrants. Her husband was arrested and when NGO Atina came into contact with her the woman was living in a private apartment with a Serbian family she had met through other Afghans. Some members of the family spoke Pashto and were mixing extensively with Afghans.

Atina reported the case to the authorities on the suspicion that the woman was being forced into prostitution; she was provided with alternative accommodation.

Like this woman, a growing number of Afghan women are being housed in private accommodation, squats, or abandoned buildings around Preševo, Belgrade, and the Croatian border, while there are visibly fewer in state-run centres.

This puts them at grave risk of GBV, restricts their ability to access assistance, and leaves them wholly dependent on the men they are travelling with; their husbands or male relatives, as well as those women who were able to call NGO Atina and other hotlines, expressed a fear that, if they were to go outside, members of the Taliban may find out they had left Afghanistan and take revenge on relatives left behind.

More worryingly, these women are often not even registered with the state and so have no contact with state officials or support services, meaning they are practically invisible.

"Afghani women are not even in official data," said Radoičić Nedeljkić. "Some of them are staying in private accommodation, but most are in some kind of informal settlement," she said, citing the rising cost of rent due to the huge influx of Russians since the

start of the war in Ukraine and the imposition of Western sanctions on Russia.

The Taliban takeover has made it harder for women to flee given the new restrictions on their movement, including a rule that women cannot travel more than 75 kilometres from their home without a male family member accompanying them. Many of the women currently in Serbia fled prior to August 2021 but have effectively been left behind while their husbands or male relatives try to reach and settle in Western Europe before sending for their families.

A second Afghan woman NGO Atina spoke to said she had left her home in Kabul three years earlier with her husband, flying to Istanbul then crossing into Greece with the help of smugglers and finally into Serbia via North Macedonia. In North Macedonia, the woman said that she was raped by a Pakistani smuggler at a boarding house the smugglers used to accommodate refugees and migrants on their journey north while her husband was out of the room. The woman told her husband and a sister, but she has said nothing to any of her brothers or her father, citing the fact that in Afghan culture “such incidents are not met with understanding” for the victim.

Once in Serbia, the woman said she considered killing herself and barely left the room they were staying in. She said that counselling she received in Serbia had helped, but that she never considered reporting the rape to the authorities given her status and the fact she does not know the identity of her attacker. She had tried to cross the border with Croatia several times with her husband, without success.

Mohammadi said that Afghan women trying to reach Europe live in constant fear of rape. Mothers have to cope with children walking for days on end, hungry, thirsty and crying, she said. And then there is the danger of separation when confronted with border forces and the smugglers tell them to run.

“There is a lot of danger – for women with children, the danger of being raped, of losing the money, of the smuggler doing many wrong things,” said Mohammadi. “You’re not in a position to say anything. You’re in the middle of nowhere.”

Screening conducted during the first three-month phase of the project helped NGO Atina’s team to understand where Afghan women and their children were being housed. Most are financially dependent on their husbands or other male members of their family, making them vulnerable to abuse. Entrenched gender roles do not change on the road, meaning women are responsible for all the needs of their families.

Due to inappropriate segregation of state-run facilities along lines of nationality, some women find themselves housed with hun-

dreds of single males, prompting them to stay inside their rooms and forego what structural activities may be on offer.

During the course of the project, NGO Atina provided safe accommodation for a grandmother, mother and daughter, aged six, who had been subjected to GBV in the Serbian asylum centre where they were accommodated.



VI. Risking Everything: Refugee stories

Hopes of reaching Belgium: A 16-year-old boy described leaving Afghanistan roughly six months prior to being interviewed, saying it was “impossible to live normally under the Taliban” due to the lack of money, jobs or prospects for a better future. Leaving behind his parents and 11 siblings, he entered Pakistan and then Iran. Trying to cross the border into Turkey, he was first beaten by Turkish border guards, who pushed him back, and then by Iranian guards. He spent three months in Tehran in an illegal boarding house for refugees, taking anti-depressants and never daring to go out. The boy finally entered Turkey, where he said security forces were extremely violent, then Bulgaria and finally Serbia. He said he hoped to reach Belgium, where he has a cousin, to go to school and become a sports coach.

Smugglers ‘exchanging’ people for money: A 15-year-old, born in the eastern Afghan province of Paktia but living in Kabul, said he left Afghanistan roughly two months prior to being interviewed after he was beaten by the Taliban for working as a tattoo artist. He crossed into Pakistan with a group of hundreds of Afghans, led by a smuggler, and then into Iran. With some 30 other people, the boy said he spent about two weeks in the mountains near the Turkish city of Van, where smugglers had told them to wait. Without food, they ate tree bark and the hunger made them hallucinate, he said. After a few days in an illegal boarding house in Istanbul, smugglers took them to the Bulgarian border, where the boy said they waited for five days in the woods, eating ice for water. He described how the smugglers would beat anyone who complained. He saw smugglers “exchanging” people for money and said he intervened at one point when a smuggler tried to take a boy away from their group. Crossing into Serbia, the boy said the police caught three of his friends and sent them back to Bulgaria but he and some others escaped. After hiding out in an abandoned house, they were discovered by the police and sent to the roadside motel at Adaševci, and then Bogovađa. He said he hopes to reach France where he has an uncle.

Minors as manual labourers: On the edge of Batrovci, a village near the Serbian-Croatian border, NGO Atina spoke to a 16-year-old ethnic Tajik from Baghlan province, northern Afghanistan, in a converted car repair shop where he was staying, in the yard of a house. The boy, whose leg was in plaster after he fell trying to enter Croatia at night, said he had left home a year earlier, after the Taliban returned to power, leaving behind his parents and seven siblings. He crossed into Iran

with a group of 46 people, many of them unaccompanied minors like him. The boy reached the city of Karaj, near Tehran, where he worked as a manual labourer alongside many other Afghans, including minors, sleeping on site to avoid being caught by police on the streets. With a smuggler, he crossed into Turkey, where he found work in a furniture factory in Istanbul. Trying to enter Bulgaria, the boy said he and other refugees and migrants were beaten by Bulgarian security forces, robbed of their phones and money, and pushed back into Turkey. When he finally crossed, he was sent to what he described as a "closed" camp. The boy likened the camp to a prison, with only the very basic of living conditions; minors were treated the same as the adults, he said. After four months, he was sent to a less restrictive camp, and immediately set off on foot for Serbia. The boy said he hopes to reach Germany, resume schooling and eventually work for a humanitarian organisation. He said he was aware of the dangers of travelling alone and the "bad things" that can happen to boys on the road.

Sold up: A family of eight in an asylum centre near Belgrade said they left their home in Takhar, northeastern Afghanistan, roughly a month after the Taliban takeover. "My wife and I had completed our education and everything else in life that we could, but our children haven't," said the father. The man cited the ban on secondary schooling for girls and the imposition of strict religious rules, such as forcing people, under the threat of punishment, to pray five times a day, grow their beards long and wear certain clothes. "I am a believer and I pray," he said, "but I don't want anyone forcing me to do anything." After two failed attempts, the family managed to enter Iran with the help of smugglers, staying for 10 days before crossing into Turkey. Their youngest child was born in Turkey and they stayed for about a year before entering Bulgaria and, 10 days later, Serbia, with the aid of smugglers. The journey as far as Serbia cost roughly \$3,000, he said, which they raised from selling their house in Afghanistan for \$20,000. The man said they had heard that the rest of the trip to Germany, where he has some friends, would cost between \$15,000 and \$20,000.

'They let the dogs on us': At an improvised camp of abandoned houses and tents near Horgoš on Serbia's northern border with Hungary, a former Afghan soldier, ethnic Uzbek, said that he and his family left their home in northern Afghanistan six months earlier after he was shot by the Taliban on the right side of chest, where he has a large scar. The family travelled through Iran, Turkey and Bulgaria, where the man said that he, his wife and their 15-year-old daughter were beaten by police. "They let the dogs on us," he said, "and my son was very scared." Twice they were ordered to remove their shoes and forced to walk back over the border to Turkey. In Istanbul, their youngest child, aged three, died after falling from the balcony of the house they were staying in. Eventually, they crossed Bulgaria and entered Serbia, but the man said they had run out of money. He said that, while the smugglers along the way had not caused them any problems, they were in constant fear that something

may happen to their daughter. “Smugglers do ugly things to women, especially if they are alone, mostly when they have to sleep in one place for several days, in their houses on the road.”

People ‘disappear’: At the Preševo reception centre in southern Serbia, a group of boys aged between 13 and 17 said they had left Afghanistan some six months earlier, fearing they would be forcibly recruited by the Taliban or face repression as ethnic minority Tajiks and Hazaras. They each said their parents had decided to send them to Western Europe, but only one boy, a 17-year-old Tajik from Ghazni, southeastern Afghanistan, had some idea of how much his parents had paid the smugglers – \$5,000 to reach Serbia. The smugglers, however, left them in North Macedonia, and the boys continued on their own with the aid of GPS or linking up with others trying to cross the border without smugglers. The boys did not understand the term “human trafficking”, but said that people sometimes “disappear” on the road because smugglers do “something bad” to them.

Waiting out the winter: At the Krnjača asylum centre on the outskirts of Belgrade, three boys, aged 18, 14, and 13, described travelling without the aid of smugglers from the eastern Afghan province of Laghman to Serbia, via Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and Bulgaria. Two of the boys were cousins. They said they left, in agreement with their parents, after the Taliban forced them into religious schools as a prelude, they feared, to recruitment. The boys described sleeping in the woods or in abandoned buildings and crossing borders under cover of night. They said they were beaten by Turkish border guards and then by Bulgarian, but had no trouble entering Serbia. They planned to wait out the winter and then press on to France.

Beaten ‘like an animal’: At an improvised camp near Horgoš, a 30-year-old Afghan man said he had been travelling for roughly nine months, leaving behind his wife, who was pregnant at the time and later gave birth. He said his family had been branded “infidels” by the Taliban because his father had worked as a civil servant before the Taliban returned to power. Fired from his job as a low-ranking municipal employee, the man struggled to find work. He set off with two other men, using GPS and maps they found on the Internet. The men were beaten by security forces in Iran, by soldiers in Turkey, and then again by police in Bulgaria, before reaching Serbia. Trying to enter Hungary, he said that men “in green uniforms” beat him “like an animal,” stole his money and crushed his phone on the ground. At the time of the interview, he had not spoken to his family for five days.

Beaten and forced to strip: At an improvised camp near the Hungarian border, two boys, aged 11 and 13, described their journey from Laghman, eastern Afghanistan, through Iran, Turkey, and Bulgaria. The boys were part of a larger group of 10 from the same region; worried about suicide attacks, they said that their parents decided to send them on their own after being unable to raise enough money for an adult to accompany them. Their trip was agreed between the fathers, uncles and the smugglers in Afghanistan, but the boys did not know the details. They said that their group

was forcibly returned from Bulgaria to Turkey several times and that the Bulgarian police beat them, set dogs on them and made them remove their clothes and shoes. A 22 year-old man in the group, also from Laghman, confirmed their account, saying he left Afghanistan out of fear for his life and lost hope that things would ever get better. He said that the Taliban killed his father several years ago and he did not wish to suffer the same fate. The group had tried to enter Hungary several times but was caught and beaten by the Hungarian military, which he and other refugees said had become more violent than the police.

Minorities under threat: Two men, a 35 year-old Tajik and 25 year-old Hazara, met working illegally in a textile factory in Turkey, trying to earn enough money to continue their journey. The Tajik said he had been an officer in the Afghan military and fought for years against the Taliban. He showed photos of himself in uniform and of his military record book. He said he knew he would be killed if caught by the Taliban after their return to power, so he fled, leaving behind his wife and three children. The Hazara had been on the road for a year, having left his wife and young son in Kabul. As Shiites, he said the Hazaras are targeted both by the Taliban and the Islamic State, and that's why he left. The man said he hoped to reach France, where he has a cousin.

VII. Results and achievements

Over the course of the 12-month project, 619 people underwent initial trafficking and/or GBV screening and were provided with information regarding their rights, obligations, legal options, and the consequences foreseen for any violations of the rules set by authorities.

- Of the **619**, there were **243** women, **231** men, **112** boys (**57** of them unaccompanied), and **33** girls. Of the total, **225** were from Afghanistan.
- **61** individuals, including **24** from Afghanistan, were provided with direct services, including psychosocial support, cultural mediation, accommodation, and medical support.
- **15** individuals, including **6** from Afghanistan, were provided with safe accommodation - **12** women, **2** boys, and **1** girl.

Efficient, ethical data collection: NGO Atina incorporated a system of Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) into its regular activities, with a MEAL specialist responsible for supervising ethical data collection and ensuring adherence to the MEAL framework. The project team collected the data from the field on a daily basis and filled in the matrix, providing a clear overview of the demographic characteristics of the beneficiaries, possible trends and achieved goals. All data and information collected either through direct conversation with the beneficiaries or during the provision of service was subjected to processing that guarantees confidentiality and complete protection of personal data.

Raising the alarm: With regards Afghan women refugees outside of state-run facilities, NGO Atina raised the issue and stressed the risks involved at meetings of the Child Protection Working Group, organised by UNICEF with the participation of representatives of all organisations in the field as well as the Serbian Ministry of Labour, Employment, Social and Veterans Affairs and the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, and international organisations including the UNHCR and International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

Male cultural mediator: Acting on experience gained from field visits but also on recommendations by other relevant actors, the engagement of an additional male cultural mediator – a Farsi speaker – enabled NGO Atina to carry out additional field activities and assessments of existing risks of violence and human trafficking in official accommodation facilities but also in informal settlements. This

allowed the mobile team to focus more on men and boys at risk of violence and other forms of exploitation.

Referral mechanism: Communication with partner organisations in Greece, North Macedonia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina led to the creation of an informal transnational referral mechanism and guaranteed provision of the necessary information about potential risks and existing systems of support along the route. The benefit was seen in the fact that the NGO Atina hotline was used directly by women in need who were not registered within state-run facilities in Serbia. With significant on-the-ground presence and a 24/7 hotline, NGO Atina is the only organisation engaged in the response to migrants and refugees that provides this scale of service and availability and is a valuable resource for other non-governmental actors working in the field. Over the reporting period, NGO Atina received 127 calls from institutions and organisations seeking to discuss further action in specific cases of persons at risk of GBV.

Coordination body: More frequent visits to areas bordering Hungary and Croatia positioned NGO Atina within a body of organisations established and coordinated by the Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration in Šid with the aim of better coordinating ongoing activities. The other members are UNICEF, UNHCR, IOM, and the Danish Refugee Council, as well as representatives of the local health centre and local school administration.

VIII. Recommendations

Assessment: Authorities in Serbia should introduce regular assessment or screening to identify victims of human trafficking and GBV in state-run facilities; an assessment mechanism to proactively identify UASCs among young Afghans who do not necessarily identify as minors is of vital importance, thus making sure that they receive the protections and support they need. “Even if someone claims he is an adult and you think he is a minor, or claims he is a minor and you think that he is an adult, after making such an assessment you can take that decision. In some situations it is quite obvious,” said Radoičić Nedeljković. “We have advocated very strongly for the government to make that assessment.”

Equal standards: Authorities must set aside the perception of refugees and migrants as simply transiting Serbia and offer them the same protections and support provided to women and children in Serbia who are victims of human trafficking or GBV. “When it comes to legislation, when it comes to basic rights, definitely we would like to see the same approach and the same respect applied to both categories,” said Radoičić Nedeljković. “Now, that is not the case.”

Recognising as minors underage girls forced into marriage: Minor girls among refugees and migrants, who have been forced to marry and in some cases have children, must be treated as minors, not as adult women as is currently the case. “We had a huge number of minor girls who were married with children and the state, the authorities, were treating them as adult women, as mothers, wives, but definitely they are young girls who probably were forced into marriage in Afghanistan,” said Radoičić Nedeljković. Serbia, she argued, must apply a specific approach, “recognising them as children, recognising them as migrant girls, and treating them as such, making sure that they can live and are not abused in that family situation.”

Outreach: It is of utmost importance to ensure the provision of necessary information about services and protection, focal points, and experienced NGOs to women housed outside of state-run facilities, in a way that will not endanger their safety and privacy. Their number will likely rise.