

## MirreM Data Collection – Country Context

### SERBIA

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Irregular migrants, like migrants in general, are a category that began to be more seriously monitored in Serbia with the adoption of the Foreigners Act, the Asylum Act, and similar legal acts regulating the status of foreigners in the Republic of Serbia. Before 2008/2009, there was no significant tracking of numbers within this population. However, after that period, irregular and incomplete figures emerged without a system of measurement and regular public dissemination of data. Although data on irregular migrations are not generally available and are of very limited quality, they tend to surface mostly during major migration crises such as in 2015.

Data sources for the public and researchers include various reports from local NGOs or INGOs, mainly based on information obtained from border police and KIRS (Commissioner for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia), the institutions that first and primarily come into contact with irregular migrants. Experts we interviewed indicate that the only reliable data on migrants are those related to the intention to seek asylum and those associated with the asylum procedure itself. Additionally, data on both asylum and transit centers, particularly pertinent to irregular migrations, are crucial.

Police data are collected mainly at border crossings and asylum offices by members of the Ministry of Interior. These data are not publicly available on their website but are provided to interested parties. There is no comprehensive description of the methodology for collecting this data or whether double counting is excluded.

Regarding data from the Commissioner for Refugees of the Republic of Serbia, it pertains to individuals in reception centers. These individuals are either asylum seekers (those who have expressed an intention to seek asylum as well as those who have initiated the process) or are entirely irregular in the country. In the first category, besides those in the process of regularizing their presence in the country, there are those who express an intention to enter that process but often do not do so. This second variant represents a semi-regular status in the sense that migrants provide basic information, are directed to the camp, and have 72 hours from that moment to be present at the camp. Afterward, if they register at the camp, they have 15 days to enter the full asylum procedure to be formally considered asylum seekers. Most migrants do not even express a desire to seek asylum (do not take that first step), while a very small percentage of those who express an intention actually enter the asylum-seeking procedure within the legal deadline. The law stipulates that after the prescribed period, they automatically enter the status of irregular migrants. This category most often transitions into irregularity. The second category comprises migrants who have never entered the process of regularizing their status nor have they ever shown interest in seeking asylum. If intercepted by police officers, they usually formally refuse to seek asylum.

in Serbia. If they do not make such a formal statement, they are usually not registered, continuing in a completely irregular status, moving towards EU borders, either remaining in the country or in private accommodations or in so-called Transit Reception Centers run by KIRS. In this case, data on them can be obtained from border police, who record refusals to seek asylum, as well as from KIRS, which manages transit camps. In this scenario, it cannot be confidently stated that, at least partially, they are not the same individuals, i.e., that double counting has not occurred.

In interviews with experts, we learn that they receive data used for advocacy, planning, and policy proposals from both the Police and KIRS. Sometimes they use data published by UNHCR, which represents a mixture of Police data and data obtained by UNHCR from partner organizations working in the field. The exact methodology for combining this data and whether double counting is verified is not available to the public.

Data on migrants, especially irregular ones, in Serbia is generally difficult to access, incomplete, and fairly unreliable.<sup>1</sup> There is no clearly outlined methodology for their collection, nor are all potential shortcomings of the same discussed, including possible estimates of the "real" number of migrants, etc., as irregular migrants, understandably, are not included in data collected during the Census or other regular surveys conducted by the Statistical Office.

In addition to internal migrations, returns under the readmission agreement with EU countries (2008) are also monitored in Serbia. However, since those returned under this agreement receive documents from the Republic of Serbia, they are not considered irregular migrants in Serbia, and thus not counted as such. They are mostly members of the Roma population returned primarily from Germany.<sup>2</sup>

Migrants from Asia and Africa are mainly interested in transiting through Serbia, so even when they decide to seek asylum, they do so to facilitate further passage to desired destinations.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding the quality of data on irregular migrants, their lack and low quality are topics that have been raised several times by both academic institutions in Serbia and the non-governmental sector, but little has been done to improve this type of data. Research on irregular migrants is mainly conducted using qualitative methodology, not only to gain deeper insights but also due to the lack of quantitative indicators that could be used in research.

I have started the data collection process by analyzing the main data sources used by migration experts in the country but also by me while I worked as Data Analyst for Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub (Save the Children). I am familiar with most data gaps and sources but have checked whether something changed in the last few years. I've tried to contact Police, CRM and UNHCR with partial success. The data which is not available must

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<sup>1</sup> Jovanovic, K. and Vladisavljevic, M., Data on refugees and migrants on Balkan route: comparability of methodologies and their consequences, Expert Workshop: Mind the gap: critical perspectives on migration theories and data, December 2020, <https://hummingbird-h2020.eu/news/downloads/WP23122021/jovanovic-vladisavljevic-data-on-refugees-and.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> KIRS, Migracioni profil Republike Srbije za 2018. godinu, 2019, KIRS, Beograd, pp. 52-60.

<sup>3</sup> Antić M. Et al. The current and future needs regarding migration, integration and governance related research in Serbia: mapping of stakeholders at the national level, MIGREC – Migration, Integration and Governance Research Centre, 2020, <https://migrec.fpn.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Deliverable-1.2.pdf>

be asked formally in written form and set by mail to the Asylum Office in order for them to process the claim and respond. After more than a month I did not receive response from them.

My opinion is that it would be worthwhile to contact further CRM and ask for the data on the newcomers in centres previous to 2018 (contact is: [jelena.surlan@kirs.gov.rs](mailto:jelena.surlan@kirs.gov.rs)). Although the methodology of collecting this data is not sound and there could be multiple counting involved, this data could give us better understanding of the irregular flows since those figures are much higher than registration figures from Asylum Office. It should be noted that the experts we spoke to believe that throughout the years at least 50% of migrants never entered the centres but opted for private accommodation staying out of the system.

As for the good practices of estimating irregular migration and its use in policy making, I have not come across them in Serbia. Irregular migrants are practically an invisible category although there are indications that they make the vast majority of migrants passing through the country. Most of the estimates are not based on any sound methodology and, since the number of migrants in general is a sensitive topic in Serbia, policy makers mostly shied away from making any estimates. Some of the indirect indicators are used by officials to plan the capacities of migrant centers, and to adapt the services for them.