



# Migrant Protection & Assistance *in Serbia*

## Context

Border restrictions in Europe have increased protection risks along the western Balkan migration route through Serbia. This route remains one of the most active migratory paths into the European Union for migrants and refugees from Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. The estimated 100,000 people who take this path are often left without services and protection. Tighter borders have incentivized the use of smugglers and reduced access to service providers and protection actors. People are increasingly taking more difficult and remote routes that avoid the large population centers where services are usually concentrated. This puts migrants and refugees, especially women and children, at risk of smuggling, human trafficking, gender-based violence, and exploitation.

Risks are increased for those who opt to seek shelter outside of reception facilities to have easier access to the border. Approximately 8-10% are unaccompanied or separated children. Forced to cross the border illegally and to hide their age so they can continue their journey, many remain hard-to-reach, isolated and highly vulnerable to violence, abuse, neglect, sexual exploitation and trafficking.

## CWS Response

In Serbia, the Migrant Protection & Assistance Program supports vulnerable refugees and migrants to have improved access to effective protection procedures and essential services. This includes information about their human rights, their right to seek asylum and, when applicable, support to exercise mechanisms to receive international protection.

Through outreach in Belgrade and at unofficial shelters near the border with Hungary, the program connects people on the move to resources, evaluates their needs, informs them of their rights, and initiates referrals to additional aid services. In partnership with InfoPark, a national NGO specializing in

protection services, the program provides immediate protection assistance to arriving migrants and refugees, and educational and empowerment opportunities through a specialized support center or 'Hub'. InfoPark is staffed with 10 specialists in research, cultural mediation, child protection, and gender-based violence.

### **The frontline team identifies refugees and migrants who are newly arrived or are residing outside of reception facilities and provides:**



Needs and vulnerability assessments and identification in the case of victims of violence, smuggling or trafficking



Information on protection, threats and vulnerabilities, available alternatives, safety points and contacts, legal recourses, asylum and available accommodation



Referrals to specialized/expert organizations (medical, psychosocial support, legal, child protection and best interest of a child)



Pro bono legal aid by lawyers with protection expertise



Translation and cultural mediation by Farsi and Pashto interpreters



Daily drop-in shelter for victims of violence, smuggling or trafficking and services for those identified as extremely vulnerable individuals



Transportation to refugee reception centers

## Migrant Protection & Assistance (cont.)



The program prioritizes unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) by providing support through urgent needs assessments, referrals to reception centers and state services including Social Welfare Centers. UASC are provided with a referral to a legal guardian, asylum counseling and legal assistance during the application procedure, life skills and language classes at the Hub, cultural mediation and translation, safe transportation, and food and supplies whenever needed. Through a responsible referral system and public awareness campaigns, InfoPark aims to provide additional protection measures for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, smuggled persons who are in need of support and protection and victims of human trafficking.

Along with outreach protection work, in 2023 the program will conduct research into protection mechanisms for UASC in Serbia and their barriers to access. It will examine to what extent temporary protection is accessible and available, if they are aware of their rights and services available, and the push and pull factors that lead UASC to access or avoid the system. Research will encompass experiences of UASC who are outside the system and undocumented, those registered and sheltered and those who applied for or received asylum.

Analysis will help answer important questions on UASC knowledge of their rights and available services, motivation behind decisions to not use certain services and obstacles during the integration process. It will also provide statistics on trends to improve stakeholder coordination and services.



Near the border of Serbia and Hungary, migrants set up camps on abandoned land. Camps do not have running water and electricity is limited or non-existent. When temperatures drop, the conditions at the camps worsen further and migrants are exposed to harsh temperatures and increased risk of disease.

To cross the border, refugees and migrants usually make multiple attempts and run the risk of injury and violence from the border officers.

CWS and InfoPark teams often visit border areas to ensure newly arrived people are identified and receive timely and verified information on protection issues.