



C.1 Evaluation System

Case study Serbia
March 2021

This document has been produced by



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Introduction

The project “FAB: Fast Track Action Boost” aims at improving the provision of services related to labour market integration for refugees and third-country nationals with a special focus on women. To this end, it initiates the cooperation of six European cities or regions: the cities of Milan, Berlin, Stockholm, Vienna and Madrid and the Republic of Serbia.

The objectives of the project as defined in the description of the action are

- Improve integration of the refugee, asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection populations in the target contexts, through mainstreaming of relevant and tested policies, measures and practices (Service Delivery);
- Improve the capacities and knowledge of key actors at the city-level to plan, implement and mainstream the measures, service delivery mechanisms and practices most relevant and effective as responses to the specific challenges emerging in the different contexts (Capacity Building);
- Develop innovative European models of policy approaches, practices, methods, and guidelines flowing from project results on fast track mechanisms for refugee integration and on women integration in the labour markets (Dissemination and Learning).

As part of the evaluation process, SÖSTRA is carrying out five case studies in order to find out to what extent these objectives have been reached. The case study in Serbia put a specific focus on Capacity Building. The central questions to be answered are

- How do we identify transferable parts and adaptable processes from others’ experiences?
- How do we develop approaches / ideas / projects based on competences from all stakeholders?
- What permanent effects on competences and cooperation on the local level did FAB induce?

1 Background situation in Serbia

Serbia (Kosovo included) had an estimated total of 8.7 million residents in 2019¹, 9.4% of which (820,300) were foreign-born or had other nationalities². About 3.9% (32,300) of the international migrants in Serbia were refugees including asylum-seekers. Nevertheless, the total population rate shrank by approximately 5% annually in the last 10 years, along with a decline of the share of the working-age population.³

¹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). World Population Prospects 2019

² <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/countryprofiles.asp>

³ <https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-us/oblasti/stanovnistvo/procene-stanovnistva/>

The number of refugees in Serbia peaked during the end of the Bosnian war in 1995.⁴ Between 2015 and 2018, more than a million refugees and migrants passed through Serbia on their way to Western Europe⁵ of which 577,995 expressed their intention to seek asylum in Serbia in 2015 and 96,117 in 2016.⁶ In 2019, 12,937 persons were registered during the asylum procedure. However, only 252 persons finally applied for asylum. Most of the foreigners who made asylum applications in 2019 were nationals from Iran, followed by Afghanistan, Burundi, Iraq and Turkey. Due to the rejection of applications by the first-instance authority and asylum seekers who left the country without completing the asylum procedure, the Asylum Office granted refugee status in 17 cases and subsidiary protection in 18 cases.

Asylum seekers and persons with granted asylum are accommodated in Reception/Transit and Asylum Centers where they also receive financial and medical assistance. In 2019, between 2,400 (August) and 5,200 persons (December) lived in the centers. Persons with granted asylum are eligible for a support programme administered by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration which provides temporary accommodation and integration support for a period of 12 months.

Because Serbia is a transit country for refugees to Western Europe, integration into the labour market has long been of minor importance.⁷ Organised assistance to refugees for inclusion into the labour market is provided by non-governmental organisations rather than state institutions. Access to the labour market is legally granted to refugees who have obtained asylum and to asylum-seekers under specific conditions⁸. Yet, there are several challenges regarding the high administrative costs and long timelines for exercising the right to work.⁹

2. Designing the pilot

The circumstances in Serbia differ substantially from the ones in the other partner regions of FAB. Also, in Serbia the project was situated on the administrative level of the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs, whereas in the other regions, it was set on the executive level. These were challenges when it came to identifying practices suitable for transfer. Therefore, specific focus was put on the context research in order to identify needs in Serbia and on the Local Empowerment Workshops (LEW) as the means for learning about practices and approaches.

⁴ <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/countryprofiles.asp>

⁵ https://serbia.iom.int/sites/default/files/publications/documents/Brosura_Ostavljena_secanja_IOM.pdf

⁶ <http://www.bgcentar.org.rs/bgcentar/eng-lat/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Right-to-Asylum-in-Serbia-2019.pdf>

⁷ <https://serbia.iom.int/sites/default/files/Migration%20and%20Development%20in%20Serbia.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.bgcentar.org.rs/bgcentar/eng-lat/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Right-to-Asylum-in-Serbia-2019.pdf>

⁹ Asylum-seekers wait 130 days on average to submit their asylum application.

2.1 Identify needs in Serbia

The key activity for identifying the specific needs in Serbia was the context research carried out within work package O1. In Serbia, this research went beyond pure desk research: Existing data was enriched by field research, consisting of a survey of refugees and asylum seekers in three reception centers in Serbia, interviews with employees at the centers, and a survey of employers in the Belgrade region. The field research showed that Serbia still was considered a transit stop by the vast majority of refugees entering the country. However, this perception was shifting slightly at the time FAB was implemented: Due to restrictive handling of migration flows at the external frontiers of EU, Serbia was about to turn from a pure transit country into a country of destination. This development was actively promoted by EU donor institutions, which urged Serbian authorities to put more emphasis on social and labour market integration of refugees.

The major obstacle to social and labour market integration was identified to be language. Not only is Serbian a rather complicated language, but also, since most refugees do not plan to stay in Serbia, they do not put a lot of effort into learning it. However, weak language skills do not only hinder labour market integration, but also make it difficult for refugees and asylum seekers to obtain information on the legislative regulation and on relevant institutions and support systems in Serbia. Thus, the need for a simple and structured way of presenting and disseminating all necessary information, especially information on job search procedures and employment services, was evident.

Based on the context research, the following fields of action were identified to be worked on within FAB:

- Organization of language trainings as one of the preconditions for participation in the labour market.
- Awareness raising through trainings related to job search procedures, existing employment services and possibilities. A brochure is planned to be developed for this purpose.
- Development of the individual dossiers (identification of educational levels, job preference, skill assessment) and plans.
- IT sector workshops (social media, Google, WordPress, SEO);
- On the basis of individual plans' development of the training programmes for the vocational trainings such as cooking, hairdressing, etc.
- Development of a one stop shop approach and individual support to asylum seekers in job search.

2.1 Identifying transferable practices

Since the highest degree of correspondence in terms of structure and objectives of refugees could be found between the Republic of Serbia and Italy (with Italy having been a transit country until 2017), an exchange was established between Serbia and the partner in Milan. A first Local Empowerment Workshop took place in Milan in October 2019. From the Serbian side,

representatives from the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs (MoLEVSA) and from the Belgrade Centre of Social Work participated. From Milan, there were participants from Municipality from Milan and from AFOL Metropolitana (employment services in the greater Milan area). At the LEW, the partners from Milan presented the most important institutions in Milan with regard to labour market integration and also explicated the typical pathway of an asylum seeker into employment. Quickly, it became obvious that the framework and the challenges in Milan vs. Serbia differed substantially. However, FAB happened at a point of time where Serbia was about to turn from a transit country into a country of destination, just as Italy did around 2017. Thus, the project contributed to directing attention to issues of labour market integration that had long not been in the focus of Serbian authorities and politics.

In Milan, there were specific approaches and ideas that caught the Serbian delegation's interest. The most important one was the mobile app that had been developed as a private initiative by a refugee in Italy and which compiled all necessary information for refugees and asylum seekers.¹⁰ It was only during the LEW that the Serbian delegation realised that there exists no centralized information for refugees neither on a digital basis nor printed. Therefore, they decided to develop a similar app.

During the second LEW, which took place in Belgrade in January 2020 and in which all relevant stakeholders for the adaptation and implementation of the pilot project were present, the ideas developed in the first LEW were further elaborated on. It resulted in identifying four activities for pilot implementation:

- Development of a web application for migrants
- Info brochures / leaflets
- Info days in reception centers on job search procedures, existing employment services and possibilities
- Language and IT trainings.

2.2 Adapting the practices

Since the political and societal situation in Serbia differed substantially from that in Milan, the adaptation and development process was of specific relevance. Its main driver was a working group which was formed after the first LEW and in which all relevant stakeholders participated. It was installed under the direction of the assistant minister of MoLEVSA and comprised representatives of the following institutions:

- Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs (MoLEVSA): coordinating body of migration management in Serbia,
- Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MoESTD): responsible for recognition of qualifications,

¹⁰ <https://mygrants.it>

- National Employment Service (NES),
- Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of Serbia (KIRS): responsible for first aid and housing for asylum seekers.

These institutions cooperate on various topics in the context of migration, so that the FAB working group could build on pre-existing personal and institutional bonds. After its installation in December 2019, the working group met on a regular basis and discussed all issues of project design and implementation, including the definition of the target group as well as content and structure of the activities. Since the working group was installed on the national level, and since Serbia is a highly centralized country, all activities were designed such that they target (or can easily be scaled up to) the national rather than the local level. The target group for the Serbian project was defined to be asylum seekers from asylum centers in Banja Koviljača (City of Loznica), Krnjača (City of Belgrade) and those who already received asylum (residing mostly in the City of Belgrade).

The web application was the practice that drew most on an existing practice from Milan. Still, major adjustments had to be made, and the content had to be developed. The same was true for the leaflets and the info days. The design of the trainings also takes up some experiences from other partners, namely the combination of language and professional training as developed for example in Stockholm. However, here again, major adjustments to the Serbian context and also to the timeframe of FAB project were necessary, e. g. with regard to target group, objective and content.

As a result, the pilot activities in Serbia did not constitute a transfer of practices, but rather new, suitable approaches based on the stimuli received from Milan. The Serbian project coordinator put it the following way:

“We got the experience, and from that, we made something new.” (project coordinator, MOLEVSA)

3. Implementing the pilot

Implementation of the FAB pilot in Serbia took place between June 2020 and March 2021. All members of the working group were involved in the implementation, according to their specific field of activity and know-how. For example, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development provided information on education for the app, the National Employment Service hosted the info days at the reception centers, and the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of Serbia established the contact to potential participants.

3.2 Addressing potential participants

While the web application, the leaflet and the info days were directed towards the broad public of all refugees in Serbia, individual participants needed to be activated for the language and IT training. Identifying and addressing a sufficient number of participants was challenging, mainly for two reasons:

1. Only very few refugees who enter Serbia apply for asylum: In 2019, only 252 persons applied for asylum, of which 35 were granted asylum. Since FAB was designed to address asylum seekers or persons with granted asylum, the vast majority of refugees in Serbia were not eligible to participate.
2. Refugees who do apply for asylum in Serbia often do so because they consider it unmanageable to reach their actual country of destination (usually countries like Italy, Belgium, France, Sweden). Often, giving up their ambition goes together with general exhaustion and physical and / or mental issues which also prevent them from becoming active in order to integrate into Serbian society and labour market, e. g. to learn Serbian. Therefore, only few had the language proficiency necessary for taking part in the training courses.

3.3 Service delivery

The pilot activities in Serbia put an emphasis on improving information for refugees and asylum seekers. To this end, an integrated set of material was developed, based on digital and print tools as well as personal contact. This set was completed by a training course for asylum seekers and person with granted asylum. Altogether, the pilot consisted of four activities:

The **web application** provides information on legal rights, rules, procedures and opportunities of education and employment and job search to all asylum seekers on Serbian territory in Serbian and English (<https://asylum.rs/>). The objective of the web application was to ensure easy accessibility of relevant information by establishing a single point of information. The web application went online in October 2020. Until March 2021, it has been visited 149 times. After completion of the FAB project, the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of Serbia will take over the administration of the web site.

The **leaflets** pursue a similar goal: They provide information on education and employment and links to important websites aiming refugees to be informed about their possibilities on the territory of Serbia. Already existing brochures on different topics were collected and evaluated to draft one leaflet combining all necessary information. For this purpose, the different working group members create the content given their different perspectives and decide on the number of brochures to be printed. The texts were checked by the partner from the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration with regard to terminology and easy language. 500 leaflets have been distributed during the info days at Krnjača and Banja Koviljača reception centers in February 2021. Consecutively, leaflets will be distributed in all Serbian refugee centres.

Raising awareness about rules, procedures, and rights of education and employment of asylum seekers in Serbia, as well as the role of the National Employment Service and other institutions involved in the process is the main objective of the **info days**. They consist of 4 hours sessions in which residents at reception centers receive information on employment and education. The info days are hosted by experts from the National Employment Service, thus ensuring up-to-dateness of the information presented. Staff at the centers are invited to the info days, too. Thus, the info day sessions also serve as Train of Trainers. Until March 2021, two info days had taken place,

reaching a total of 18 refugees and 5 staff. Moreover, it is planned to roll out info days across all centers in Serbia in the future.

The **language and IT training courses** took place in February and March 2021 in Banja Koviljača, Krnjača and via online platforms, with a duration of two months. The curriculum had been developed in close cooperation of the working group members as well as a local school. Due to the restrictions in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the trainings were designed as blended learning, comprising study phases at the school and online. Until end of March, 40 participants had entered the trainings.

3.4 Outcomes and Impact

Since the pilot implementation was still ongoing when the case study was carried out, outcomes and impacts of the pilot activities cannot be determined yet. However, several persons interviewed in the case study stressed the relevance and the value of the web application which gathers all relevant information for refugees and asylum seekers in one place. They were positive that this contribution of the project will permanently enhance support for this target group in Serbia. Also the other pilot activities, especially those directed towards improving information of refugees (leaflet, info days), have the potential to be kept in use after FAB terminates, thus yielding lasting effects.

Outcomes and impacts on the organizational level, i. e. in terms of capacity building could already be identified:

The project intensified cooperation between the institutions as well as the specific individuals involved in the working group. While most members of the working group had known each other in advance from other contexts, some institutions and / or persons worked together for the first time in the FAB working group, thus establishing new connections that can result in future cooperation (e. g. between the national Employment Service and the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration). But also when partners had known each other before, the cooperation within the FAB working group intensified their bonds. This was because cooperation within FAB was intense, with each partner being expected to actually contribute to the project, and also because the working group functioned very well, being especially effective and goal-oriented (according to the partners involved). There were two main factors of success identified by the partners:

1. Composition of the working group: All relevant stakeholders were involved.
2. Individual motivation: Each partner had a motivation to participate and to contribute to the topic.

Since inter-organizational working groups are frequent in Serbia, the positive experiences from the FAB working group can enhance this kind of cooperation.

To date, FAB has already stimulated several activities and projects in Serbia:

- The Ministry of the Interior had been planning to develop a web application informing about education and employment. It was able to gain useful ideas as well as expertise

from the web application developed within FAB and started a cooperation with MOLEVSA in order to capitalize on MOLEVSA's experiences.

- During the LEW in Milan, the project partners from Milan presented a short video aiming to inform migrants about the Italian labour market. A participant from MOLEVSA picked up this idea and is planning to produce a similar video in order to inform unaccompanied minor refugees in Serbia about their rights and duties.
- MOLEVSA is preparing a proposal for EasI funding in cooperation with the National Employment Service.

On a more general perspective, FAB has contributed to drawing attention to the issue of social and labour market inclusion of refugees in Serbia. The project took place at a point of time when Serbia started to shift from a pure transit country to a country of destination for refugees. This requires major modifications in how politics and institutions deal with the topic of migration. FAB was one of the first projects related to integration of refugees into the labour market in Serbia, thus contributing to putting in on the agenda and promoting some of these modifications:

"It was the first institutional instrument for national institutions to have in mind this topic [of labour market inclusion]." (project partner, MOLEVSA)

4. Lessons Learned

FAB was designed to foster exchange of good practice between regions with different framework settings, but similar challenges with regard to labour market integration of refugees and third-country nationals. However, the situation and challenges in Serbia differed substantially from the situation in all other partner cities and regions. Despite these differences, the exchange within the FAB project proved to be productive for Serbia, leaving the partners with successful practices as well as improved cooperation and an advancement in the political agenda. The following aspects were pivotal for establishing a fruitful exchange:

The process of learning about each other's framework and approaches (in the form of Local Empowerment Workshops and Mentoring) was designed in a very open way. This refers to the stakeholders and institutions included in the process as well as the topics covered. In terms of participants, a broad spectrum of institutions was involved in the project on the Serbian side. Including different institutions and stakeholders with different tasks and duties expanded the project perspective from labour market related topics to issues of more general support for refugees and asylum seekers as a prerequisite of labour market integration. Also, more individuals were able to benefit from the exchange, each of them considering the information they obtained from the Milan partners from their specific point of view. Thus, numerous good practices could be transferred, also in fields other than labour market integration.

The activities designed within the project drew on existing experiences only as a first stimulus. Rather than transferring specific practices from Milan, the Serbian partners used them as a starting point to develop innovative approaches that fit the Serbian context and needs. This

transfer required a longer phase of adaptation and preparation, but on the other hand resulted in project activities appropriate to Serbia's specific situation.

The broad involvement of institutions helped to improve inter-institutional cooperation in Serbia by learning about specific tasks and competences and by forming new contacts. Here, the composition of the working group was a crucial factor of success: Not only was it necessary to involve all relevant institutions, but also to ensure that the representatives from each institution were motivated to actively participate in the project. Here again, opening up the project in terms of topics covered helped to attract the attention of stakeholders for whom labour market integration of refugees is not at the core of their tasks and duties.

Finally, the project happened to take place at a point of time where the topic of refugees staying in the country permanently started to gain attention in Serbia, thus raising questions of social and economical inclusion. The project helped to advance the discussions connected to these questions and drew attention to a necessary realignment of institutions that might result from this shift.