

## Transit as a Lived Experience

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Anthropological research on **transit** has increasingly focused on the experience of prolonged waiting and the circular movement of people on the move.

Conversations with people on the move who are currently in Serbia offer us a partial insight into their lived experience of transit. Through their narratives, the temporal dimension of transit figures far more prominently than the spatial dimension. These narratives are filled with testimonies of waiting, being stuck, and coming to a standstill.

Field note, interview with Hamid and Nadira, asylum center in Serbia, April 2018

Generally, no, they don't want to stay here, even though their children go to school. They want to move on. Hamid says that Serbs are good people ("Serbian public is all good"). It's a good country, but they want to move on. I ask where. To Germany? He says Alman (Alman is Germany in Farsi, they explain to me). He says, "Germany, France, or another country." I ask if they were aware when they arrived that the borders were closed. Hamid says they knew they were closed but had heard that there was a list for Hungary. I say that it's not just Hungary that's closed. Nadira explains they left because of a bad situation in Afghanistan. I ask: "So, does that mean you knew the Hungarian border was closed, but not the others?" They say no, that's not it. They knew, but hoped they'd still be able to cross. When they arrived, there was a list for Hungary, and a few people were allowed through each day. Now, it's harder to cross the border. Now Hungary lets through one family per week. When they came, it was one family per day. Now it's one family per week. I nod, because at that time, they really were letting more people through than now. I ask how one gets on the list, and whether people pay to get on it. They say that when they arrived at the center, they heard that some people were paying to get on the list. Now they're not sure if that's true. But they hope their turn will come, to be that one family per week. A year ago, people were paying for it. The interpreter asks Nadira if she's tired. She nods.

This field note shows that the couple in the conversation does not have a clear destination, but that their goals change depending on external opportunities, obstacles, and self-initiated border-crossing attempts. Their prolonged stay in Serbia is a consequence of their inability to continue their journey. Initially, Serbia was meant to be just a stopover before the anticipated crossing into Hungary. However, they have now been living in the camp for almost two years, and their children have started school. Due to their inability to get on the "list" for entry into Hungary, they are forced to remain in Serbia. Transit is no longer a temporary and fleeting state, but has become a much more enduring condition for them.

The following examples illustrate how transit is linked to the experience of waiting. Elham is a citizen of Iran who arrived in Serbia during the period of visa liberalization between the Republic of Serbia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. This regime allowed Iranian citizens to travel to Serbia without a visa, and some of them applied for asylum, while others continued their journey toward other European countries. Elham spent several years waiting—that is, in transit—in Turkey.

Field note, interview with Elham, asylum center in Serbia, May 2019

I ask him whether he knew when he came to Serbia with a visa that he would stay here, or if he thought he would go elsewhere. He says no: "I come to Serbia, I wait on, I wait... Because I don't know. Serbian people like people from Turkey, because it's very different. I wait. I didn't want to go to every country. Because I'm tired. Because I waited five years in Turkey, unfortunately." I say, "So, you want to stay here for a while." "Yes. I went to one of the camps, then I came here." I ask, "Why did you change camps? Did you have a problem?" He says the police transferred him because he told the police and the Commissariat: "*I will stay in Serbia, I want asylum in Serbia.* That is legal in Serbia, for everyone. They change your camp." He further explained that the first center he arrived at was a reception—or transit—center, but the one he is in now is an asylum center, which is why he was transferred.

Here, he pointed out the difference between two types of centers, or camps. In Serbia, there are two types of centers managed by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia (a government body responsible for reception). The first are asylum centers. The second are reception centers, which were referred to as transit centers during the existence of the Balkan Corridor, but after the corridor was shut down, they became

camps for longer-term accommodation. There are more reception (transit) centers than asylum centers. This division between the two types of official camps in Serbia clearly shows that transit has been institutionalized. When a person applies for asylum, as Elham did, they are transferred to an asylum center. Although there is a general practice of placing asylum seekers in asylum centers, while those who have not applied for asylum are housed in reception (transit) centers, there are exceptions. Interlocutors described the asylum process as long, uncertain, and inaccessible:

I asked them about our asylum, they said “you must wait.”

Field research has shown that even people who receive asylum in Serbia often continue their journey. Refugee status or subsidiary protection leaves people in a precarious position, which is why many choose to seek their future elsewhere.

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